A Story About the Underground Railroad

Written & Illustrated By Cindy Yawkey

Underground Railroad Society of Cass County

www.urscc.org

Cindy Yawkey of Vandalia, Michigan has been a member of URSCC and a volunteer in the Bonine House, home of abolitionists and UGRR stationmasters James E. and Sarah Bogue Bonine, since we first opened to the public in July of 2011. She is a docent, caretaker, historian, and invaluable source of information about her home town.

She is an accomplished photographer and has chronicled the restoration of the Bonine House for years. During this time Cindy would draw various aspects of the house and carriage house and the freedom they represent. These exquisite pencil drawings expanded to become the story of Lucinda, a freedom seeker, and her journey from Georgia to Michigan and the Bonine House in the 1850's.

Cindy is a unique talent and a distinctive voice and we are very proud to be a part of offering her story and her art to the world. Enjoy.

-- The Underground Railroad Society of Cass County

Lucinda

The Whipping Tree

My name is Lucinda. I was a slave in Georgia I heard you could be free in the North. That was where I was going. I would run away. The slave catchers would capture me and take me back. The master would make me wrap my arms around the whipping tree. Rip open the back of my dress. Each lash of the whip, ripped my flesh to the bone. The whipping tree stained with slaves tears, sweat, and blood. It's bark covered with scars from where the whip slashed it. My back covered in scars. The master yelled "Take her shoes. That'll keep her from running away!" They took my shoes. I cried. They took my shoes. How am I going to be free? One night a slave named Eliza told me about the Underground Railroad, where people would help you get North to freedom. I was ready to go right then, but she said "we have to wait. I'll let you know when it's time to go." Eliza came and said, "it's time to go." I grabbed what little food I managed to save up and put it in a bag, a bag I made from scraps of cloth, the dress maker was throwing away. "I am ready," I said. She looked at me from head to toe and said "Where's your shoes at?" "They took my shoes." I said. She said "it's a long way." I stood up tall and said, "let's go." We met the first conductor at the edge of the plantation. I hesitated because he was a white man. Then he said, "If you want to be free follow me." He lead us through the swamp.

There's A Map In The Sky To Freedom

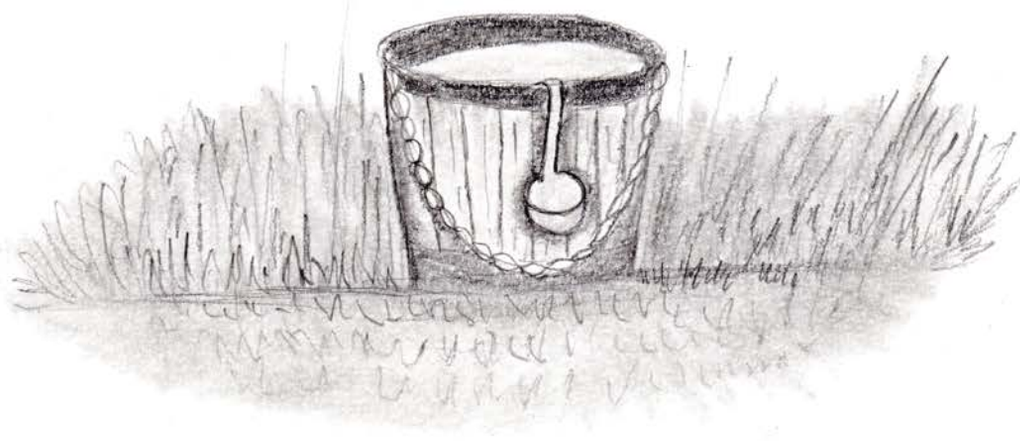
After we made it through the swamp, the Conductor said "do you want to see the map to freedom?" "Yes," I said. He pointed up to the sky. "Do you see the drinking gourds? There's a big one and a little one. If you can find the little one you can find the North Star. Three Stars make the handle and four stars make the drinking part." I see them" I said, pointing to the stars. "Do you see that brighter star? That's the North Star. If you get separated from you conductor, look up and find the little drinking gourd and the North Star. Keep traveling that way." He lead me to a road. "Stay close to the edge of the road. If slave catchers come, you can hide in the woods. Stay on this road, if you see a lady hanging out a quilt, stop and she'll give you something to eat. If you don't see her hanging out a quilt, keep going. If there's a man watering his horses, ask him for a drink of water. If he says yes, he'll help you get North to freedom." I thanked him and headed up the road.

Lady Hanging Out A Quilt

I was hoping an a praying, that she would be hanging out her quilt. I was so hungry my belly was touching my back bone. I tried to find berries, anything to eat, but I didn't find anything. I kept walking. I smelled sweet cakes and sweet potatoes. Oh let this be the place. I peeked through the bushes. There she was hanging out her quilt. I walked up. She said "Welcome friend, I have sweet cakes and sweet potatoes to eat." "Thank you, thank you." I said. She wrapped them up in a cloth and handed them to me saying "the slave catchers are near by. Go to the man watering his horses." She pointed and said "go through the woods, he's on the other side." "Thank you, thank you." I said, eating and walking as fast as I could go.

A Man Watering His Horses

I made it through the woods. There he was watering his horses. I remembed the conductor told me to ask for a drink of water. I walked over. "Sir, may I have a drink of water?" "Yes, please help yourself," he said. "The slave catchers are near," I said. "Come follow me, I'll hide you in the barn."



I followed him. He pointed at the ladder. "Climb up there." I climbed up the ladder. There was a door. "Go in and lock it," he said. I opened the door and looked inside. There were slaves and free blacks hiding. I went in. He moved the ladder away. I hurried and locked the door

The Word Nigger

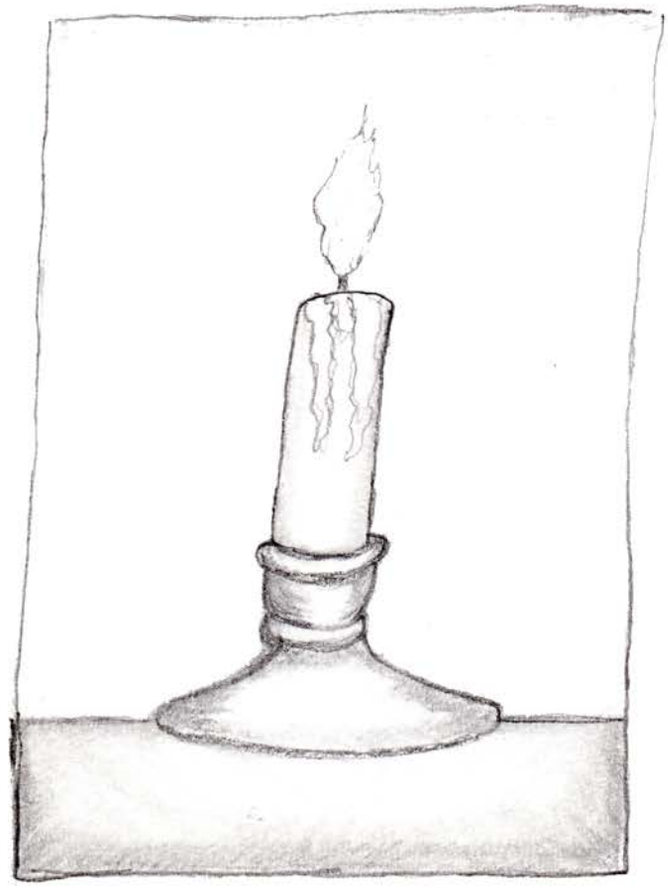
We heard a scream. It sent chills to my bones. We peeked out through the cracks between the boards. The slave catchers caught a man and a woman hiding in the hen house. They were dragging her by her hair. They dragged him by his shackled arms, beating their legs with sticks. Yelling "This will teach you niggers to run!" That horrible word I heard all my life. "Nigger do this, nigger do that". Most of the time followed by a whipping. The word nigger meant you weren't human. You were less than the master's dogs. You were a thing to be bought and sold, whenever to whomever. Fall dead in the fields. "You Quaker, where's the rest of my niggers?" The poor man and woman were bleeding. They kept hitting them. I wanted to yell, "let them go!" I stopped, covered my mouth, and shut my eyes. "Search every inch of this place, starting with the barn," the slave catchers said. The slave catchers grabbed up pitch forks and started stabbing the hay loft. One slave catcher came up. He was stabbing the hay, but we were safe in the little hidden room, the Quakers built. The slave catcher said "Let's go." They tossed the man and woman on to the wagon, like they were sacks of potatoes. I didn't know if they were alive or dead.

A Field Of Thorns

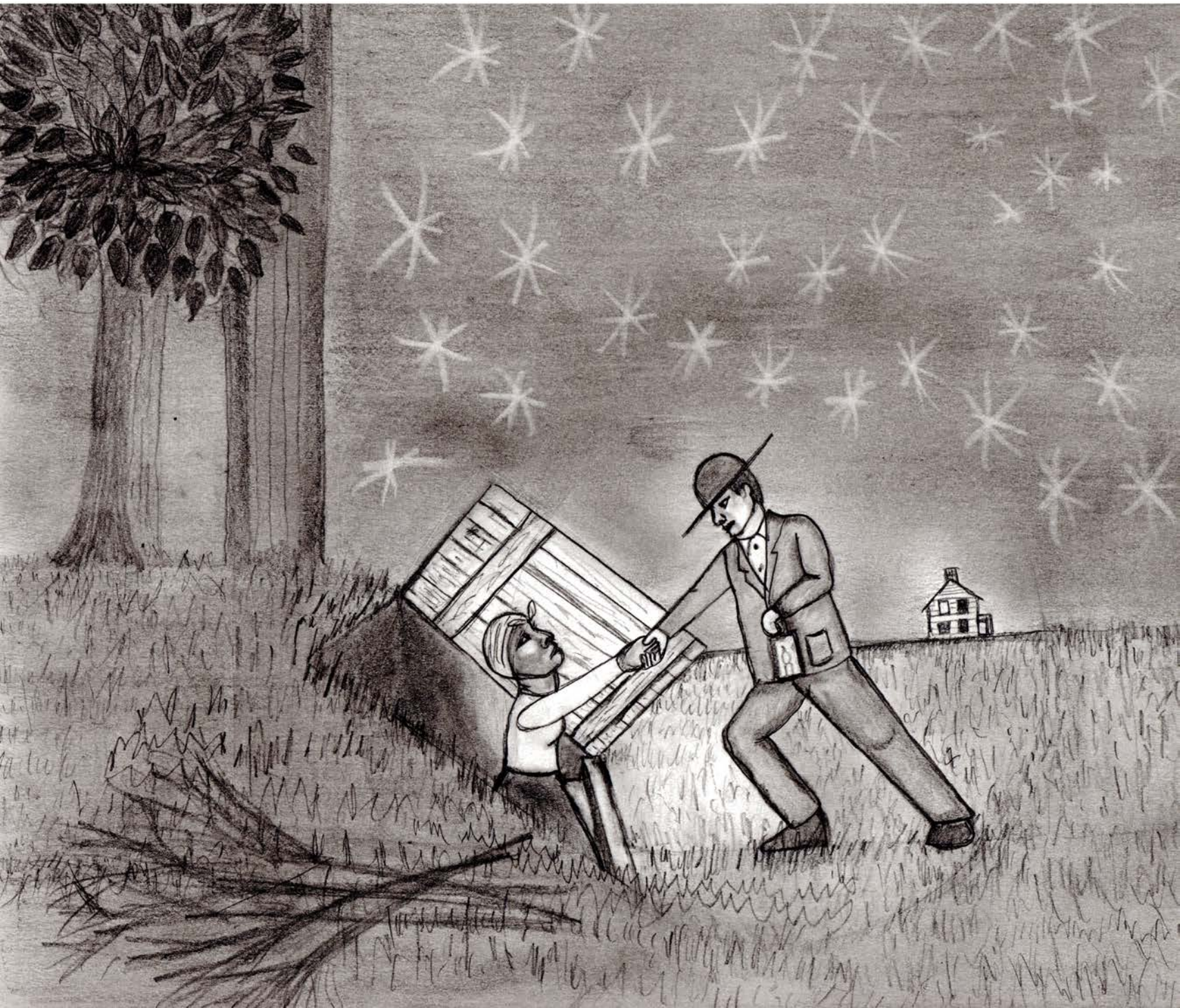
Zeb was the next conductor. He came into the barn. "Hello friend, I'll be taking you to the next stop. We were walking along. Zeb stopped. "Slave catchers coming, hurry, hurry, go and hide. I'll let you know when it's safe to come out." When I heard that, I took off running. Ouch the pain, something piercing my skin and ripping my clothes. Oh my barefeet. I ran into a briar patch! I dare not cry out, the slave catchers would hear me. I'm not going back. I knelt down in the briar patch, thorns poking me. "Nobody would be crazy enough to hide in there, let's look elsewhere," the slave catchers said. Then I heard Zeb saying "come children, come children, let's go and pray." It was safe to come out. The slave catchers were gone. Then Zeb saw my ripped up clothes and my bloody feet, thorns still stuck in the bottom. Zeb bandaged up my feet. I said. "Please can we get moving, before the slave catchers come back? We started going again. The thorns felt like they were going deeper, with each step I took. Please let the safe house be close. Zeb pointed to a house. He said "this is your next stop. You can tell by the candle in the window

Candle In The Window

Jacob and Mary were station masters on the Underground Railroad. They put a candle in the window, letting slaves and free blacks know it was a safe place to stop. Once Mary saw me. She said "oh my heaven, what happened to your clothes, your feet?" "I ran into a briar patch." I said. "I have some clothes you can have. Sorry I don't have any shoes." Mary said. Mary removed the thorns from my feet and bandaged them again. They told me about the candle in the window. If I get separated from my conductor, I should look for a house with a candle in the window.



"It's almost daylight, I'll show you where to hide," Jacob said. He lead me to a storm cellar and I went in and Jacob closed the door and piled branches over it. I stayed hidden all day. There was a barrel of water and food Mary gave me. Jacob came and helped me out of the cellar. "This is Sam. He will help you get to your next stop." "Thank you Jacob and Mary"



Lord Willing And The Creek Don't Rise

Sam and I met another conductor, who had a young couple and an older lady with him. He asked Sam if he could take them, Sam said he would. We were walking beside a creek, when we heard slave catchers say "I think there's slaves over there" Sam said. "Come on, let's hide under the bridge." We waded into the creek. It was knee deep. We got under the bridge. Thunder, lighting, and pouring down rain. The creek rose above my chest. "I don't know how to swim" I said. The couple said "we don't know how to swim." The lady said "I don't know how to swim." We heard the slave catchers on the bridge. We saw their lanterns moving side to side, searching. I was hoping they were as wet and miserable as I was. "Let's get out of here, they're in a barn, some place dry." They left. We stayed under the bridge a little longer. Sam went out first. "It's safe to come out." Let's get moving. We have to get to the Ohio River. There's boats waiting for you, to get you into Ohio." My wet feet, softened by the water, on a rocky road. Bite my lip. I am not stopping. Am going to be free. Good Lord willing and the creek don't rise. The creek rose. I made it. God willing I'll be free.

Ohio River Is Deep And Wide

Freedom On The Other Side

I made it to the banks of the Ohio River. Waiting to cross. Run and hide. Going station to station. A safe place to hide, something to eat, and rest. Through swamps, over a mountain, and a field of thorns. I made it this far. "You still have a long way to go, before you're safe and free." Sam said. The river was like a mirror, reflecting the lantern light. The boat came across the river and Sam helped me in. I hid in the bottom of the boat. "You'll meet your conductor on the other side." Sam said. "Thanks Sam.

Ohio Free
Not Me

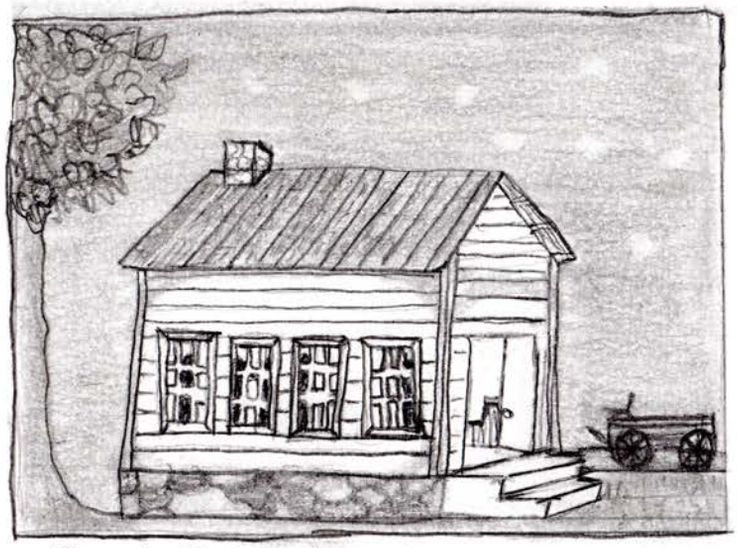
Safely across the Ohio River. I was about to stand on free land. "Welcome friend my name is Jeremiah." He helped me out of the boat. My feet now stood on free land. "Come, we must keep moving, the slave catchers will be coming." Jeremiah said. "Isn't Ohio a free state?" I asked. "Yes Ohio is a free state, but The Fugitive Slave Law says slave catchers have the right to come and get their slaves. Not only that, free states are to return slaves. Let's get as far away from Kentucky as we can." Station to station we traveled. I would hear where the slave catcher were. I heard what slave catchers were doing. Capturing free blacks, destorying their papers and selling them into slavery. Through Ohio in to Indiana. In Richmond we met Levi Coffin, who arranged a wagon to take me and two others to Michigan. We hid under the floor boards of the wagon, covered with straw. In Bristol I met B.F. Cathcart. Who gave us food and hid us. That night we crossed the Bristol Bridge, over the St. Joseph River. Then four miles. I made it to Michigan.


MICHIGAN

They Have My Shoes I Have My Freedom

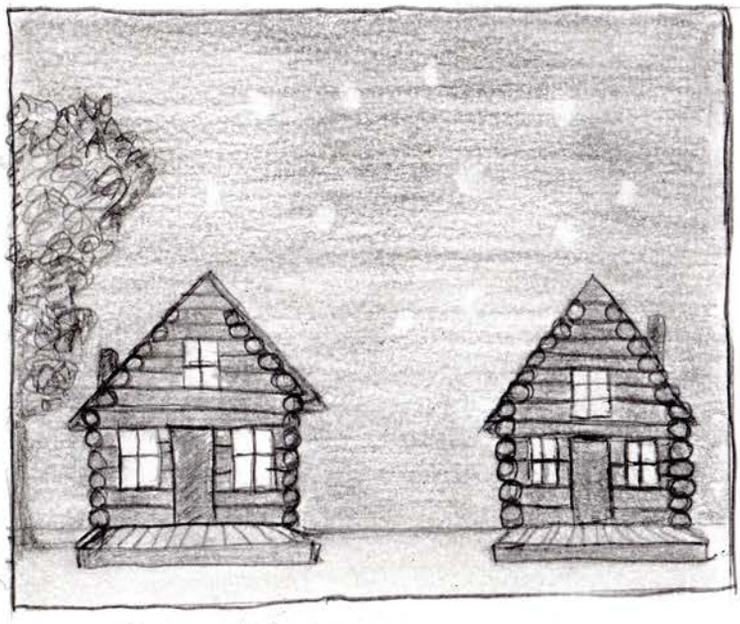
The conductor seemed to be moving at a slower pace. I thought something was wrong. The wagon stopped. The floor boards opened. The conductor said, "you can ride on top, you're in Michigan." We climbed in the wagon. The conductor would tell us about the people and places.

He said, "we're in Calvin Township. Many free black families and slaves live here. They'll help you." We passed Mount Zion Church and Chain Lake Baptist Church. "This is Ramptown, James Bonine divided the land, five and ten acre lots. Slaves and free blacks could work the land, save their money, buy their own farms. Children could go to school. He pointed up ahead and said, "do you see the white carriage house?" "Yes" I said. "That's the next stop."

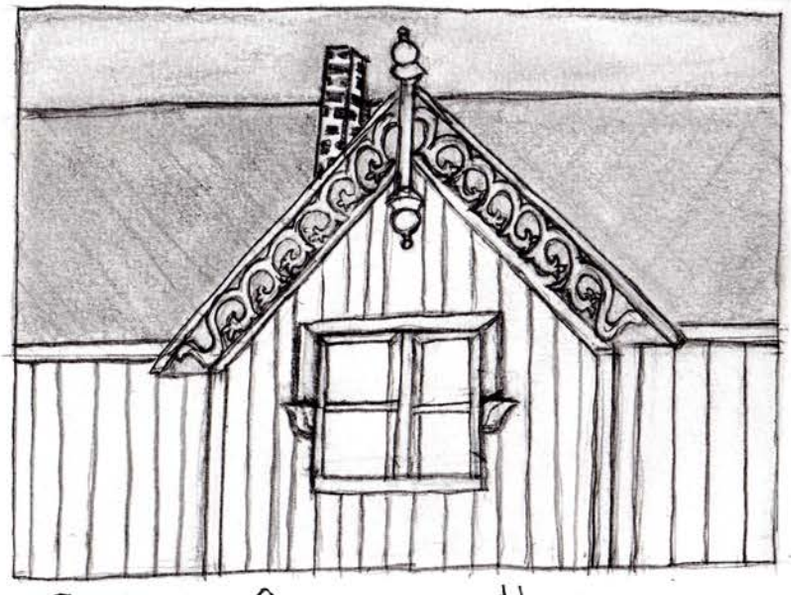


Mount Zion Church

Chain Lake Baptist Church

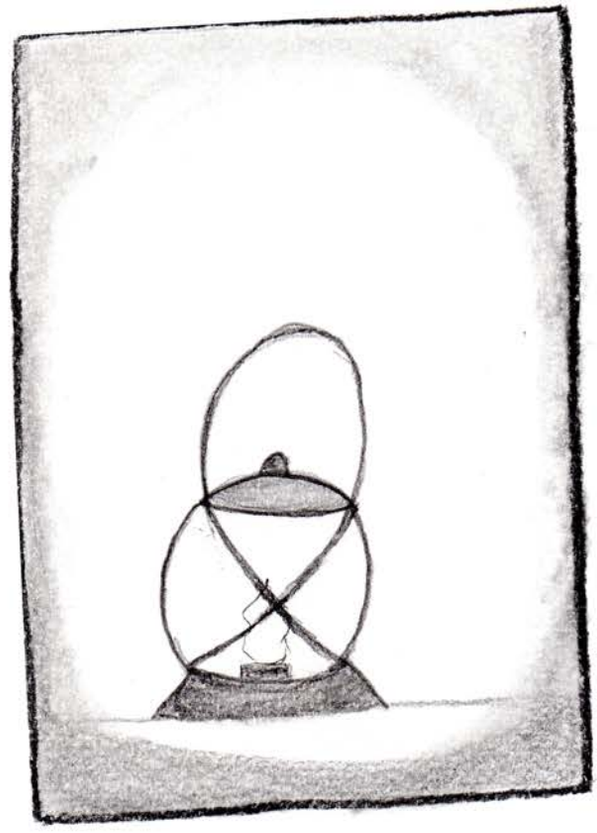


Ramp Town



Bonine Carriage House

We moved closer, a welcoming sight, a light in the window of the Bonine house.
When I was getting out of the wagon. I heard somebody say, "where's your shoes at?"
"They Have My Shoes, I Have My Freedom." I said.



"Welcome friends, I am James Bonine and this is my wife Sarah." "We have food, clothing, shoes, and a place to rest on the third floor of the carriage house," Sarah said.

Free grass and free dirt feels good on free feet!

My Journey To Freedom