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MAINE STORIES

BY JOHN MCDONALD

Southerners were less than thrilled by Harriet

Patrick from Brunswick writes: I'm new to Maine, to Brunswick and your fine column, John, so forgive me if I ask about something you might have dealt with in the past. Although I've never read it myself, I'm told that Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote her famous book "Uncle Tom's Cabin" right here in Brunswick, someplace. Is it true that the book many say helped start the Civil War was written here? What more can you tell me, John?

Thanks for the email, Patrick. The answer to your first question is 'yes,' Mrs. Stowe did write the celebrated work "Uncle Tom's Cabin" somewhere in Brunswick. She wrote it while living in the Stowe House on Federal Street, so we're probably safe in assuming that a good chunk of the acclaimed work was written in that house. It's unlikely that folks in town called it 'the Stowe House' while Harriet and the other Stowes were living there but I don't have the space or time to go into how Maine houses get and retain a certain name.

No matter what house she was living in Harriet was not your ordinary 19th century housewife, having come from a well-known abolitionist family in Connecticut. Her father was Rev. Lyman Beecher and her brother was Henry Ward Beecher, a prominent Congregational preacher. Besides the anti-slavery movement Harriet also dedicated a lot of time and energy to the temperance movement and women's suffrage.

In the 1850s Harriet's husband Calvin Stowe got a job as Professor of Biblical Literature at Bowdoin and moved his family to the Federal Street home. The way the story goes, Harriet was in church one Sunday when she had a vision of the death of an old slave. She said the vision became her inspiration for "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

They say Harriet was determined to write a book that described the horrors of slavery that she had witnessed while living in Cincinnati, Ohio. Some critics said the book didn't give an accurate picture of the system known as slavery but despite its faults it is still recognized as a brilliant piece of reform propaganda. It incensed and aroused northern readers against the barbaric and inhuman practice and helped ignite the war that eventually led to emancipation for all slaves.

And don't be embarrassed about never having read "Uncle Tom's Cabin," Patrick. As a true American classic it's not supposed to be read anymore, just left on a bookshelf unopened but talked about occasionally.

Originally serialized in the "Washington National Era" it appeared in book form on March 20, 1852 - exactly 150 years ago. It immediately became a huge bestseller in the north. Three hundred thousand copies were sold the first year and by 1860 more than one million had been sold. There are no numbers available on how many were read.

As you might expect, southerners were not too thrilled with Mrs. Stowe's story and in parts of the south the book was outlawed.

It would be difficult to find a copy of the book today and I doubt if there are three people alive who have read the famous work from beginning to end.

When Mrs. Stowe (who was barely four feet tall) went to the White House to meet President Lincoln (who stood over 6' 4") the Great Emancipator said, "So this is the little woman who started this big war." We don't know what Mrs. Stowe said in answer to the president but we can only assume it was a snappy comeback. And for all we know Lincoln hadn't read the book either.

After "Uncle Tom's Cabin" Harriet wrote other books but none approached the popularity of the anti-slavery work. One of her novels set in Maine was titled, "Pearl of Orr's Island." Rumor has it that she began writing a sequel - "Oars of Pearl Island." (Sorry)

It's hard to say what Brunswick was like in the 1850s when Mrs. Stowe was busy writing her book. Today the sprawling town is almost evenly divided between the 'townies' or shopkeeper-types around Maine Street; the Volvo-driving 'professor-types' around the college; and the southern-accented 'military-types' around the naval base.

It's none of my business, of course, but I'm curious to know which group you're in Patrick?

I stopped at a restaurant in Brunswick just a few weeks ago and noticed they had 'tripe' on the menu. The man next to me at the counter asked the owner what it was and the owner said it was meat from the stomach lining of a cow or ox.

The man thought about that for a minute and then said, "You'll never catch me eating anything that came out of the stomach of a cow. Give me a couple of eggs, instead."

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