

2009

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Recommended Citation

Penny, Dianna. "River Town Chronicles." *The Iowa Review* 39.2 (2009): 80-89. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.6709>

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DIANNA PENNY

River Town Chronicles

For most of my life I have lived in a community beside a river. A river has watered the roots of my family since 1850 when my paternal great-grandfather, a fugitive slave, found the Mississippi a route to freedom and made his escape from a southern Missouri plantation across the river to the Free State of Illinois. Henry Penny was superstitious about mice and saw in their presence a sign of prosperity and good fortune. He thought mice were smart because they showed up in times of plenty when more crumbs were dropped. One day, he discovered a nest of them in the deep pocket of an old duster hanging in a barn. He took this as sign of an opportune time to take flight, so he hid a worn but serviceable canoe in tall grass at the river's edge until nightfall when he could cross undetected to Kaskaskia, Illinois, an early French settlement on the Lewis and Clark Trail. Kaskaskia stuck out into the channel as a peninsula attached to Illinois and the river flowed around it in a slow-moving oxbow. In 1871, an earthquake would alter the river dramatically, overwhelming Kaskaskia, carrying most of it downstream, and leaving it an island in the middle of the river channel. Much later, as a student in nearby Chester, Illinois, I got to know French- and Slavic-surnamed classmates who were bused in from Kaskaskia Island.

That night in 1850, though, Henry Penny made his way from Missouri to Kaskaskia to Chester where he was taken in by an abolitionist named Henry Hayes, who hid him in a barn on his property. The Fugitive Slave Act, allowing slave owners to enter free states to hunt for runaways, was signed that year by President Fillmore, so my great-grandfather would be forced to live in hiding for fourteen years, until after the Emancipation Proclamation.

Despite the times, the river would soon be bearer of more good fortune for my great-grandfather. Because Penny had to remain hidden during daylight hours, he plowed Hayes's fields by night. Once, during this nocturnal labor, he accidentally plowed into a nest of field mice whereupon he rejoiced, seeing in them, this time, a sign

to seek a wife. As the only person of color in Chester, he was lonely, a fact that did not go unnoticed by Mr. Hayes. A steamboat traveling up the Mississippi from New Orleans docked at Chester to unload a great assortment of items such as cooking pots, bolts of cloth, and other merchandise. Citizens turned out in throngs, dressed in their Sunday best, to celebrate the boat's arrival. Standing among them, Mr. Hayes glanced upward to the crow's nest and observed a tall, thin black girl of about eighteen standing beside the captain who was threatening to throw her overboard. When Hayes saw the young woman, frightened and in tears, he called up to ask what the captain wanted for her. The captain, seeing an opportunity to be rid of a slave whom he said had been "nothing but trouble," simply told Hayes to take her off his hands for no money at all. Her name was Rachel and Mr. Hayes took her home to Henry Penny. There was no way for slaves to marry legally, but with Hayes and his family as witnesses, Henry and Rachel Penny "jumped the broom," an African custom that symbolized a new beginning. In time they became the parents of fifteen children.

Following Emancipation, Mr. Hayes, who was preceded in death by his wife and daughter, named Henry Penny, now a free man, as sole heir to his land, which would come to be known as Penny's Hill. A gentle creek that emptied into the Mississippi flowed quietly by at the bottom of this vast wooded hillside. Two generations of family laundry were scrubbed clean in this creek by my grandmother and great-grandmother on a large rock with homemade lye soap.

Though born in St. Louis, I spent the better part of my formative years in Alton and Chester, Illinois, and Muscatine, Iowa, all situated on the Mississippi. Our years in Alton and Chester would see the births of two sisters, followed by three brothers. I remember little of St. Louis, as my parents and I left before my second birthday, and I did not see it again until I was six and a half and our train pulled into Union Station after a harrowing journey, under Jim Crow conditions, from Jackson, Tennessee where we had been visiting Mama's relatives. It was late August, 1947. Daddy had returned to Alton a week earlier to begin a job at the *Alton Evening Telegraph*, which also allowed him to use its facilities to produce a weekly black newspaper, *The County Editor*. I don't think I shall ever forget

that trip into St. Louis. Although we boarded in the early morning, just after sunrise, the day was already hot and humid. We stood with our luggage, a single large suitcase, at one end of the station platform, awaiting the arrival of a northbound train. There were four of us youngsters, with my brother Nick the youngest, an infant of nine months, nestled in Mama's arms. She was a slender young woman in her late twenties and still a beauty as the early morning sun picked up the red highlights in her dark auburn hair and the splash of freckles gracing her pert, upturned nose.

A train whistle sounded in the distance and the passenger train soon chugged into view. A series of cars moved by until the last car appeared and stopped beside us. The train had begun its run at Biloxi, Mississippi and the last car was filled beyond capacity, leaving standing room only. This last car was the only car with open windows because it was not air conditioned. We quickly boarded and the porter placed our suitcase in the aisle, positioning it to create as little obstruction as possible as the train began to move northward. Being young and somewhat sheltered, I did not immediately attach any significance to the fact that all the passengers in this hot, overcrowded car were black.

Mama held onto an overhead bar with her left hand while holding little Nick in her right arm. We girls, aged two, four, and six, took turns sitting on our suitcase. For most of the trip, Mama's only relief came when it was my turn on the suitcase since I was the only sibling old enough to safely hold Nick. We were close to the glass-paned door between cars. Blessed with the curiosity of childhood, I stood on tiptoe to peer into the next car and saw that it was occupied by a lone white man, reading a newspaper in air-conditioned comfort as evidenced by moisture condensing on the closed windows. My innocent query as to why we could not simply walk through the door and sit down on the abundant empty seats in the car ahead was met with a wall of silence. I glanced at the sea of sweaty black faces and fluttering, hand-held fans, but no one spoke. I could see that Mama was unhappy, but she too remained silent except to urge me away from the door between coaches. It would dawn on me later that my uncomprehending eyes had witnessed my first fully realized glimpse of real-world injustice.

By late afternoon, as we neared St. Louis, a seated passenger offered to hold Nick so Mama and I could take a breather. Needless

to say, disembarking into Union Station was a relief beyond description. Daddy emerged from the waiting crowd and we were at last on our way home to Alton across the river. The Interstate Commerce Commission soon outlawed the conditions I have just described.

Most of my early childhood was spent in Alton where we lived two and a half blocks from the river in an apartment on Belle Street above a men's clothing store. The river helped feed us. There was a fresh fish market on the riverbank and a fresh poultry market two blocks in the opposite direction. To save money, we brought fish and chickens home alive, the fish in a bucket of ice. Mama butchered them in the kitchen sink of our small apartment somehow managing to hang on to them until they stopped struggling. How she could do this and still maintain a clean and pleasant kitchen, I'll never know. I only remember her delicious cooking.

Since we lived in an apartment downtown with no yard, we were taken to Alton's Riverfront Park on Sunday afternoons to run and play on the green grass and enjoy the fresh air. Sometimes, we would venture to the river's edge and throw rocks into the water, fascinated by the concentric rings that formed as each missile splashed down. Being the oldest and a bit more adventuresome, I decided one afternoon to wander further away with my little sisters in tow. When Mama caught up with us I was attempting to scale a sloping wall of the Alton (now the Melvin Price) Dam and Locks just south of the Lewis and Clark Bridge, no doubt scaring her out of her wits. I was spanked and scolded for wandering off and leading away my younger sisters.

In time, Daddy was ordained in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, attaining the rank of itinerant elder, so we were relocated several times, first to Daddy's boyhood church in Chester and landing eventually in Iowa City. For most of my adolescent and teen years, we lived in the parsonage adjacent to the church in Chester. The two structures sat atop a heavily wooded hill overlooking the Mississippi. From the window of the bedroom I shared with my sisters, we could see Missouri, a hazy landscape in the distance. The early morning mist rising from the river above the treetops was the first thing I saw every day. It was an ethereal and lovely sight, as

was the unobstructed sky above the trees, in which we followed the changing positions of sunrise as the seasons changed. Or we could reach through the window and touch the bough of a persimmon tree on which an owl might perch at dusk on a summer evening.

We had no television. Except for an occasional evening at the Arrow, a drive-in movie theater in nearby Steelville, and school performances, a radio in the living room was our only source of outside entertainment. We loved to read—Dickens, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Laura Ingalls Wilder, and Shakespeare were favorite books my sisters and I carried home from school and city libraries—and soon discovered the very adult literature of African-American author Richard Wright. We would sneak Daddy's copy of one of Wright's novels from a bookshelf in my parents' bedroom and, after nightfall, huddle beneath a large quilt in our bedroom, using a flashlight as we took turns reading in whispers until a rising crescendo of adolescent giggles betrayed us to our parents. From time to time, Mama's voice floated through the darkness, gently admonishing us to be quiet and go to sleep. I suppose the forbidden Wright novel was our "late show."

The weathered parsonage was heated by wood and coal burning stoves in three of its six rooms. The church had a single pot-bellied stove. The heavy iron range in the kitchen was one of our stoves and lacked any means of determining oven temperature, in spite of which we turned out to be good enough cooks, learning to sense the heat well enough while turning out our share of lopsided cakes, or concave muffins that failed to rise. The unfortunate appearance of these items always elicited great whoops of laughter. We were poor and hated to waste food, but our dogs didn't mind as they consumed our mistakes. To this day, though, I have no idea how I got flour on the kitchen's beadboard ceiling. Mama and Daddy looked the other way whenever they turned us loose in the kitchen.

Coal was expensive, but the railroad ran along the river at the foot of our hill and passing freight trains would often dump excess coal near a sand dump on the riverbank. We considered this high quality coal manna from heaven as we toted it uphill in thick burlap sacks. Even John, aged five, the second youngest of six, carried his share.

There was no plumbing in the church and the only plumbing in the parsonage was a single cold-water tap in the kitchen. An outdoor privy and chamber pots served their purposes. We caught rainwater for washing our hair and heated water for bathing and laundry in galvanized buckets, which were omnipresent on top of every stove, especially during the winter. A new baby, my youngest brother, Joe, was in perpetual need of clean cloth diapers since Pampers were as yet unheard of. An open section of pipe stuck out at the top edge of a hill and overhung Mama's hillside vegetable garden that was terraced with railroad ties. She dug a shallow ditch beneath the pipe's opening and running the length of her garden, which was irrigated every time we poured soapy dishwater or used laundry water down the drain. I am certain that I shall never again see or taste tomatoes like those from her garden.

There are no words to describe how grateful we all were when the parsonage of Daddy's next assignment contained the full complement of plumbing facilities. I'm sure there were classmates who thought that I was nuts to exult so at the idea of hot and cold water from a single tap and flushing commodes; what could they know?

During one Mississippi River flood, a man dear to us died tragically of electrocution and drowning. Jack owned a small Mom and Pop grocery store near the riverbank at Chester. He sold penny candy, bubble gum, and other goodies that delighted youngsters. He had been wading through the hip-high water inside his little store when he began to slip. To steady himself, he reached overhead for something secure but what he grabbed turned out to be electrical and live. Jack was much loved by all the kids in the neighborhood. Now, the river had snatched him from us.

In addition to Jack's store, there were other small businesses along the riverfront, most of them taverns. It was from one of these that I would receive a very special gift—my first piano. I will never forget the sunny September afternoon a red pickup truck bearing an upright piano turned into our gravel lane. I had seen it from the school bus and ran toward the house as fast as my long, thin twelve-year-old legs would carry me. Mama and Daddy, waiting on the front porch, beamed at my excitement. The piano was a battered

Victorian relic, its gloriously ruined appearance a sight to behold, having seen its share of celebratory and drunken revelry. Many of the places where bas-relief carvings had once adorned it were now bare expanses of wood with only faded outlines of what once was. Most of the white keys were missing their ivories and one key was missing a hammer, producing, when struck, only a dry, scratchy sound, like the rattling of bones. Most of the felt pieces in the key bed were missing. None of that concerned me, however. The piano was mine, and lessons would commence on the following Saturday. In retrospect, I suspect this instrument had been through a flood, perhaps several. The tavern's proprietor was replacing it with a jukebox. It seems as though the river had offered it to me, and I practiced until my parents made me go outdoors and play or called me to dinner.

My sisters and I were also child singers and soon I could accompany them. Daddy hosted a religious broadcast on KSGM of Ste. Genevieve, Missouri, a historic French community on the west bank of the Mississippi north of Chester, and before long we were able to participate in it. Ste. Genevieve was the oldest European settlement west of the Mississippi and boasted beautiful old stone chateau-like houses with walled gardens. Every weekend our entire family would travel to the station to either broadcast live or tape our program. We would cross the Chester Toll Bridge and be greeted by a toll-taker, a delightful chap named Alfonso and nicknamed "Fonny." Once on the Missouri side, we would pass through the hamlet of St. Mary, also historic, where we met a surviving former slave whom everyone called Aunt Biddy. She was the last surviving member of the tiny AME Church in her community.

We loved to arrive early enough to visit with the station's manager and announcer, a big, amiable Cajun called "Uncle Buck." The studio, housed in one of Ste. Genevieve's lovely stone mansions, contained a beautiful antique Steinway concert grand piano of 1870s vintage and I was smitten. It was well maintained and sounded heavenly after a week of playing my "gift from the river." My old beat-up piano stood proudly, though, in one corner of the parsonage's lace-curtained living room until it was destroyed by fire three years later when both church and parsonage at Chester burned to

the ground. By then, KSGM had acquired a sub-station at Chester, and my high school choral director was one of its announcers; he issued an appeal for replacement of my piano and I was soon the owner of a much finer used instrument.

Menard, just southwest of Chester, and also on the river, is home to the Menard Correctional Center, formerly known as Southern Illinois Penitentiary, the state's largest maximum security prison. Whenever there was an escape from this facility a loud whistle sounded, creating no small amount of concern because the heavily wooded bottoms were full of hiding places. On a hillside above the main facility was the Security Hospital that housed the criminally insane. It was popularly known as the "bug house." A particularly shrill and piercing siren announced the escape of an inmate from the "bug house," which was much scarier than an escape from the main facility because we reasoned that "normal" escapees would try to get as far away from the area as possible, whereas those deemed insane were less predictable. One day while five of us were at school, there was an escape from the Security Hospital. When we returned home, Mama said a state trooper had knocked on the door and asked if she was alone and if she'd seen anything unusual. She was indeed home alone with one-year-old Joe but had not seen or heard anything. The trooper searched the cellar, an outbuilding, and the nearby woods, with his gun drawn, but found no one.

A little red "school bus" passed our house daily, transporting incoming inmates to the penitentiary. The bus made a sharp right turn where our road abutted the railroad tracks and continued north up the river road. This particular location was re-created in North Carolina by Hollywood for the opening sequence of the 1993 film *The Fugitive* that starred Harrison Ford, but which also contained footage shot in Chester.

Once the state auditor of Illinois was convicted of embezzlement and sentenced to prison. From our hillside, we kids watched the passing motorcade as the high-ranking, white-collar criminal was transported to the penitentiary in a long black limousine accompanied by a police escort. A convicted embezzler was going to prison, but he didn't have to take the bus.

On two occasions my high school chorus entered the prison to provide a holiday concert. In the midst of various choral selections, a concert grand piano was rolled onstage and I played a medley of Christmas music while armed guards patrolled along a catwalk above the seated inmates. In spite of the guards, gates, and bars, the world behind the prison walls resembled a small town. It had a movie theater, a chapel, and an assortment of small shops.

Less than a year later I caught my first glimpse of Iowa as we crossed the river from Illinois. It was late October and Daddy had been assigned the position of Pastor of Bethel AME Church in Muscatine, a church no longer extant. This was new territory in which the Pennys had no family ties. Mama, however, did have a cousin and aunt who lived on a hill overlooking the river in Davenport. The Muscatine church and parsonage were on Seventh Street near Mulberry, within easy walking distance of downtown and the riverfront. I was a high school senior and graduated the following spring from Muscatine High School.

The new environment offered interesting challenges, especially the fascinatingly contradictory weather. I was surprised to see vegetable gardens producing as late as November. During the warm weather months, Muscatine produced watermelons in abundance, culminating in its annual Watermelon Festival, a weeklong celebration in August when Second Street was blocked off and carnival rides and booths replaced downtown traffic. During that first winter in Iowa, I was equally fascinated by the sugar-like snow, which I'd never seen before. My sisters and I earned extra money shoveling snow for an elderly lady who lived around the block. One of my dad's parishioners surprised us with the gift of a big brown box with tubes—our first television set, a Philco table model. A year later, the presiding bishop of the 4th Episcopal District of the AME Church, while reading the list of assignments, called out "Who will take Iowa City?" Daddy raised his hand and was assigned to its Bethel AME Church. Built in 1868, it remains active and was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2000. When my family moved to Iowa City in the fall of 1958, we saw immediately that a river ran through it.

I had been accepted as an art major at the University of Iowa as we began our lives in yet another place and I got acquainted with another river. The winter of our first year in Iowa City would be the harshest that any of us had ever experienced. For weeks on end the temperature hovered at or below zero. The Iowa River was a good deal smaller than the Mississippi, and during this extremely cold winter it froze solid and remained frozen for a couple of months. A heavy blanket of snow covered the frozen water. Someone drove a Volkswagen onto the river and the ice did not give way. I was among those who boasted that I had “walked on water” to get to and from my classes in the Art Building. By walking across the frozen river, one found relief from the biting winds that swept the more exposed footbridge. I found it ironic that a river frozen as hard as stone was helping me to keep warm. Nor was the March thaw pretty, as enormous and jagged chunks of ice, often surrounded by nasty-looking foam, floated downstream. Iowa City was forced to endure horrible-tasting tap water because of the increased amount of chlorine necessary to cleanse it of wastes and impurities that had backed up during the winter. Needless to say, sales of soda pop and beer escalated dramatically. Bottled water was not yet much marketed.

In the summer of 1993, the Iowa River rose and spilled out of its banks. During this flood-stricken summer of 1993, my sister flew in from California with her two sons. We walked along the swollen river as my young nephews clambered atop piles of sandbags for a view they undoubtedly found very different from the beaches to which they had become accustomed. Barb, however, wanted the boys to become better acquainted with their Midwestern roots, which included inland rivers and the related experiences we had grown up with. As I look at a river’s charms as well as the devastation it can cause, I know we must find better ways of living with our rivers.