

From the Log Book of the Chief Explorer The Buxton Liberty Bell: It tolls for all of us

(Written for inclusion in the inaugural newsletter to Affiliates of the Innovation Expedition)

Don Simpson, Chief Explorer

*"It's a bell about freedom
It rings about justice
It's a song about love between my brothers and my sisters
All over this land"*

(1960s folk song of the Civil Rights Movement)



Valentine's Day 2007 provided me with a beautiful opportunity to reflect on various aspects of my experiences in Africa over 47 years and my interactions with the black communities in Canada.

Dawn Ralph and I were among the invited guests of the Ontario Minister of Citizenship and Immigration at the launch of a replica of the historic Underground Railroad Buxton Liberty Bell.

During the 1800s the Buxton settlement represented safety and freedom for hundreds of slaves escaping from the United States via the Underground Railroad. The largest of such communities in Canada West, Buxton became known as an innovative model of what could be accomplished through collaborative, action by courageous people with a passion for breaking through the barriers of ignorance and prejudice.

The bell (a gift from the coloured community of Pittsburg) was hung in the steeple of St. Andrew's church in Buxton. The intent of the donors was that the weekly ringing of the bell on Sunday was to inspire their ongoing commitment to free others from bondage. In addition, the bell was rung each time another slave reached freedom in the community.

The Buxtonites drained the swamps, created a community bank to help finance homes and factories, exported goods to the USA and built schools to ensure widespread education for all. They then took their innovative community development model to the Caribbean and to various part of Africa—and for a short time Southwestern Ontario was the centre of the fledgling Pan-African Movement.

After the Civil War, many returned to rejoin their family members throughout the USA and they took the Buxton model with them—influencing the social and economic development of many American communities. For over 80 years—to this day—Labour Day in Buxton brings together the descendents of these early slaves in a celebration of this amazing story of the movement of African people and the impact of their journeys.

It was my first journey to Africa in 1960 with Crossroads Africa that led to my introduction to Buxton and the beginning of my personal journey to explore the contribution of blacks to the building of Canada. As a young teacher I was petitioned by a community group in Buxton who wanted to try to create Canada's first museum of black history as part of their contribution to the Canadian centennial

The conventional wisdom of the day was that there was no black history in Canada worth celebrating. So I, along with Vic Ullman (formerly an investigative journalist for the New York Times) began the task of moving from community to community across the USA, connecting with Buxton descendents and digging out the stories—and what powerful stories they are. Our work led to two books (*Follow the North Star* by Vic Ullman and *Under the North Star* which is my contribution).

I had no doubt early on that the creative, courageous experiences of these black immigrants in the 19th Century could provide important insights for today. However, when our work was first completed and used as early material for the Buxton Museum (which did open in 1967) publishers felt that the only market was the black community which they deemed too small to warrant commercial publication. To my mind these are not just stories of black immigrants, they are important human stories with the potential to add value to all our lives.

But thankfully times have changed and now there is increased recognition that, in this global knowledge-based economy of the 21st Century, the capacity to build and sustain multicultural communities is a key element for success. And so 30 years after completing the research my book was published in 2005 by the African World Press. The Buxton Museum is now fully recognized and supported as a national historic site—and now a replica of the Buxton Liberty Bell will be touched and rung by visitors to the Museum and used to spark their interest in the stories—and new stories continue to be written and shared in books, plays and movies.

This personal learning expedition of mine to explore the Afro-Canadian story, while it eventually led to a Ph.D. thesis, was more important to me as part of my personal vision quest. The lives of black leaders, both those I met through historical records and oral histories and those I met in person, helped to strengthen my understanding of and respect for entrepreneurial innovators who have the skills, the passion and the commitment to overcome significant challenges in building strong organizations and communities.

The journey to find connections to a hidden past of a cultural group different than my own required the building of trust and led to my early understanding of the power of personal perceptions and the challenges inherent in practicing successful cross-cultural communications. This experience had a strong influence on all of my life's work.

This personal African journey continues to this day and is providing growth opportunities for other IE Affiliates. Keith Jones and I head to Kenya on February 19 to apply the CDS™ in helping to build: (a) an Innovation Unit for Agricultural Research; (b) a global consortia for vaccine development (in which Steve Murgatroyd is playing a part); (c) AfriAfya, a digital network to support improved health in low income communities (Dawn Ralph has in the past worked with this health network, providing some initial organizing support for their bank of resources).

Meanwhile I have pledged my support (and that of any other interested IE Affiliates) to York University's growing effort to build an innovative knowledge network on the African Diaspora—to be known as the Harriet Tubman Institute (she was a famous black woman “conductor” on the Underground Railroad). The public launch of this global network will be March 25 (the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery by the British Parliament) and the festivities will be presided over by our Governor General, herself a descendent of African slaves. But more on this exciting innovation experiment in a future newsletter.

LET THE JOURNEY CONTINUE!

Don Simpson