

TRACING ROOTS, FINDING LOVE



In the 1980s, to help fill her days as a retired librarian, my Aunt Eunice turned to genealogy, discovering a tragic part of our family's past.

She learned that our ancestor, Robert Ball, kept slaves on his Kentucky plantation, including one named Robert Anderson. Incredibly, Anderson's widow, Daisy, whom he had married when he was 79 and she was 21, was still alive and residing in Colorado.

My aunt phoned Daisy Anderson, not quite sure what to say. The protocols of etiquette are silent on the matter of how to introduce oneself to the widow of a man your family member had enslaved.

Somehow, Eunice muddled through, her task made easier by Anderson's grace. By the end of the call, she had invited Eunice to come visit her.

My aunt's friends warned her not to go, afraid the meeting would prove too awkward. Eunice went anyway, her own anxiety disappearing when

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Anderson met her at the airport, threw her a party, served her delicious meals, and treated her like a member of the family. The two elderly women from vastly different backgrounds found that they also had much in common, including the bond of widowhood. An unlikely friendship was born.

Through Eunice, I found out that Anderson helped her husband write a slender memoir before he died in 1930, publishing it herself. I wrote to order a copy, letting Anderson know of my connection to Eunice. On a May afternoon in 1989, the parcel arrived, wrapped in a Sears catalog envelope Anderson sensibly reused. She included a handwritten note. "I will always keep you in my prayers," she told me. "I hope you enjoy my book and the meaning of it. God bless you."

From Slavery to Affluence: Memoirs of An Ex-Slave is predictably grim, recounting the deprivations and brutality Robert Anderson endured during his captivity, including merciless beatings at the hands of the plantation mistress. He eventually slipped away during the waning days of the Civil War, joined the Union Army, settled in Nebraska, and thrived in farming.

When Daisy Anderson died in 1998 at 97, her passing made national news. The book and letter she sent me still rests on my shelf. One lesson she and Eunice taught me is that racial reconciliation is possible, though we might have to risk getting out of our comfort zones to do it. I've also learned that slavery, often described as America's original sin, is not so distant a historical fact. A middle-aged man in the 21st century, I've corresponded with the wife of a person my relative once claimed as property.

I can't help but think of William Faulkner, who was even more deeply familiar with slavery's legacy. "The past isn't dead," he famously declared. "It isn't even past."

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