

“White Oak: A Tender Side of the Racial Divide”

By Evelaca Dobbins



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In the midst of surviving during the pre and post Civil War era, a “free” Black settlement lived in the North Kansas City community of “Big Shoal” for more than ninety years. Originally known as “Strawberry Hill,” residents renamed the settlement “White Oak” when they rebuilt the church, Mt. Olive Baptist, using white oak timber growing on the land. Lines of lineage crossed in “White Oak”, merging to create a rich mosaic of family history during the mid and late 1800s: White Americans, Native Americans and African Americans.

Lottie Fielder Smalls, an African American descendent of the Waller-Murray-Johnson lineage, lives to tell an inclusive story about her great-great-grandfather Fountain Waller, who migrated to Clay County from Farquier County, Virginia, in 1822. Although pro-slavery in his worldview, he sympathized with blacks; Waller deeded the majority of his “White Oak” property, upon his death in 1882, to his bi-racial son, Richard Waller, and black consort, Pemily Murray. From personal research, Smalls discovered that Fountain Waller refused to allow blacks who resided on his property to be placed on the auction block in Liberty, Missouri.

Waller was a man who publicly supported the Confederacy, yet privately protected blacks despite the political and societal climate of the era. Like Thomas Jefferson, Waller struggled with his conscience on the issue of slavery. The Waller-Murray-Johnson family will always be a connecting link to Fountain Waller and the “White Oak Community” of North Kansas City, Missouri. Their legacy is one with a deep human story.

Unfortunately, historians give only a small glimpse at what life was like for blacks before the Civil War and during Reconstruction. After Fountain Waller's, death, the emancipated men and women of “White Oak” organized themselves and formed a local community which sought to educate, to employ, and to offer hope in difficult times. They established a one room school-house which was located just south of Mt. Olive Baptist Church. Many children were taught how to read, write and how to do mathematics. Not surprisingly, the residents were able to organize themselves in such a manner: before emancipation they were responsible for much of the day to day management of the land where they lived. They had acquired the skills to assemble, to be productive, and to support the needs of their community.

The white oak timbers of Mt. Olive Baptist Church provided comfort to a black community that thrived for over 90 years. According to Legend, White Oak, a “free” black community, provided one of the many stops on the Underground Railroad. This community did not thrive so much economically as it did religiously and socially. The residents' lives centered on the local church. Horace Hickman, the head carpenter, utilized the white oak timbers from the residents' land that were sawed at Nat Murray's sawmill to lead the rebuilding of the church. From the stone bricks of an old limestone basement, to the white oak

timbers which were rebuilt into White Oak Chapel in 1912, the influence of the local church held strong. It was home—a place of fellowship, of community service projects and a cultural refuge.

The women formed a missionary society and went from house to house serving dinner, sewing quilts and delivering clothing. Members of the church were diligent in their support of mission activities. Needy families benefited from the many basket dinners and church socials. At the peak of the church, it had nearly 200 members and the members were often baptized in Little Shoal Creek which was located behind the one room school-house. The community also organized two fraternal lodges, The Benevolence Lodge and Sons and Daughters Lodge.

White Oak was full of respectable, hard-working, family-oriented individuals. In response to a 1995 newspaper article Mrs. Della M. Lakey, a poor white woman who lived less than a mile from the White Oak Community remembers “Boots” Waller who worked with her dad at the “Old Winnwood Beach” which burned in 1935. Lewis “Boots” Waller was the son of Richard Waller. Lakey fondly remembers “Boots” always giving her and her seven siblings a quarter every time they saw him. She emphasizes that, “We really loved “Boots” and his family”. Lakey also remembers a man they called “Grundy” who was kind to her family. “Grundy,” like Lottie Smalls, was a descendent of the Murray-Johnson family lineage that lived in the White Oak Community.

During Reconstruction and the Great Depression, families struggled across the country, and the White Oak Community of North Kansas City had to work together to survive. It was not just the knowledge of racial inequality and the laws that supported it that lingered constantly in the residents’ minds, daily survival was difficult for both blacks and poor whites. Lakey points out, “We had a lot in common with blacks trying to make ends meet....the black community seemed to thrive better than us, because they pulled together.”

Lottie Smalls also remembers well what it was like to be an African American living in the White Oak Community: “It was a gay ole time; life was good for me and my family as a child.” Prior to the building of the Paseo Bridge, my mother and I would travel by horse down to the Missouri river and board a ferry that would take us across the river into Kansas City. Upon arrival we would shop at Harzfeld’s among the many other stores along Petticoat Lane; those are wonderful memories for me.” Lottie keeps her White Oak memorabilia in special collection scrapbooks and on posters stored in her home.

Slavery was a tumultuous time in American history, but there were many individuals who acted with conscience and cared for blacks, recognizing them as being a part of a greater family—the human family. Good and honorable people existed on both sides of the racial divide. Fountain Waller was one of those exceptional individuals.

The ties to the past are still present through the restored Fountain Waller Slave Cemetery located in the Carriage Hills Subdivision of Gladstone, Missouri. White Oak Chapel has been re-located on Stroud’s Restaurant property less than a mile away. Both the cemetery and the church are now designated historical sites. Today, Blacks and Whites use White Oak Chapel for meetings and weddings, further narrowing the gap in the community’s racial divide.

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