

THE MCKINNEY FARM

An historical Hoosier homestead

The harness jingled as the large horse came to a halt in front of a white picket fence just outside the two-storied white McClure family farm house. Preston T. McKinney, a man highly regarded for his ability as a doctor, dismounted and strode down the path through the opening in the fence. He paused at the front door then knocked roughly. In a moment, the door swung open and P.T. McKinney was ushered into a dimly lit interior.

“James is in his room.”

P.T. nodded and passed through the kitchen with grim familiarity. He knew his way well; the McClures and McKinneys had neighboring farms since P.T. got title to the land a few years back. He’d even been married to Sarah Jane McClure, mother of his first four children, until her death in January of ’48. But when he’d married her sister, Eleanor, it’d caused quite an uproar. The McClures were very unhappy with what they considered an incestuous marriage, and their relationship with McKinney was strained. P.T. was booted out of the local church, where he’d served as a deacon. The whole community seemed averse to accepting this union.

But now James McClure was ill. And despite the tensions P.T. regularly came over to doctor his old Wabash College friend, never talking, never relaxing – just ministering.

This night would prove to be different, however. After weeks of silence and heightened formality between the two families, James welcomed P.T. with a moment of his usual silence, then finally said, “Put his horse in the barn.

The land that was to become the McKinney farm was first a grant from the national land bank signed by President John Quincey Adams (which hangs framed in the McKinney house today), and was obtained by Harold Martin. However, he did not retain the land for long.

In those days, farmers would pool their crops or livestock and one person would take the product to market. Such was the case with a barge load of pork which Martin took to New Orleans. Among those whose interests he was representing was Aaron Hedfield's, the "company store banker," a politician and money man who founded the small burg of Newtown, Indiana.

Martin mysteriously lost everything on that trip. And since he had some loans out on his land to Hetfield, the latter claimed Martin's land as recompense for his share of the losses.

This parcel of land then passed to Dr. Preston T. McKinney, who purchased it from Hetfield in 1836, and it has been in the McKinney family since that time.

The McKinney farm adjoined the one owned by the McClure family, and soon the McKinneys and McClures were also joined as families when P.T. married Sarah Jane McClure. These two families have shared social and business relationships ever since.

"A man could settle down here and live his life," said P.T. McKinney, gazing out a window and absently holding back the curtain.

Aaron Hetfield looked at his companion with an amused smile. "This wouldn't have anything to do with a certain Sarah Jane McClure I've seen you sparking lately, would it?"

P.T. let the curtain fall back over the window. He looked down at his shoes with his own slight smile. "I don't suppose you'd be interested in selling that piece of land you have next to the McClures, would you?" he asked.

As he spoke, he thought briefly of the letter he'd written home to explain his lengthy absence from his home in New Carlisle, Ohio. In his mind's eye he could see the modest, beautiful Coal Creek; the "river" that had been flooding so badly he couldn't possibly cross it yet...

Hetfield stood up from his comfortable chair and stretched for a moment. He'd had this land for some time as a settlement against that rascal Martin. Martin had lost a tremendous load of pork for Hetfield – said it was robbed in a riverboat incident. More likely it was in an unlucky gambling incident.

Well, he was a man with an eye for a good sale. P.T. would be a distinguished addition to the neighborhood. It'd be good to have a doctor in these parts.

"I think we can arrange something," said the banker.

Unlike many farms and great tracts of land today, the McKinney and McClure farms (today called Walnut Knoll and MarMac, respectively) have remained relatively unchanged for over 150 years. And both have remained with the original families.

A common cemetery, placed on the property line, links the two farms and is rich with the history of both families.

It was a sight those at the small funeral gathering would always remember. A cold spring wind whipped around somber bodies. Flanked by his young children, P.T. stood at the edge of the grave site bidding silent good-bye to Sarah as her body was lowered into the ground. Peach blossoms were falling on the coffin from the trees overhead.

A friend said later, "I'll never forget the sight of P.T. down at the cemetery in the cold burying Sarah with those four children, all under age five."

Six generations lie buried in the McKinney family plot, including P.T., his first wife, Sarah Jane, his second wife, Eleanor, who helped rear her sister's four children but died trying to give birth to one of her own, and his third wife, Catherine.

Ironically the third Mrs. P.T. McKinney had also been a McClure, although she was not related to the McClures of MarMac. Catherine was a local schoolteacher and had reared her sister's son, orphaned by an outbreak of malaria, until he was an adult. Then in her 40s, she married P.T. and her first child, Charles, was born to the couple.

Charles married and had four children, among whom, a daughter, died at age 12. His wife, Mary, broke tradition and had the child buried in nearby Newtown because the family cemetery had become overgrown. And although Charles and Mary chose to be buried next to their daughter in town, Charles' son, Glenn, was buried in the family plot, as was another daughter, Georgia, who spent 40 years as a missionary to Iran (called

Persia in those days). In 1938 Lawrence (grandson of Charles) and his wife, Alice, restored the cemetery.

The McKinney farm has many stories to tell. Between 1818 and 1820 it was host to a thriving mill. At one time a canal which ran down near Coal Creek brought logs down from the north to be processed at the saw mill. Today you can still see a contour in the land, and when it rains heavily, water will collect. One can easily imagine how the original canal must have looked.

But it wasn't just logs that passed through this farm.

The moon wasn't out that night so the horse-pulled cart was heard before it was seen.

"Whoa," said the driver softly.

The horses halted before a large farm house. The door opened almost immediately. A man stood in the doorway with a lamp, its light showing no surprise on his face.

"Two this time?" he asked.

The driver nodded and went to the back of the cart. He spread the straw and lifted back wool blankets. Two forms got up and dusted themselves off, the slighter one coughing to clear her lungs.

They walked without speaking to the barn. Their dark-skinned faces were illuminated by a soft lamp light once they came inside. Charles showed them to a special room where food and rest awaited.

Even though the farm was well up in the North, there were still folks who didn't appreciate the slave-running practices of their neighbors. This McKinney farm house, the original homestead, was burned in 1851.

The McKinneys had been sleeping in the barn to protect their livestock – as was the common practice of Underground Railroad households. The house wasn't entirely destroyed, but it was moved, rebuilt and the face of the farm was changed permanently.

Actually, burning barns was the more common protest. During the civil war a militant organization sympathetic with the South, known as Knights of the Golden Circle, marked the McKinney barn a second time for burning. Many of the barns of families with sons in the Union Army were burned; and Charles' oldest (half) brother, William, was a captain in the Civil War.

This barn had been built by P.T. McKinney in 1849, the year of the Gold Rush. The original homestead stood on the knoll just east of the barn and was the birthplace of his son, Charles R. McKinney, and grandson, Glenn E. McKinney.

On its centennial, in 1949, Glenn and his son, Lawrence, replaced the roof with wood shingles.

In his 80s Lawrence reminisced about this last project with his father. "My father commented on what changes had been made during the past century, and how our shingling was an historic event," he said. "How little I realized the significance, because my father died about a month later."

The cattle, fed broken ear corn, silage and cottonseed meal which enabled them to reach weights up to 1,400 lbs, stood lowing outside the barn. It was early, the sun hadn't risen yet and the air was still cool. These great beasts were to be driven on foot this morning to Wingate and loaded on trains for sale in Chicago. Young Lawrence was excited. This was always a stirring and social event – the neighbors were already gathering to join in the cattle drive.

Today, surrounded by rich cornfields along State Highway 55 between Wingate and Newtown, Walnut Knoll is today primarily a sheep farm, raising champion show sheep which are jealously (and necessarily) guarded by great Pyrenees dogs because the farm straddles a wolf run.

The present farm house, which stands three stories, was built in 1892 by Glenn McKinney and has been fully restored. It is nestled quaintly in a beautiful, park-like setting, with parlor window facing the original homestead, where the original barn still stands.

Several varieties of mature trees rise gracefully on the 40+ acres of land which encompass the house – handsome sycamores, oaks and walnuts, even a stray Kentucky Coffeebean.

Current residents Pearce McKinney (great, great grandson of P.T. McKinney) and second wife, Alice, are a new breed of “gentlemen farmers.” They mind a family-owned business during the week and tend the farm during evening and weekend hours, caring for its treasures (which include a genuine Persian rug, found recently serving as padding for another carpet). They were busy last fall planning a wedding that’s in keeping with tradition for Michael McClure (great, great, great grandson of James McClure) and Amy Nixon, daughter of Alice Nixon McKinney.

A large, relatively new red barn houses several varieties of sheep, a few ducks, a multitude of cats and kittens, and even two great peacocks.

Down a rolling hill over a spreading pasture of cattle often visited by deer, Coal Creek cuts through tree-studded land, saddled by a large suspension bridge and jumping with trout and bass.

The “new” McKinney farm house stands as an historical landmark. It has been featured with other local landmarks in a 1993 calendar, and was recently showcased in a national decorating magazine for its tasteful restoration.

Although the house is beautiful to behold and peaceful to experience, there is something that runs deeper. All around are subtle hints of the lives from that unusually long, unbroken line of family ownership, reminders from the land’s past, lingering stories from the experiences of those who lived there, artifacts from the Shawnee and Pawnee Native American tribes who originally inhabited the land and now, the restoration and stewardship of its current owners. The land and its people are intertwined.

As Lawrence McKinney once put it, “I may have title to this land, but I don’t own it. It owns me.”

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[written 1994 by Lynnell Nixon-Knight, with information from Lawrence McKinney]