

THREE ON THE TOWN

OFF THE SAME BOAT

When I was a child, slavery was rarely discussed in my family circle, and then only as a distant, ominous whisper. Rarely was an explanation given for the obvious comminglings of African, Native American and Caucasian blood that stained our gene pool. And if a young'un got bold enough to ask the awful question "What are we?" some testy elder would snap, "We're American like everybody else."

In my South-Central classrooms, slavery eluded the textbooks and the teachers. But in the schoolyard, it festered as some horrible, mysterious secret. During Saturday matinees of "White Cargo," "Huckleberry Finn" and "Gone With the Wind," it evoked embarrassment, frustration and rage. And in the pulpit, it was encoded in recountings of Moses leading the children of Israel out of Egypt—the subtext being an impassioned hope that all present-day residuals would be left at the banks of the Jordan if nowhere else.

But even rarer was the mention of whites in that context. Except for John Brown, and an occasional Quaker, the notion of whites being victimized, lynched or sold as chattel was largely ignored till the civil rights movement forced national debate. Partly to temper black righteous indignation and partly to correct the sin of omission, "indentured servitude" was brought to the ideological table.

A footnote in the settlement of North America in the 1700s, indentureds were an underclass of orphans, petty criminals, political/religious prisoners and sons of poor landowners. Bound by law or by choice to a four- to five-year term, they were promised freedom and 50 acres of land (a wee bit more than 40 acres and a mule). Because of these parallels to slavery, indentured servitude sometimes proves to be an effective device for fostering dialogue in communities where conflicts between urban blacks and the descendants of the immigrant Irish remain at issue. Underneath the cacophony of accents, tangle of bloodlines and cultural gridlock, L.A. boasts at least one family that proudly claims indentured servitude as part of its



*Settling Our
Differences
Begins When We
Learn What We
Have in
Common*

By
Wanda Coleman

heritage and has the document to prove it:

"This Indenture Witnesseth, that Valentine McMenamin, Born March 13th, 1882 by and with the consent of Mrs. Catherine McMenamin, His Mother hath put himself, and by these present doth voluntarily and of his own free will and accord, put himself Apprentice to The John B. Stetson Company of Philadelphia, to learn the art, trade and mystery of Felt Hat Finishing and after the manner of an Apprentice to serve the said John B. Stetson for and during, and to the full end and term of his Apprenticeship, which will be the 8th day of December A.D. 1903 next ensuing."

Said masters expected Valentine Patrick to not gamble, frequent ale or playhouses, to remain unmarried and generally "behave himself as a faithful apprentice ought to do."

As a child, Valentine worked the woolen mills as a "blue-arm," so named for the dye used to make military uniforms. Then, as an indentured

servant, he received \$2 a week during his 1899-1903 term. And while, according to grandson David, he considered the conditions repressive, they provided a trade. At the end of his service, he was given a gold watch (now a family heirloom). "Freed," he stayed three more years for journeyman's pay. Determined to make his fortune, he purchased a six-shooter, "retired" and went west.

Valentine the Hatter established his downtown chapeau emporium at 942 South Hill. Business boomed, sustained by May 15, Hat Day (when the swells doffed beaver for the straw of summer). But when postwar L.A. went hatless, Val was forced to abandon fedoras for cowboy hats. His elite clientele included Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, William (Hopalong Cassidy) Boyd and Gene Autry. Val never got rich, but before his death in 1951, he managed to put one son, John, through Occidental College. Grandson David recalls an introspective man who loved to drive up to Angeles Crest just to spend time alone. When asked if being descended from an indentured servant had any specific ethnic or cultural impact on himself or other family members, David thought it over briefly.

"No," he said. "I see myself as just an American."

Illustration by Ellen Weinstein

10 LOS ANGELES TIMES MAGAZINE, MAY 8, 1994