

Malindy's Freedom: The Story of a Slave Family

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Review

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Enslaved Indian

A Native-American narrative

Malindy, a full-blood Cherokee unlawfully enslaved as a child after a curious chain of events, was the great-grandmother of the two authors. The volume falls into the category of biographic slave narrative, stories the two authors heard over and over from their grandmother, until, in the oral tradition of the Cherokees, they felt they could--and should--tell them themselves.

Malindy, whose Cherokee name meant Rose Dawn, was born in western Kentucky around 1820. Her clan was in the division of the Cherokee Nation that chose not to assimilate with whites, preferring to stick to traditional ways. Nevertheless, they traded with the whites, and it was on one of these trading trips into Missouri that Rose Dawn, then about seven years old, was accidentally left behind and the white farmer who found her chose to keep her as a slave, rather than report her to the Bureau of Indian Affairs as he should have.

The farmer renamed her Malindy. Fortunately, under the circumstances, he also put her in the care of a sympathetic mulatto slave, Momma Sue, who tried to get her to accept her situation, rather than risk the harsher treatment that comes with rebellion, even though Momma Sue's spirit was as committed to freedom as Malindy's was. Later, Malindy was assigned to the cookhouse where another slavewoman took her under her wing. She learned to cook and as a teenager was left to run the cookhouse.

Although the farmer would not admit to having an Indian among his slaves, he treated her differently, as did the African Americans. He never whipped her,

but his wife worked her hard.

Momma Sue had never expressly told Malindy she was a slave so she was able to maintain internally her Cherokee identity, but when she was 16, Massa sold her and a number of other young slaves to another, wealthier farmer. Maintaining the identity fiction became harder, but she did keep her commitment to survival. Malindy's abilities as a cook landed her in the kitchen, again getting somewhat better treatment as a house slave.

As she matured, Malindy encountered a new set of problems. The new Massa started talking of marrying her to a young buck and their producing a lot of pickaninnies. Malindy determined to select the man whom she would marry and ensure that her children were not born into slavery.

Her opportunity came at a summer picnic when Old Free Charlie drove up in his clean, black buggy. Charlie, an herbalist and preacher, was literate like most freedmen. He also was part of the network that helped escaping slaves. When, after a few months, he asked Massa to let him marry Malindy, Massa decided to ignore Missouri law that prohibited marriage between a slave and a freedman, and agreed to let them wed, assuming their children would be added to his stock of slaves, as was the custom. A female slave was valued more for the number of children she produced than for her own work for her master.

About the time of Malindy's marriage to Charlie, the U.S. government decided to relocate the Cherokees who were on ancestral grounds; the relocation turned into the infamous Trail of Tears. Malindy's clan's village in Kentucky no longer existed, and had Malindy been able to do anything, she would not have known where to try to contact her parents, if, indeed, they still lived. She never saw them again. Nine months later she gave birth to a son, whom she and Charlie named Sammie, but whom Massa claimed as his property.

The coming of the Civil War increased tensions between the whites and the slaves, and one of Malindy's five children ran away, and was seen only once more when he returned and tried to persuade Malindy to leave with him. She refused, and as her great granddaughters tell the story, she must have been much conflicted between her persistent and insistent desire for freedom and an odd kind of loyalty to her owner.

After the war ended, like many other newly freed slaves, Malindy and Charlie decided to accept Massa's offer of employment on the farm. Malindy was about 45 years old at the time and she later died in 1870. The authors say that Malindy told her daughter Ellen that she was to remember all that happened and to pass it on to future generations so that it would not be forgotten. They credit their grandmother Ellen with a near-perfect memory. An Afterword briefly describes what happens to her children, especially Ellen, who raised author Mildred Buckner Johnson and encouraged her to put her (Ellen's) memories on paper. Ellen died in 1941 at the age of 97.

As with most slave narratives, Malindy's experience and the recounting of it is highly personal. The great-granddaughters stress that Malindy was a forgiving person who always believed that someday God would ensure that slavery would be ended. On page 93, they write of Malindy, She suppressed her rage, but it never disappeared.

In the Preface, the authors add that Malindy passed her legacy of forgiveness to her daughter Ellen and when Ellen told the saga of the slaves' ordeal, it was never with malice. Therefore, we tell her story without malice. There may be no real malice on the part of the authors, but they have not suppressed their rage, whatever Malindy may have managed to do. But that is not surprising; who of us could tell the story of the kind of treatment our grandmother received without at least some resentment towards those who did it?

The story is well told, even though the themes of forgiveness, eventual freedom and God will take care of us,' well established early on, tend to become redundant after awhile. While the intent is to be inspirational and show how Malindy's great faith endures over the years, subsequent statements on the subject will distract some readers.

The least satisfying part of the book, however, is the unanswered question of why Rose Dawn's parents and their clan apparently made so little effort to find the little girl left behind after a trading session. Unlike their eastern cousins, the Western Cherokee, of which Rose Dawn's clan was a part, did not generally practice slavery, but it is impossible not to wonder whether something happened to induce the clan's traders to leave the little girl behind.

Malindy's Freedom has photographs, illustrations, and an appendix showing hand-written census entries from 1850 when slaves were listed as personal property, and 1870 and 1880 when they were listed in their own right. A useful bibliography is also appended.

Barbara Cloud is a Professor of Journalism Emeritus, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and editor of Minister to the Cherokees: A Civil War Autobiography by James Anderson Slover, University of Nebraska Press, 2001. Her current work in progress includes Western Destiny: The Coming of the Frontier Press, part of the Visions of the American Press series, edited by David Abrahamson as a Medill imprint for the Northwestern University Press.