



Past » Present & Future



Enduring Families: Shivers, Revels & Moss Families

By Rebecca Mormann-Krieger



Thomas Shivers
(Photo courtesy of the author)

Shivers Family

In 1940, a census taker sat opposite Alga Shivers at his kitchen table asking about his household. I imagine he saw Alga as another 50-year-old black farmer who lived with his younger brother, Edgar, and 80-year-old father Thomas. The census taker was doing his job. He had to collect information from every house in Cheyenne Valley and he did not have time to visit with anyone. He was on a deadline.

If I could travel back in time to be that census taker, I would arrive on a rainy farm day after morning milking. I would spend my day sitting on the porch talking with Alga, Edgar, and Thomas about life in the Shivers family. Their story was one of resilience, courage, and the beginnings of a unique community in Cheyenne Valley near Hillsboro, Wisconsin, about 50 miles east-southeast of La Crosse.

Thomas Shivers was born into slavery on July 15, 1857 near Alamo, Tennessee. His father died before he was born. His mother, a household slave on the

plantation, raised three children on her own: Thomas, Ashley, and Mary. Their owner, noticing Thomas' intelligence, decided Tom should attend elementary school. Tennessee was one of a few slave states that allowed people of color to obtain a free public education, though it wasn't widespread.

At the age of 5 in 1862, Thomas walked five miles to and from school every day. Few people can imagine the tenacity of a five-year-old walking ten miles round trip daily in all kinds of weather.

The Shivers children were orphaned when Thomas was seven. They were cared for by a slave woman named Joana Joza who later married Edmond Harris, a Freedman fighting with the Union Army. When Edmond Harris returned to Tennessee after the Civil War, he and Joana adopted the children.

After the Civil War, Tennessee moved forward with social equity, but not civil rights. The family tried to make their livelihood there, but found Jim Crow laws difficult to overcome. They made the decision to move, but it took them two years to walk north from Tennessee to Wisconsin. They arrived in Cheyenne Valley by 1879.

On the 1940 census Alga Shivers reported he and his brother Edgar worked a 75-hour week. Thomas, his 80 year old father, was retired. They owned their farm, the original quarter-section purchased by Thomas' adoptive father, Edmond Harris after the Civil War. Thomas bought additional land when he became owner after Edmond died in 1880.

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By 1900 Alga said his dad had the “largest negro-owned farm in Wisconsin”. He had constructed a large frame house to replace the log cabin originally built on the property. During World War I, he piped water from a hillside spring to the house and had the first hot and cold indoor plumbing in Cheyenne Valley. Most noticeable on Tom’s farm was the round barn Alga had designed and built. As time went on, Alga Shivers became widely known in southeastern Wisconsin for his skill in the design and construction of round barns. Most were constructed between 1890 and 1930.



Alga Shivers
(Photo courtesy of the author)

Alga Shivers and his wife, Flora (Revels), lived their entire lives in Cheyenne Valley. They never had children, but many young people living in the valley called their farm home. Alga’s uncle, Ashley, and his wife Ellen (Waldon) did the same thing in La Crosse and later Madison.

Alga attended George R. Smith College in Sedalia, Missouri and served in World War I, returning to Wisconsin to run his farm. He was the kind of farmer who read all the farm books and magazines he could find. First to have a tractor in Cheyenne Valley, he understood many of the latest trends in farming. Farmers and county farm agents came from miles around to talk with Alga about farm news, seeds, germination, and breeding.

At least fifteen round barns near Cheyenne Valley were designed and constructed by Alga Shivers. The wind resistant design of round barns placed the silo and hay chute in the center of the structure allowing for an efficient feed distribution and a spacious dairy, with cow heads facing the silo. Most of the round barns in the United States are in Wisconsin, and most are in this area.



Round barn built by Alga Shivers
(Photo courtesy of the author)

Thomas Shivers lived to be 101 years old, 21 years past the 1940 census. A slave as a child, he witnessed the Civil War, then walked to Wisconsin with his siblings and step-parents. Together they built a farm on land of their choosing. As a single dad, Thomas raised his children on the same land, saw his children find success in a diverse community, and grew old to see the day that Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus in 1954. Thomas Shivers was a remarkable man.

Revels Family

The Revels family was part of a migration of African Americans and American Indians beginning in 1820 from Georgia and North Carolina. Free and cheap labor forces of slaves and indentured servants had allowed both states to remain top producers of cotton, but demand for land meant American Indians were forced to relinquish their fertile croplands to speculators.

Mycajah Revels left the Tallahatchie River Cherokee reservation with his wife Morning Star Jacobs in 1820. Before leaving for Newton, Alabama near the Georgia border, they were married in the native way. Later when Mycajah became a Methodist minister, they were married in North Carolina in a Christian wedding. Mycajah kept his Cherokee ways, but never spoke the language. In North Carolina Mycajah and Morning Star met Ishmael and Silvia Roberts. As elders of very large families, these two couples would lead their groups from North Carolina to Lick Creek, Indiana.

Two governmental decisions influenced Lick Creek’s founding. In 1830 Congress passed the Indian Removal Act. American Indian lands were opened for speculation once Native Americans were removed. The Five Civilized Tribes brought their case to the court and in 1831 and 1832 the Cherokee Nation won

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two Supreme Court cases, *Worcester v. Georgia* and *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*. Legal precedent set by these cases stated American Indian tribes were “sovereign nations” and the United States could not interfere within their boundaries. But President Andrew Jackson disregarded the ruling, and between 1830-1835 forcibly removed Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, Seminole, and Cherokee people (and any African freedmen and slaves who lived among them) from their traditional lands in the Southeastern United States. Over 16,000 men, women and children were forced to walk thousands of miles to Indian Territory (Oklahoma). Approximately 4000 people died on what became known as the Trail of Tears.



Mycajah Revels (left) & Morning Revels (right)
(Photo courtesy of the author)

State legislators placed additional restrictions on the civil and legal rights of Free People of Color after the Nat Turner Rebellion in 1833. Free born persons and freed slaves, American Indians, or indentured servants were restricted in their movements, business practices, rights of assembly, and marriages. As a result, a committee of forty Quakers was appointed by the North Carolina Society of Friends to examine laws within free states. They recommended that Free People of Color settle in Indiana, Ohio, and Illinois because of better economic and educational opportunities.

Shortly thereafter in 1835, Lick Creek Settlement or Roberts Settlement was established in Orange County, Indiana by free blacks of mixed heritage. A dozen families traveled there from North Carolina, Georgia, and Virginia. They fled slavery and laws infringing on their social and legal freedoms, seeking new opportunities for their children. Several run-away slaves from the South left with them. Along their route to Indiana they established a trail for the Underground Railroad.

As Roberts Settlement prospered in Lick Creek, its members shaped community life based upon their cultural makeup. Black Codes did not allow slaves and freedmen to openly receive an education, so this became a priority. Mycajah Revels’ family, a sizable portion of the group, came from the Cherokee Nation. As the first American indigenous people to have a written language, education was an important part of the Cherokee community.

African American and American Indian spiritual leaders were often involved with the social and political welfare of their communities. The role of the Society of Friends and Wesleyan Methodist Church also had a strong influence upon the settlers. It became a natural fit for the settlement’s school and church to serve as both community center and place of worship. The African Methodist Episcopal Church grew out of this history and these relationships.

“In the late 1840s the Roberts community church became affiliated with Wesleyan Methodism, an emerging Methodist sect initially distinguished by its staunch opposition to slavery and vocal support for racial equality.”

“Although African-American landowners tended to purchase contiguous tracts of land with one another, non-African-American ownership of land within the settlement was typically intertwined.” (United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Hoosier Nation Forest, Lick Creek African American Settlement)

In 1850 the United States Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act. Lick Creek Settlement was only thirty miles from the Kentucky border, and without freedmen’s papers the fear of slave catchers was real. Records show Ishmael Roberts, Sr. was able to secure his freedman’s papers. But freedman papers were almost impossible to obtain five states from where you were born, and most people in Lick Settlement did not have them.

By 1854, Indiana felt it necessary to identify all freedmen within the state. All blacks and mulattos were required to report to their county seat to register, bringing a white neighbor as a character witness. This was the beginning of the end for the Lick Creek Settlement. Only half of the people in the

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settlement reported to the county seat. Within seven years half the acreage owned by African Americans was sold to outsiders. By 1880 only six African American families were left within the community.

Mycajah and Morning Star Revels left Lick Creek Settlement with their children and their families in 1854. They headed for Wisconsin because it offered available farm land with rich soil, an anti-slavery stance, and free public schools for all children. They had heard Wisconsin offered voting rights to African Americans males and challenged the federal government about the constitutionality of the Fugitive Slave Act.

The Revels family first settled near Madison, while Mycajah headed south to Bad Ax and stayed the first winter in Hopeful Valley (the first name for Revels Valley/Cheyenne Valley). The entire family arrived in the late 1850's.

Mycajah and Morning Revels were half Cherokee Indian, but Southern governments defined their family as black or mulatto. In North Carolina and Georgia, they had been subject to the same laws as freemen of color and slaves. In Wisconsin these discrepancies showed up on censuses. Sometimes the Revels were identified as "Indian" and other times as "Black" or "Mulatto." During the Civil War, some of the men in Cheyenne Valley served with white regiments and others with colored regiments, even though they were blood relations.

Eleven of the Revels children married into seven

different families from Lick Settlement. Three of Revels children would marry into the Roberts family. The valley became populated with double cousins. Mycajah and Morning's other four children married newcomers within the valley.

Over their many years of marriage Mycajah and Morning Revels had 15 children, and their children had 10-15 children of their own. Other families joined the Valley, but this extended family formed the nucleus. By 1900 descendants of all the founders of the valley had intermarried with freemen, former slaves, and American Indians and Europeans from other nations. They were tri-racial in genetics and heritage. Most of the people in the valley today carry last names of the original inhabitants somewhere in their family tree.

Part Two of Enduring Families will appear in September and will highlight the Moss Family living in La Crosse, Wisconsin. Our story would not be complete without making connections between the Revels, Moss, and Shivers Families. Zachariah Lewis and Mary Moss moved to Wisconsin from Virginia by way of a packet boat on the Mississippi. The Moss family were barbers and entrepreneurs living in La Crosse. Their son, Zachariah Henry Moss, married Revels Valley native Emily Waldon, granddaughter of Mycajah and Morning Star Revels. Her sister, Ellen Waldon, married Ashley Shivers. These families are deeply connected to Cheyenne Valley and the history of La Crosse.

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is published quarterly by the
La Crosse County
Historical Society
(608) 782-1980
www.lchshistory.org

Readers are invited to submit
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the LCHS reserves the right
to edit for clarity, brevity, and
accuracy. Articles should pertain
to La Crosse County history or
the LCHS organization.

Mail articles to 145 West Ave.
S., La Crosse, WI 54601, or
email to admin@lchshistory.org

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Editorial Committee: Candace
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La Crosse WI, 54601

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Museums

The La Crosse County
Historical Society owns
and operates two museums
conveniently located in
downtown La Crosse,
Wisconsin.

Hixon House

429 7th St. North
(Corner of N 7th and Badger
Street)

Hours:

Memorial Day - Labor Day
Tues. - Sat. 10 am - 2 pm
Closed Sunday & Monday

Riverside Museum

410 East Veterans Memorial
Drive
Riverside Park
(in the La Crosse Area
Convention & Visitors Bureau
building)

Hours:

Mon - Sat 9:30am - 4:30pm
Sunday 10:00 am - 4 pm

Note: Group (10 or more) tours
at both museums are available
year-round by appointment.

Upcoming Events!

Historic Hixon House

Memorial Day, May 29

(Open for tours through the summer)

Tuesday - Saturday

10am to 2pm

\$10-adults | \$8-seniors | \$6-students

Members get in **FREE** with their membership card

Folk Life La Crosse

Sunday, July 9

11am to 3pm

(on the Hixon House grounds)

See flyer on page 7 for

more information.

LCHS Annual Members Meeting

June 15 @ 5:30pm at the Freight House

Tickets for the dinner are **\$35**

*(If you have not RSVP'd, don't forget to do so by
calling the office at (608) 782-1980)*

Discover the Silent City

Saturday, September 16

11am to 3pm

This year's theme: *"Leaving a Mark;
Artists of La Crosse."*

"History in a Bag," speaker series at Riverside Museum

*Five free presentations on the many different
ethnic and cultural groups living in
the Coulee Region*

June 13 through July 18.

(See full schedule on page 10.)

Eat Out to Help Out:

Tuesday July 18th- 5pm- 7pm
at the Mormon Coulee Rd Culver's
(Southside La Crosse)

*A portion of all sales from 5-7pm will
be donated to LCHS- bring a friend!*