

Left circle shows old engraving of
Sojourner Truth at height of career.

Lifted Lamp in the World's Wild Storm

Everywhere Sojourner Truth went she preached and prayed with convincing power. The name this intrepid voyager had given herself was a sharp disavowal of the material, a confirmation of her endless search to know the Divine

BY JAMES E. DYKES

IN RECENT TIMES, students of American history have been seriously reviewing and re-evaluating the events and personalities of that tumultuous period which extends from just before to immediately after the Civil War. Often they are fascinated by the lives of certain unforgettable and perceptive characters which crowd its scenes.

Etched sharply against a background of the 1860's, the compelling form of Sojourner Truth, a gaunt, rough-hewn, solitary woman, stands out. She was born in the degradation of the slavery system, and as was true of numerous other captives, she was denied the most elementary schooling. The only name by which she could be identified was Isabella, until later in a flash of prophetic insight, she adopted for herself

the name "Sojourner Truth." Nevertheless, this singular woman, who placed her sense of duty to God before all things, militantly championed causes involving fundamental human rights and freedoms.

It is universally recognized by historians that Sojourner Truth's contribution to the progress of her time lies in several spheres of humanitarian concern: 1. The abolition of human chattel slavery. 2. The establishment of women's rights, including the right of suffrage. 3. Active support of the cause of temperance. 4. Preaching the gospel of Christ. 5. The exertion of moral influence in the direction of character building, and the betterment of all human relations.

It is difficult for the generation living today to sense the tremendous moral

impact of the life of one born so lowly. Yet, because of her God-endowed wisdom, her sardonically biting wit, her penetrating understanding of human nature, Sojourner Truth was referred to by Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as "The Libyan Sibyl." She moved with dignity and ease in the society of the great minds of her time. She counted among her personal friends such great ones as Abraham Lincoln, James Russell Lowell, John Greenleaf Whittier, Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, Lucretia Mott, and a vast galaxy of the brightest stars among Abolitionist and other reform movements. The names of history's illustrious ones are usually acclaimed after they are dead, but Sojourner Truth became a legend during her own lifetime.



James E. Dykes (center) interviews retired Battle Creek barber James H. Lewis, left, and Ronald Simpson. Mr. Lewis, who died recently, knew Sojourner Truth, went to visit her home near city when he was a boy. Recalls that she was baptized by Uriah Smith in Kalamazoo River.

Historical references seem to agree that Sojourner Truth was born in Ulster County, New York, about eighty miles north of New York City. But there is disagreement concerning the date of her birth, because apparently no one knows it exactly. Recent research, however, places her age at death between 105 and 108 years.

A CLIPPING from an issue of the *Battle Creek Journal*, which was found in an old scrapbook, sheds light here. This news story, written by Minnie Merritt Fay, an artist and writer of Battle Creek, Michigan, gives the following facts:

"Sojourner Truth lived in the home of my parents when I was a very small child, . . . [and] I am sure that my great affection for her must have been formed at this time. . . . We loved to hear her talk. Her wonderful voice was so deep and smooth. . . .

"An incident of Sojourner's life that left its deep impression upon my childish mind, which I remember having heard discussed later by those trying to establish the date of her birth, was her telling of the 'Dark Day,' May 19, 1780, at which time she was probably five or six years of age. She said she was terribly frightened and ran into the field with the frightened animals, where the dew was on the grass as though it were real night. I think it was this incident that established her age at the time of her death as about 108 years."

Isabella, a tall, angular girl, at the age of nine was sold to John Nealy of Ulster County, New York. At Nealy's place she was made to feel the soul-crushing character of the "peculiar institution" of chattel slavery. For her, life at Nealy's became almost unbearable—one oppressive round of physical and mental anguish. It was here she received scars on her body from the slave master's whip which she bore all her life. Here, too, was kindled in her soul the unquenchable fire of a righteous indignation against every form of injustice.

Through intense trial and suffering, Isabella came to know and to appreciate the privilege and power of supplicating prayer. With childish but fervent entreaties to God she sought deliverance, first from sin's bondage, and then from slavery's shackles. Erelong the answer to her prayer began to unfold. She was sold next to Martin Scrivner.

The happy-go-lucky Scrivners were quite irreligious, but they treated Isabella with great kindness, permitting her to live more like an employee than a slave. Thus freed from tension and fear, she developed rapidly. In fact, the circumstances under which she lived were so far removed from the normal channel of slave life that Isabella experienced a brief lapse in piety, becoming somewhat gay and self-indulgent. But this frame of mind did not persist for long.

Isabella's discipline in hardship began all over again when she was bought

by John Dumont for seventy pounds. Dumont's wife nurtured a strong dislike for her, and went about to make her life thoroughly miserable. In her deep anguish, Isabella "wrestled" with God in prayer. By the river she found a secluded spot where she daily went to pray. Henceforth she formed a fixed habit of talking with God. It was while still at Dumont's place that Isabella met and was married to Thomas, an



Meeting of Sojourner Truth and Abraham Lincoln in White House, 1864. Lincoln said he had heard of her years before he became president. He autographed her book for her.

older man owned by her master. She became the mother of five children, but her family was soon torn apart by the vicious slave traffic.

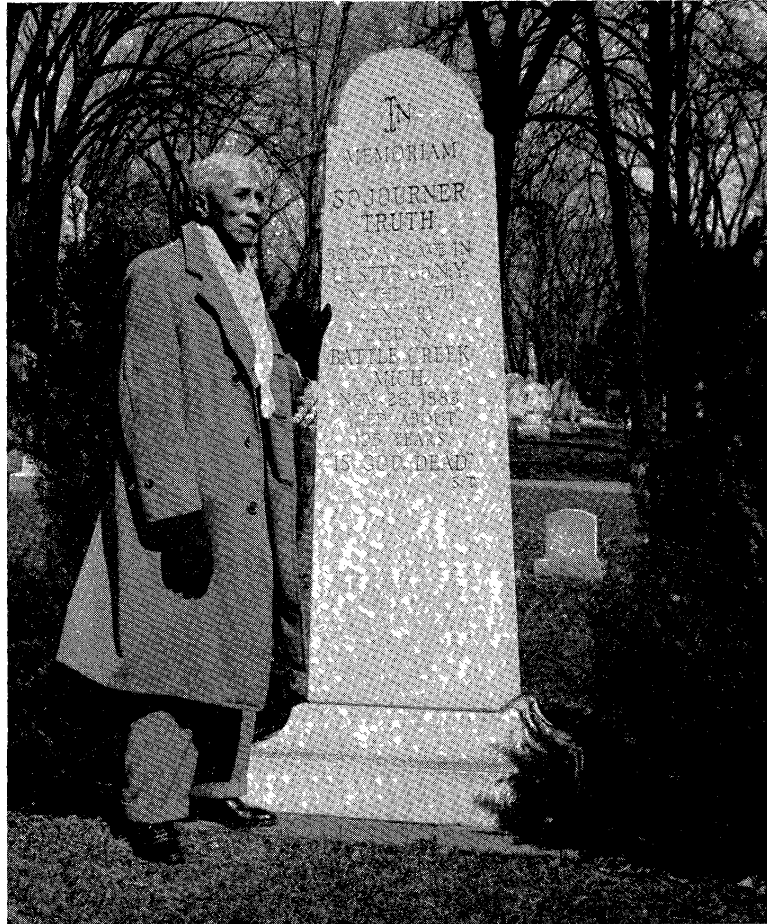
A law passed by New York state had decreed that all Negro slaves over forty should be freed in 1817 and all others in 1827. Dumont had promised, as a reward for Isabella's trustworthiness, to give her freedom a year in advance. When the time came he reneged, but Isabella, claiming her promised freedom, left his estate. Dumont made no effort whatsoever to bring her back.

ISABELLA, directed by a friend, came to the Van Wagoner's and found there a real Christian home. The Van Wagoners were kind, sincere religious people, who interpreted the Bible literally. In this God-fearing atmosphere Isabella's spiritual outreach assumed new dimensions. And yet there were times when the devout life of these serious-minded friends and their emphasis on the otherworldly were at cross purposes with her lighter side. Thus it came about that despite the Van Wagoners' earnest protests and advice, Isabella suddenly decided to leave. For a short while she found employment at the Whitley home, but deep within her she felt again the insistent "call"—the implacable urge toward the higher life, the summons to the work toward which she felt her life was being shaped.

With what seemed now to be a clear sense of this duty, Isabella began a many-journeyed pilgrimage as a crusader for God and humanity. She met a Quaker one day, early in her travels, who asked her name. "Sojourner," came her reply. When the Quaker insisted upon knowing her surname, with a sudden flash of inspiration, she said, "Truth!" The name stuck.

Everywhere Sojourner Truth went she preached and prayed with convincing power. She seemed to have little fear of any law that did not come from heaven, but she strongly believed with the writer of the Psalms that God's law "is truth" and that obedience to it becomes a hallmark of all sincere Christian profession. Her hope for the world was beyond a turbulent, disordered life. The name this intrepid voyager had given herself was a disavowal of material attachments, a confirmation of her search to know the divine will.

In her time there were perennial anxieties for a nation struggling to right itself in the midst of a costly Civil War. It was Sojourner Truth's belief in God which pointed her beyond the fortunes



James H. Lewis beside grave of Sojourner Truth, in cemetery with Advent pioneers. Inscription, "Is God Dead?" recalls her interruption of speech by Frederick Douglass at Salem, Ohio.

of a people at war, to the triumphant group who would witness "wars to cease unto the end of the earth." It is small wonder that in this context she could hold a lamp of faith high when everyone felt that there was adequate basis for despair.

How would the spiritual viewpoint of Sojourner Truth answer the problems of our present complex society? From the distance of two world wars and more away, could she speak to the issues of our time? Would her message give added understanding to the tragic convulsions of our own age? Certainly the evidences she would see of technological achievement in 1958 would be breath taking; the speeding automobiles and planes would be unbelievable; the destructive bombs would be terrifying. But the problems of race violence, of armaments, of crime, of revolutions, of famines, and of religious indifference would be fundamentally the same. On

the folly of our bewildering search for peace without God, she could speak as an Old Testament personage denouncing erring men for willful sin.

She could speak against the nation's shameful crime record, in which both young people and adults participate. She knew war as we know war, only the types of weapons and the names of the battle areas would be different. The ends of greed and selfishness served by hostilities would be the same. The circumstances and the people would be different, but Sojourner Truth could discuss with meaning the problems that lie always beneath the veneer of our civilized life.

She stood as an advocate of the pillars of belief which Jesus enunciated in the long ago. Then as now many of those great spiritual monuments were spoken against. But while many civilizations are drifting into darkness, the
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Lifted Lamp

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ideals of Jesus are finding increasing place in the lives of those seeking Him.

When Frederick Douglass felt dejected as he addressed a vast throng in Salem, Ohio, one night, he suggested that nothing could be done to lift the curse of slavery unless the black man took up arms in his own defense. Sojourner Truth arose to her feet, and with a stentorian voice shouted: "Frederick, IS GOD DEAD?"

BEFORE leaving the New England scene, Sojourner Truth became acquainted with the doctrines of Adventism, as taught by such leaders of the Millerite Movement as Dr. Josiah Litch (1809-1886), a physician and Methodist clergyman. L. E. Froom tells us that "in the early days of the slavery and temperance agitation he [Josiah Litch] was constantly in the forefront of the conflict." It was the strong reformatory tenets of Seventh-day Adventists which attracted Sojourner Truth and caused her to move to Harmonia, Michigan, a suburb of Battle Creek, which was at that time the throbbing heart of the church. In Battle Creek she met such leaders of Adventism as James and Ellen G. White, Dr. J. H. Kellogg, and Uriah Smith.

James Hannibal Lewis (1865-1957) of Battle Creek said that when he was a boy he went to visit Sojourner Truth at Harmonia. He remembered her as a dynamic Christian. "I recall that Sojourner Truth was baptized by Uriah Smith, in the Kalamazoo River, at the end of Cass Street," he said. "Furthermore, her funeral was conducted by Uriah Smith in the old Battle Creek Tabernacle." Reminiscing further, Mr. Lewis told of how Sojourner had received a skin graft at the Battle Creek Sanitarium. The art of skin grafting

had but recently been discovered, and Dr. J. H. Kellogg decided to try it on a leg ulcer from which Sojourner was suffering. The physician asked for small strips of skin from likely donors, but even Sojourner's daughter was frightened at the idea. Whereupon Dr. Kellogg from his own arm and chest cut small strips of skin, and applied them in little islands to Sojourner's leg. The skin united perfectly with her own.

The meeting of Abraham Lincoln and Sojourner Truth at the White House, in 1864, was a memorable occasion in her career. When she came for her visit, the president arose, extended his hand warmly, and remarked: "Well, I had heard of you years and years before I ever thought of being president. . . . Perhaps you would like to see the Bible which the people of Baltimore presented to me!"

He brought out a Bible encased in a walnut box, which cost \$6,000. Completely captivated, the old warrior of Jehovah exclaimed: "What a beautiful book!" Sojourner then showed President Lincoln her "Book of Life" containing the names of interesting persons. He wrote: "For Sojourner Truth, October 29, 1864, A. Lincoln."

In December of 1865 the government, through the National Freedmen's Relief Association, authorized Sojourner Truth to be a counselor to the freed people of Arlington Heights, Virginia. Through this bureau, the Freedmen's Hospital was established.

At three o'clock on the morning of November 26, 1883, Sojourner Truth fell asleep in death. An announcement of her death read: "She quietly passed away, a living example of Christian faith, being fervent in her belief of a hereafter, and confident of entering that eternal rest." THE END.