



Uncle Dave's Story: The Life of Ex-Slave Dave Boffman

By Phil Reader

For thirty-six years he lived quietly on a small homestead which was located atop a wooded hill at the end of Branciforte Drive in the Vine Hill district. When he died in 1893 he was a wizened old man bent low with age, sporting a balding pate and grizzled white beard. In death his looks belied the once hulking ex-slave who had trod barefoot across the prairie in search of freedom. Tales involving slavery have, by their very nature, an underlying sense of pathos. No story in Santa Cruz county history is more poignant than that of Dave Boffman. It is indeed one of those stories which cries out to be told.

He was born at the Baughman plantation in Crab Orchard, near Stanford, Lincoln County, Kentucky. The exact date of his birth and the name of his parents remain lost to history having been recorded in one of those slave inventories which reduces the nativity of a human being to a mere number. "Born on this date, one Nigger boy." Boffman, himself, estimated the year be about 1820.

His old master was Henry Baughman, a transplanted Virginia aristocrat, who owned one of the largest cotton plantations in central Kentucky. To work his fields, he owned nearly one hundred slaves, and it is among these people that young Dave grew into manhood.

In 1837 he was mated to Matilda a sixteen year old fellow resident of slave row. During the next ten years, six children were born to this union, three boys and three girls. Old master Henry died in 1843 and Dave and his family were deeded to a grandson, Newton Baughman.

The word that gold had been discovered in California spread quickly across the country, reaching Kentucky during the summer of 1848. Newt Baughman, who was a restless sort, immediately made plans to move west with his wife and daughter. In late summer they left Kentucky, taking with them their slave Dave and his family. Crossing the Mississippi River, they continued on into north-western Missouri and bought a farm at Lafayette township in Clinton county.

After settling in, Newt Baughman began to prepare for his trip to the gold fields. In order to finance the journey he sold three of Dave's children to a slave buyer from the south. He then asked Dave to accompany him to California in return for the opportunity to purchase his freedom once they had reached the mines. Dave readily accepted, seeing in it the chance to not only buy his freedom, but to reunite his family.

During the month of May, 1851, master and slave set out, planning to follow the Missouri River up to old Fort Kearny and, there, pick up the California Trail. But this was not meant to be an easy journey.

All of the border states were fraught with slave hunters forever on the lookout for run-away slaves, and most were not opposed to kidnapping a freedman, or stealing a slave from his master. All of the points of terminus for the overland trails were closely watched.

As luck would have it, Dave and Newt Baughman were quickly separated and he had to make it to Fort Kearny on his own. One day as he walked along the river bed, he happened upon a party of slave hunters, who were running a large pack of blood-hounds. He immediately dove into the swift current, where he knew that the dogs would not follow, and swam to the opposite shore while a hail of bullets plunked into the water all around him. He was forced to employ this maneuver on two other occasions to avoid capture before arriving safely at the fort where he found his master waiting.

After resting a few days they set out across the prairie following the Platte River through Nebraska and Wyoming toward the Rocky Mountains. This was Indian country and the Cheyennes and Pawnee were on the prowl. Twice they were attacked and during the second raid Dave, who was not allowed to carry arms, was taken prisoner.

He was marched with much ceremony into the Indian camp. Because he was the first black man that this tribe had ever seen, they looked upon him more as a curiosity than a captive. During his time with the Indians, he was puzzled by the fact that he was constantly being touched and rubbed. Dave soon learned that his capture was considered to be a good omen and that anyone who touched his black skin would surely have good luck.

His special standing with the tribe proved to be a boon because they did not post a guard on him and he was able to effect his escape.

Continuing westward alone, he found Baughman again waiting for him at Fort Laramie. There they joined a large flotilla of wagons and completed the rest of their journey to California in relative comfort and without further incident. Dave, now in the prime of his life, had walked the whole two thousand miles barefoot.

October, 1851 found the two men busily prospecting near Mokelumne Hill in the northern mines. Their efforts met with success and Dave was able to unearth enough gold to meet the one thousand dollar price that Baughman wanted for his freedom. He stayed on at the diggings long enough to accumulate a small stake.

During this time he met a young man named Samuel McAdams, who told him about the opportunities to be found working in the redwood groves near the coastal community of Santa Cruz. Lumber was selling for 5100 per thousand feet, and if a man was willing to work hard, he could amass a fortune. In early spring the ex-slave, who now referred to himself as Dave Boffman (spelled phonetically), set out with McAdams for Santa Cruz. Boffman's goal was to earn enough money in the woods to buy freedom for his wife and children, whom he had not heard from in well over a year.

Upon arriving at Santa Cruz, he bought a small house on an acre of land in pueblo de Branciforte. He then went up to Zayante and leased a saw mill from Isaac Graham. Boffman and McAdams spent the rest of the year milling enough lumber to fill a large schooner which they planned to ship up to the market in San Francisco. However on the way up the coast, the schooner was caught in a storm and dashed upon the rocks Pescadero. The cargo was lost and consequence the two men were ruined.

McAdams left the county in despair, but Dave knuckled down and went to work for the Weeks Brothers, who were putting in their first crop of potatoes along Branciforte Creek. By dint of much hard labor he accumulated the money to purchase a nice little 45 acre ranch at Rodeo Gulch in February of 1860.

He took on as a partner, a German immigrant named Herman Siegmann. They planted an orchard and sowed a crop of wheat and oats. Prospects had never looked brighter for Dave and he began to plan for the day when he could send for his family.

When they had taken possession of the ranch they had found running there a young unbranded colt. In May, Siegmann, against Boffman's advice, traded the colt to Live Oak stockman Martin Kinsley for a mare and her foal. Thinking nothing more of the matter they set about the business of ranching.

Several days later, Kinsley appeared at their door in the company of county sheriff John T. Porter. Kinsley stated that the colt which Siegmann had traded to him belonged to sheriff Porter and that he, Kinsley, was there to retrieve his mare and foal.



John T. Porter

At this point, Porter stepped in and told Boffman and Siegmann that what they had done was a crime punishable by imprisonment at San Quentin. Boffman protested, saying that he had nothing to do with the trade, so he was innocent. But the sheriff insisted that Dave and the German were partners and if they didn't immediately pay him two hundred dollars, he would have them sent to prison. Boffman asked for time to go into Santa Cruz and talk to a lawyer.

Again Porter threatened them with jail, adding that if they didn't have cash, they could give him a promissory note for the amount. He then guaranteed them if they paid off the note he would not say anything about the affair. The sheriff had known Boffman for several years, and knew the man's reputation for honesty and fair dealing. Porter also knew that Dave was innocent of any wrongdoing, yet he continued to force the issue.

Boffman realizing that he was a poor man, who on account of his color could not testify in court on his own behalf, and knowing full well that Porter, in his role as sheriff, was quite capable of sending him to jail, acquiesced to the extortion. Porter wrote out the note which Boffman and Siegmann then signed.

On October 9, 1860, local businessman George Otto, also of German extraction, paid Porter the sum of one hundred dollars to be applied on the note in the name of Herman Siegmann. Both Boffman and Siegmann hoped that this would satisfy the sheriff, as it was the German alone who had inadvertently wronged him. But this was not to be, because on January 3, 1861 Porter initiated court proceedings against Boffman for the full amount.

Being ignorant of the laws and intimidated by Porter's standing in the community, Dave didn't contest the suit and a judgment of one hundred and eighty-five dollars plus interest was granted in Porter's favor. At the hearing the sheriff also claimed that Otto had only paid him fifty dollars not one hundred dollars.

Judge McKee, in whose court the case was heard, denounced the way Porter had handled the matter and publicly regretted that he would have to rule in the sheriff's favor. Kinsley too, later testified as to the illegal actions taken by Porter.

Boffman was unable to pay the judgment and lost the property when it was sold off at a constable's sale on March 16, 1861. The ranch was auctioned for eight hundred dollars, much more than the one hundred which Porter bid. Afterwards he learned that Boffman still possessed some stock - a mare, a colt, two milk cows with their calves, and a heifer - which he ordered seized and sold to satisfy the judgment.

A demoralized Dave Boffman moved back to town and went to work as a day laborer. He was employed for a time by Elihu Anthony, a local merchant. Anthony, also a Methodist minister, befriended him and was to keep an eye on Boffman's interests so that he would never have to undergo another shameful incident like the Porter affair. It was also Anthony who suggested that he take up a preemption on eighty acres of school land in section 16 of the Vine Hill area. Boffman filed the necessary papers in 1864 and took up residence at that time.

The hillside land was so densely covered with brush and chaparral that Dave was forced to crawl on his hands and knees to find a clear spot. For three weeks no one heard from Dave, so Anthony rode out to the property where he found Boffman hard at work clearing the land. During the time he had nothing to eat except for a few wild berries. The preacher took him home, fed him a hot meal, and drove him back to the homestead with a wagon load of provisions.



Elihu Anthony

In time Dave finished clearing most of the land and built himself a small wooden shack with a stone fireplace. In later years he planted an orchard and a forty acre vineyard. This was to be his home for over thirty years.

Little by little he gave up on his dream of being again united with his wife Matilda and the children. He was to remain desperately poor, earning only enough from his fruit and vegetables to keep himself alive. He bought an old mare to help him with the plowing and was never known to ride it. When he went to town for supplies, he would lead the mare, plodding along barefoot next to it, for Dave Boffman never owned a pair of shoes in his life.

The 1870s were exciting times for him because his nearest neighbors were the Lorenzana's and the Rodriguez's. The young bandidos from these families trusted him and would sometimes hide out in his cabin. Faustino Lorenzana stayed there when things got too hot for him around Branciforte. During September of 1871, Tiburcio Vasquez and his gang which included one of the Rodriguez boys were hiding there after they had robbed the stage coach at Soap Lake near Hollister. On the 13th of the month, Vasquez was camped in a ravine next to Boffman's house recovering from a bullet wound, when a gunfight broke out between the desperadoes and a posse led by under sheriff Charlie Lincoln. Dave helped load the dangerously wounded man into a wagon so that he could make good his escape.

The years slipped away and he became quite well known in the area for his many eccentricities. His hair and beard turned white with age and his body shrunk and became gnarled by the passage of time. The children in town came to know him as "Uncle Dave" and he was never without a story for them. His constant companion was an old dog called "Watch" and he treated the animal with kindness allowing it to sleep on the foot of his bed.

On one occasion when Dave was bitten by a rattlesnake and the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, printed a story reporting the incident and declared the old man dead. The following day, however, he was seen in his orchard pulling up weeds with a bandaged hand. The paper was forced to print a retraction, concluding that it was the snake that was dead not Uncle Dave.

For many years his friend Elihu Anthony had been searching for any member of Dave's family that remained alive. One day he heard about a granddaughter who was living up in northern California at Colusa county. Her name was Annie Drisdorn and she was the child of Dave's oldest daughter Matilda. Anthony sent her money for a ticket and was at the depot with Dave to meet her train.

For Dave Boffman it was to be a bittersweet reunion as the girl brought him up to date on the fate of his family. His wife Matilda, thinking him dead, had remarried and moved to Kansas where she had passed away several years before. The only one of his children who was yet alive was a son George, then living in Topeka. George had been a baby of less than one year when Dave had left home in 1851, he therefore had no memories of his father.

Annie stayed with Boffman for six months taking care of his every need in an attempt to make up for all of the missing years. But then the day came for her to return to her own life, leaving the old man to the company of his dog.

On the night of April 19, 1893, Uncle Dave, almost senile and well into the eighth decade of his life, fell asleep in an arm chair next to a roaring fire that he had started in his fireplace. As he slept the flames leapt out of the hearth and caught the wooden floor boards of his cabin on fire. He barely escaped with his life as the fire all but completely destroyed his shack.

Once again his longtime friend Elihu Anthony came to his rescue taking Dave into his home and providing for him until it became necessary to commit him to the state asylum at Agnews. On September 23, 1893, Dave Boffman, the luckless ex-slave died quietly in his sleep. His remains were brought back to Santa Cruz and buried in the Anthony family plot at the Odd Fellows Cemetery where a humble tombstone now marks his final resting place.



Dave Boffman's Grave

The *Santa Cruz Sentinel* eulogized him as "honest, confiding, simple, industrious, and without a vice", remembering a day "thirty years earlier when we saw Uncle Dave carrying on his back a heavy plow from a Santa Cruz blacksmith shop to his farm, a distance of fully eight miles, performing this great task to save the strain on his old horse."

However it was his faithful dog "Watch" who was to have the final word of praise for Uncle Dave. The animal escaped from the Anthony place where it was being kept, and found his way back to the Boffman ranch. For many months afterwards he lay in the burnt out shell of the cabin whining for his master.

Author's note:

The name of Dave Boffman sits uneasy on the ledger books of Santa Cruz county because there is still a debt that is owed this meek and mild man, who for so many years could be found among us. This obligation can best be resolved by simply revealing the truth about his life.

Notes and References on Uncle Dave Boffman

Birth

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Handbill in the David Jacks Collection, Special Collections, Stanford University.

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