

"Uncle" Dan Rogers

by Phil Reader

When the California Gold Rush began in 1849, the recently acquired territory was about to enter the Union as a free state. Among the ringing words of its new constitution were "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall ever be tolerated in this state." However, with the ravenous demand for labor in the gold fields, this was a nicety honored more in the breach than the observance. That unrelenting stream carried a man known as "Uncle" Dan Rogers to Santa Cruz County not once but twice, first as a slave, then as a free man. His determination earned him a place in the history books as both the first black resident of Capitola and the first free black in Santa Cruz County.

Dan was born a slave in North Carolina at the end of the 18th century. His slave master was a man named Captain Redmond "Red" Rogers, whose surname Dan would eventually inherit. Along with thousands of others, Captain Rogers joined the stream of so-called Argonauts, gold seekers who were to swell the new state's population by 86,000 within two years.

Many of these Argonauts traveled on foot or by wagon, taking up to nine months to reach California. Of the numerous blacks among them, some were free men and women in search of opportunity while others were slaves lured by their slave masters with the promise that they could later obtain their freedom.

The Trek to California

When Captain Rogers set out in March of 1849, Dan was already 52 years of age. With a party of others, they set out from

the town of Clarksville in the Arkansas River Valley across the Oklahoma territory to Santa Fe, New Mexico. From there, their route dipped south to the Gila River and along the Guadalupe Mountains through Arizona into Southern California.

The "Clarksville Party" broke a trail which others would later follow. Theirs was a long and arduous journey fraught with many dangers. Much of the hard work was done by the slaves in the party, especially Dan. Captain Rogers carried a blacksmith forge and tools to repair the wagons.

Dan was a very good blacksmith, a skill of incalculable value on such a journey. He became the informal leader of the black bondsmen. He drove the lead wagon and made the judgment calls when it came to deciding on river crossings.

As a sign of respect for his age and talents, he earned the title of "Uncle" Dan, even amongst the white settlers. One of those settlers kept a journal which was published nearly a century later. "Uncle" Dan's leadership role is mentioned numerous times as the party nears Santa Cruz, breaking trail, building a craft to cross the Pajaro River, and leading them to their final destination, the deserted Rancho Espinosa-Aptos.

A Brief Stop along the Way

It was here that the Clarksville party split up into smaller groups. Some pushed on to the mines while others headed to other destinations. A large number, including Captain Rogers and Dan, settled at the mouth of the Soquel River (now Capitola Village) to wait out the winter.

Captain Rogers soon realized that gold was only one form of wealth in the new territory. He put his slaves, including Dan, to the hard

work of converting redwood logs into useable lumber deep in the forests of the Soquel Valley. There they felled the trees by axe, a particularly hazardous job.

Crosscutting the logs into useable planks was then done

in El Dorado County, filing a large claim in Georgetown, near the site of the original gold strike. There he worked his men in the mines during the day and hired them out by night. Within a year "Uncle" Dan was able to pay the \$1,200

surprise, the piece of paper was not a Deed of Manumission at all but a note asking "...that the slave Dan Rogers be sold at an auction and the proceeds be sent to Redmond Rogers."

With this piece of consummate villainy accomplished, "Uncle" Dan found himself enslaved again.

Amazingly, a group of prominent white businessmen heard of "Uncle" Dan's plight and took pity on him. They took up a collection and were able to again purchase his freedom at the auction. This time a genuine manumission deed was drawn up by a court, and Dan was at last awarded the freedom he had worked and bargained for so long.

Heading West, Again

Dan Rogers and family crossed the plains once more by ox team, a trip which took over a year. They arrived in Watsonville in 1860, where Dan was able to purchase a tract of 80 acres and begin life as a farmer.

"Uncle" Dan quickly became the most influential African American in Santa Cruz County history. An 1897 newspaper article called him "the first and oldest of the living Pajaro valley pioneers." Then nearly a century old, his "massive frame" and bright eyes are remarked upon, with the summary "...none of the boys want to get at very close quarters with the old man when it comes to a wrestle."

"Uncle" Dan Rogers and his descendants seeded the large black community in south county. The former slave who almost lost his freedom because of his illiteracy led a school boycott which broke the color line in that district. He passed away on October 22, 1903 at the age of 103, concluding a life that spanned three centuries. ■

Dan Rogers



by an eight-foot pit saw or whipsaw, the log suspended over a pit with one man above and another below. This was the first time that lumber was milled in the county using this method. Albeit challenging, the effort was profitable to a man whose workers were in no position to protest. Steamers carried the lumber to market in Monterey, where U. S. government officials paid Captain Rogers \$80 per thousand feet.

Finding Freedom and the Dirty Lie

In the spring Captain Rogers took his slaves and headed up to the placer mines

his master was asking to earn his freedom.

Captain Rogers gave Dan a document which the white man said was his "Freedom Paper," a Deed of Manumission.

The following winter the group returned together to Clarksville, Arkansas. But Dan, now a free man, had decided to leave the South forever and take his family back to California.

At the Arkansas state line they were stopped and asked for their papers. Dan produced the document given him by Captain Rogers. Unfortunately, the illiterate former slave's trust turned out to have been misplaced. Much to his