

Lincolnvile at Moccasin Bend

Producer: Rebecca Sharpless

Associate Producer: David Stricklin

Script

Engineer and Announcer: Richard Veit

Narrator: Vicki Klaras

Memoirists, in order of appearance:

Kenneth Hall, pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Gatesville, Texas

Rowena Keatts, descendant of Lincolnvile founders

Louie Mayberry, descendant of Lincolnvile founders

Eunice Johnson, descendant of Lincolnvile founders

Ruth Manning, descendant of Lincolnvile founders

Bessie Stafford, descendant of Lincolnvile founders

Ophelia Hall, descendant of Lincolnvile founders

Veit *Lincolnvile at Moccasin Bend: Black Families on the Texas Frontier* is a production of the Baylor University Institute for Oral History.

Voice montage

Music “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms” sung by the congregation of the Bethlehem Baptist Church, Gatesville, Texas, July 13, 1986

Music under

Narrator On a sultry July morning, the Bethlehem Baptist Church in Gatesville, Texas, is full. The Mayberry, Snow, and Brown families—cousins all—have come together again this year to celebrate their ties. Outside the small brick building, the midsummer Texas sun is climbing in a bright blue sky; inside, ceiling fans rotate slowly and worshipers fan themselves and their children as they listen to the pastor, Reverend Kenneth Hall.

Hall As I listen to the songs and I look at all the families that are represented on today, I can’t help but wonder and say, Look what the Lord has done for you. For many of you were here on last year, many faces were present are not here this year. And as you sit this morning and this homecoming and this occasion that you are observing on this morning, you must understand and recognize that nobody has brought you thus far but the Lord.

Narrator For almost two decades this scene has been repeated. The families unite on the second weekend of every July in Gatesville, the county seat of Coryell County in west central Texas. They come from across the nation and from across the street to the celebration, to share and to remember their ancestors. The Mayberrys, Browns, and Snows, descended from slaves, have made Coryell County their spiritual headquarters—their home. They share ties of kinship, of worship, of education, and they have a strong attachment to the land of the Leon River valley, which their ancestors settled over a century ago and named Lincolnvile.

Hall Let's bow and remember our forefathers who struggled in order for us to get where we are today. Let's bow and remember that mother and that father who worked so hard that we might be able to go to school and get an education and to grow up and be the individuals that we are today. Let's bow and remember that grandmother or that grandfather who, late after the midnight hour when everybody else in the house was asleep, she was on her knees, crying and calling upon God, telling the Lord to watch over us and to keep his loving arms of protection all around us, telling the Lord to lead and guide us, for we can't lead ourselves.

Narrator The families join in the worship as part of a weekend of activities. There are fish fries, barbecues, entertainment, games, dinner on the grounds. They know who they are and why they are there. What keeps them together? Why do the cousins remember the past? This is their story, told by Rowena Keatts, Louie Mayberry, Eunice Johnson, Ruth Manning, Bessie Stafford, and Ophelia Hall.

Music bridge

Narrator When white settlers arrived in Coryell County, Texas, in the 1840s, many of them came from the southern part of the United States and brought their slaves with them. At that time, Coryell County was at the very edge of settlement in Texas; it was protected from the Comanche Indians by Fort Gates, near the town of Gatesville. Despite the promise of the frontier, the county presented a challenge to the new arrivals. Except in the fertile valley of the Leon River, the area's thin limestone soil yielded little except scrub cedar. The climate didn't lend itself to large plantations, and slaves were not many in number. The overland migrations remained in the slaves' memories, however, and they shared their stories with their children.

Keatts My father was born in Centerville, Tennessee. And his father had a plantation there. He was white, of course, and he was the high sheriff there. My father was brought to Texas in a wagon with his mother. He left two sisters and one brother there in the state of Tennessee. He left them because his father had sold them to various other slaveholders. This particular man out there, this Mr. Weatherly, had a daughter who married this man from Texas. And my father and his mother were given to this daughter as a wedding present.

Mayberry Judge Mayberry and his wife had more slaves than anybody around in Coryell County at that time. The Mayberrys left Virginia looking for a place to settle where they would have more room and more land, because Virginia in those days was quite thickly settled. And so they started south to Coryell County with all their belongings, and they passed through the eastern part of Tennessee. And while they stopped there at the Madison farm, they saw my grandfather there, and they bought him. His mother raised him there on that farm. And they bought him there. He was a mature man; he was in his thirties. And he had many qualities that they desired, and they bought him. And everybody called him "Black Jim."

Johnson My father came to Texas with some people by the name of Grimes—white family. He came here with his hair plaited in shucks. He came here with them in a covered wagon.

- Narrator** Most of the slaves performed work related to agriculture. They raised cotton and tended livestock; some worked in the homes of their masters.
- Mayberry** The man that owned my father's grandmother was named Cook, and so her name was Celia Cook. She was the independent type. I don't know what part of Africa she came from or her tribe was from, but they could not subjugate her. She never did bow to their will. She never would obey those people. She was independent and a fighter. They tried to use her in the house, and she wasn't too good at that because she didn't take orders from them. She didn't want to be a slave. And she resented it, and they had to force her to do most anything. My father told me these things as a little kid.
- Keatts** My father's task was when he got out here to herd the sheep. And they only wore one piece for clothing; he called it a shirt and it came to his knees. That was the only thing that he wore and on cold days he would herd sheep all day and in the rocks in there. His feet would freeze and burst open and you could track him home through the blood in the snow as he came.
- Mayberry** When he grew up as a boy, they taught my grandfather many things and he learned how to make brooms and baskets. They used large baskets to pick the cotton in. Of course, they taught him everything that was to be done as far as work was concerned. And they saw that he had these qualities as to manage people. And so they took him on as their foreman.
- Narrator** Emancipation of the slaves came to Coryell County in 1865, following the proclamation of freedom in Galveston on June 19th. After celebrating their freedom, they turned to the reality of making their own ways in the world. Lacking education, money, and other essential ingredients of self-reliance, some of them depended heavily on their former masters. They chose to stay in the area they considered home and received help from the people who had once owned them.
- Keatts** Eventually, after they were freed, they were turned loose without any work, like rabbits or animals in the woods. My father and his mother came over on this other side of the river, and he worked. They would hire them to work and he said he paid twenty-five cents an acre until he paid for 680 acres of land.
- Mayberry** When they set him free, they gave my grandfather twenty acres. They gave him a yoke of oxen, and a horse, and a milk cow, and some tools to farm with. And they kept him on the payroll. And when he would earn his money, Miss Huldah would take it and invest it in land, because she knew that the land would always be worth something. He was always paying for land, and when he passed, they had quite a bit of land.
- Narrator** Not all white Texans were so kind, however. In neighboring Hamilton County, freed slaves were told that they were not welcome in the area; they set out, walking many miles, to places where blacks were faring better. Coryell County was one such place.
- Keatts** Didn't any of them settle in Hamilton because Hamilton was a community that did not allow blacks, and they couldn't buy any land in those areas. But down

further, the further you got this way, they were able to buy property. Aunt Rose Johnson, when they were freed, walked from Hamilton because she had to get out, and she walked. She and her family—she had, I think, four or five children.

- Narrator** As black farms grew up along the west side of the Leon River, the area became known as Lincolnville. The families were large: Jim and Lou Mayberry had nineteen children; Lou Mayberry's sister, Fannie Brown, and her husband, Jim (known as Green), had fourteen, as did Mollie and Bill Snow. Other freed slaves also settled in the area, and as they intermarried, the family connections became even stronger.
- Manning** There was nineteen of Momma and them. And you know good and well they had to work, because Grandma wasn't able to take care of nobody because every time you looked up, she had a baby. She had three sets of twins, and you know good and well she stayed fairly, fairly busy.
- Narrator** Perhaps the first evidence of a real sense of community at Lincolnville was the establishment of the Bethlehem Baptist Church in 1872. As slaves, the families had long been frustrated at the denial of their religious expression by their masters, and the creation of their own church was a major step toward self-reliance.
- Keatts** They were not permitted to have church of any kind, any kind of religious services at all. The only way they could have any type of service, they would have to turn this wash pot over a certain way so they would take up the sound so that the master couldn't hear them do their singing and praying.
- Narrator** The church was built in Gus Weatherly's pasture, and for thirty years it thrived in that location. About 1900, it moved into Gatesville, four miles away.
- Johnson** I can remember on Sunday mornings we'd dress and go through the woods going to a little old wood church house, what they had church and school in. And we'd go there and go to church, which was a lot of fun, my cousins and all.
- Stafford** I thought it was wonderful. I thought it was the only church in the world. (laughs) That's the way I thought. I thought, really, and I still think, it's the most wonderful church in the world. And I go back every year—well, when I can. All the Mayberry family, I guess, all those that I remember, belonged to the Bethlehem Church if they belonged to the Baptist church.
- Johnson** Many a times that we would go to church, and church would be full. Well, the old people had quilts they would take and spread it up in that wing, the back of the seat, and anybody's child got sleepy, he'd put him on that pallet, and you lay back there and sleep.
- Narrator** The church was very important in family life. Members joined the congregation at early ages and still recall their experiences vividly.
- Hall** The only struggle I got in was I had one little scrap with one of my cousins. It was a funny thing; I laugh about it today. We had a minister here from Chicago—I must have been nine—and he was running a revival over here at the

Bethlehem Baptist Church. Like on Friday we had had this misunderstanding—I had long hair. And they was urging it up and telling her to pull my hair and I tried to slap her down, so we had a bad misunderstanding as kids. So, that Sunday we come to town to church and the minister opened the doors to the church so we all went marching up there and joined the church.

Johnson They were taking on a revival over at the church house, and we made up we're going to join the church. And I told my sister, and she told me what to say. I told the others what she told me to say, and all of us said the same thing, like a little speech.

Narrator Bethlehem Baptist Church was a lively place, with a busy Sunday school, youth groups, and other activities. Attendance at all church functions was apparently mandatory for most children growing up around Lincolnton, and some of its present members have been in the church ninety years. For its small membership today, the Bethlehem church is the focus of many of their lives, and those who have left Gatesville have a profound reverence for their home church, faithfully attending its homecomings and other special celebrations.

Keatts We played games, and they would teach us little Bible drills. And we'd say little verses like: Read your Bible! Study your Bible! Learn your Bible slow! When the solemn truth is told you will surely know. Say, my friend, have you seen Second Timothy 2:15. First Thessalonians 5:22 will tell you exactly what to do.

Johnson That's all I know is Bethlehem Church. It's just my life.

Narrator Another significant event in the development of Lincolnton was the creation of the Lincolnton school, probably also in the early 1870s. It was held in the same building as the church. T. J. Lothlen, a former slave, was one of the first schoolmasters. Under the community school system created by the State of Texas, the school had three trustees appointed by the county judge; documents show that the early Lincolnton trustees were themselves illiterate, making their x's on contracts for school business. The one-room school was a crude one; books and other supplies were at a premium as well. Still, the former slaves' children learned to read and write, and after the eighth grade, they could go to high school in Gatesville.

Hall My grandfather, my mother's father, was I understand the first black schoolteacher in Coryell County. And I think that is marvelous. Granddaddy Lothlen was the schoolteacher. The young kids that went to school under him—I think they paid seventy-five cents a month for them to go to school. And the older children, I believe, they had to pay a dollar and a half for them to go to school. Black people used to go and work for the white people. And they had what they called wash benches and they'd put the tubs and things on the wash benches for our parents to wash. Well, that's what we had to sit on. And the white people had desks and all of that but we didn't have. When they got ready to discard books, then we would come up with maybe readers and blue back spellers and old-type arithmetics. And eventually we'd come up with geometry books and English books.

Narrator The Lincolnville school remained without adequate supplies or physical facilities—not even electricity—until just before World War II. Rowena Keatts, who grew up at Lincolnville, was one of the last teachers there. She observed that very few changes had occurred in the school since her attendance there thirty years earlier.

Keatts It hadn't changed anything. It was just that same old building, and most of those same old books. They finally got some—these old-fashioned desks. And the blackboard was all the way across the front, just like it was when we were there. In fact, they didn't do anything to it. And the same big, old stove that was there when I went there. Most of the time we'd have to go out and get the wood ourselves. I'd make the fire most every time early in the morning. And when it got so cold, Carl Snow would come down. He lived back behind the school over there. And he would come down and make the fire and have it warm when I got there in the mornings.

Narrator Finally, the dwindling population of Lincolnville forced the school's closing about 1940. The building has since fallen down, and little remains to mark its location. Lincolnville suffered the fate of many rural communities after 1900 as farm dwellers left. Some went to Gatesville, others to Waco, and many to points far beyond. Carl Snow was the last member of the original families to live at Lincolnville; he was forced by ill health to leave the farm. Some of the families have retained their land, however, and have tremendous sentimental attachment to it. One of the Snows' sons comes down from Dallas—almost 150 miles away—every weekend to work on the family land.

Keatts There was when I first started a nice group. Nice bunch of us. But when they closed it up, there wasn't but one family, and that was Carl's family. They moved to town, left the country. The older people died. And the younger ones just moved on out.

Narrator Even today, the families remember their origins and their ties. Descendants of the Browns, Snows, and Mayberrys come together in Gatesville each July for a reunion, an entire weekend of visiting and celebration. In 1986 more than seventy-five people came together to renew old acquaintances. The reunion began a couple of decades ago, when some relatives dropped in hoping to find a Juneteenth celebration. One was hastily planned and deemed a huge success. The next year, it became the pre-birthday party of Big and Dee Mayberry. In their nineties, the twins were among the youngest children of Lincolnville settlers Lou and Jim Mayberry.

Hall Aunt Bettie Weatherly had such a beautiful time seeing us all over there at her place. So, she sat there and talked to my daddy and watched us over there. We had barbecue and other things that went with it, and cakes and pies and whatsome. In talking with her, well, she sat there and she shed briny tears about it. She enjoyed it so. So she made the remark that she wouldn't be with us another year. And the Lord saw fit to take her, sure enough. The next year she wasn't here. So since she wasn't here, I got with Mrs. Manning's husband, A. W., and asked him if he would help me to have the celebration for my daddy and his twin brother. So he said, "Yes," says, "I'll be glad to." I give it a name and the name I give it was The Pre-Birthday Party of the Mayberry Twins. And it was

held June 19, which pleased my father very much because he was getting to celebrate June 19.

Narrator The reunion has since been moved to July, but it continues unabated. The tiniest children are brought to meet the oldest members of the families: Eunice Brown Johnson, Louie Mayberry, and Carl Snow. These people are greatly respected and are greeted enthusiastically. The bonds of kinship are strong, as is the sense of Coryell County as the home place.

Stafford I like family. I think families should be together. Now, that was my mother's idea. Of course, her family was all around her, but she was interested in her family. I'm interested in family. There's nothing but cousins now; I don't have any brothers and sisters living. But when they were living, we always came back home at certain times. And my mother enjoyed that so much. I don't think families should be estranged. I think they should be together.

Johnson I get to see a lot of my people I don't get to see from one year to the other. They all try to come out. If you've got a family, when you get down sick or something, they gonna be there when nobody else is with you. They gonna be there with you. You've got a family.

Music up; music under

Keatts I loved those hills and hollows out there. My daddy would sit down and tell us stories of how he had come up and how he worked. I'd sit there, and I'd listen to what he was saying, and I'd look around and say, "How did he live? How did he do?" He managed to work for the slavemaster, and he'd paid twenty-five cents an acre and bought this land. And then he'd cut these logs and built that house. Had one little window in it, and the chimney—built the chimney himself out of rock. I said, "I don't believe I could have lived." And then he'd say, "Oh, yes, you could. I did, and you did." I love that land. Ooh! Money can't buy that land.

Music up

Benediction Now, Master, we thank you now for all of these manifold blessings that thou has poured down upon us on this morning. Thank you, Lord, for these families and for sending them our way to gather together with us to uplift thy holy and righteous name. Now, Lord, as we make preparations to go down from this mountaintop experience, take each and every one of us to our respective places; guide us down the dangerous highways that we might make it back to our destinations. Dear Lord, let us rise in the morning and behold the beauty of another day. And shall we all say (sing) amen.

Credits

"Lincolville at Moccasin Bend" was produced by the Baylor University Institute for Oral History and funded by the Texas Committee for the Humanities. Rebecca Sharpless was producer and David Stricklin was associate producer. Engineer and announcer was Richard Veit. Vicki Klaras was narrator. Special thanks to Mrs. Florida Yeldell, Dr. Alwyn Barr, and Mr. Max Rudolph. Very special thanks to members of the Mayberry, Brown, and Snow families, direct descendants of the settlers of the community known as Lincolville.