

## A Great Canadian Story

He could hardly believe his ears when his Master said "Take my best horse, Solomon, and deliver this message to our good neighbour." He had been entrusted with a high duty.

Thus began the little known story of Solomon Moseby (for which thanks are owed to Welland, Ontario historians Michael Power and Nancy Butler, authors of *Slavery and Freedom in Niagara*, and to eye-witnesses who recorded this in 1897).

For as his heart quickened with the pace, in perfect harmony with the sunlit streams and the fresh smells of Spring, Solomon dared to wonder what freedom might be like.

Irresistibly, he headed straight north to Fort Niagara (now Niagara-on-the-Lake; then, the capital of Upper Canada, and having 400 black residents, a tenth of the town's population). After two arduous months Moseby arrived, wept with joy - and received a terrible shock. Incensed at the theft of a fine horse his Master had tracked Moseby all the way. He complained bitterly to the Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada, Sir Francis Bond Head, who jailed Moseby as a thief.

The people were outraged. Wasn't this a hero escaping bitter torment? Citizens, white and black, signed a petition cleverly arguing that because a slave was property, and not a person, he was not a free agent, and therefore could not be morally or legally guilty of a crime.

Bond Head deliberated deeply on this point, and ruled against them. "This land of liberty," he declared, cannot be made an asylum for the guilty of any colour."

Now here was a whole town of angry citizens claiming high moral principle to free Moseby - while their leader declared a higher one to jail him. It was moral gridlock.

The next day, something magical happened. The local Preacher, Hubert Holmes, upon hearing Moseby was to be returned to slavery, thundered "NEVER WHILE I LIVE!"

Black runners (risking capture by "black ruffians, as well as white," who made a living returning escaped slaves to the Americans for money), were sent off each chilly night to get recruits. Blacks everywhere dropped their tools, and headed for Niagara. The countryside was on fire, the towns in ferment.

Temporary shacks, at first a dozen, then hundreds, sprang up around the jail. Captain Richardson of the ferry "Canada," rebuffed Bond Head, swearing "no vessel commanded by me will be used to convey a man back to slavery!"

One week went by. No toilets. No food or water. Cold nights without blankets. The black

brotherhood watched, and sang. And hundreds of the white townsfolk fed them, gave blankets, and took many into their homes.

Sir Bond Head said, they will grow tired. They will be hungry. They will go home. But after three weeks, there was a siege shantytown of some 400 blacks on public grounds. Their fires burned to sweet singing voices.

On the last day, the prisoner was dragged out between armed constables, to a wagon pulled by two fiery horses. Soldiers with fixed bayonets fended off the angry crowd. The rooftops were covered with whites and blacks shouting to stop this horrible deed, as the terrified, handcuffed Moseby was pushed into the wagon. Then, just as The Riot Act against insurrection was read, and the crowd grew angrier with each word, "the gates were thrown open, and the spirited team came out with a rush." Frightened horses reared. Women threw rocks at the guards. The Sheriff "went up and down, slashing with his sword...and many of our people had cuts on their necks."

Boldly, Preacher Holmes grabbed the reins, while Jacob Green shoved a fence rail through the spokes of the wheels. A confused Sheriff McLeod on his stamping horse was blocked by a large black woman, who would not move aside, "her ponderosity happily offering an effectual bar, but on whom he hesitated to use his sword."

When he saw the horses stopped dead, and fearing mayhem, he shouted "Fire!" So one soldier shot preacher Holmes straight through the heart. Another ran his bayonet through Green as he struggled to get away.

Amidst the furor, Moseby leaped out of the wagon, and disappeared into the night. One witness said the jail guard intentionally hadn't locked the cuffs; another, that the blacksmith had made them to open easily.

Forty blacks were jailed for insurrection. At the trial, the death of Holmes was declared "justifiable homicide." But for months to come, Upper Canada's newspapers continued the debate. One paper said Moseby was a hero; another, an ungrateful villain provoking civil disorder.

But by December 4th. The Mackenzie Rebellion was under way, so the prisoners were released to fight for Canada in a special black platoon. Meanwhile, having heard of their jail plight, an American force had moved close to Niagara to "liberate" the blacks from British Rule in the name of "republican democracy."

But wanting none of that sort of "freedom," our black soldiers begged permission to fight them, and thus "to defend the glorious institutions of Great Britain."

While all this unfolded, Moseby somehow got to England, where he became legally freed. Years later, he returned to a Niagara somewhat reluctant to forgive him the sadness provoked in their midst.

It's time for the CBC to make this a great documentary.

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