



Past » Present & Future



Enduring Families, Part 2: The Moss Family

By Rebecca Mormann-Krieger

Many local people have heard of the Moss family, and know that they were barbers in La Crosse for several generations. What most of us do not know is the bigger story of the families of Cheyenne Valley, with whom they intermarried.

Mormann-Krieger told the first part of this story in the June issue of this newsletter. Here she tells about the Mosses and the La Crosse connection to Cheyenne Valley.

Life was challenging for most early settlers, but never more so than for the African Americans who had to negotiate the racism of a society that was clearly ambivalent about the very people they had fought a bloody war to free from slavery. Given this context, the story of Cheyenne Valley, with its multiracial settlers building a community together, reads like a lesson to be taken to heart. This is history that cannot be forgotten: it is history that gives us hope for the future. - Editor

“Zack Moss, Tonsorialist” the headline in the August 3, 1907 edition of the La Crosse Argus announced. The article stated that Moss had one of the “best known shops” in the city, a “profitable patronage; largely among the railroad men who made their headquarters” on the North Side of La Crosse; had



Zachariah Lewis Moss
1822-1902

“good fair prices”, and was the “genial proprietor of the shop with only skilled workmen” employed. Only the best shops had more than one chair and a Turkish bath; these, as well as a billiard table, were available at Moss and Waldon.

After-hours railroad and riverboat men were entertained with the bare knuckle fights in a ring behind the shop. Zack Moss, Jr. frequently participated and won the matches. As the news article concluded, “...whether a plain shave or a more elaborate service is needed, Mr. Moss is the man to see.”

Zachariah Moss, Sr. was a craftsman barber when he and his wife Mary came up the Mississippi on a packet boat in 1859. Mary may have also practiced the trade or attended customers as the shampooer and hair stylist.

Imagine traveling in 1860 on a steam boat up the Mississippi. Packet boats and large luxury paddle wheels were a chance to get away, to experience life on the meandering Mississippi River.

Stewards, chefs, and barbers on packet ships were

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the best money could hire. First class passengers came for the accommodations, meals, service, and entertainment. Wealthy clients spent their days occupied with meals, small talk, smoking rooms and sewing circles, music and cribbage games, and personal grooming. It was not a demanding life, unless you were in service to patrons. Zachariah and Mary Moss were caretakers of personal grooming. Their work would take most of the day, every day.

Travel on the boat was slow, taking six days to get from New Orleans to La Crosse, but a lot faster than taking a wagon with horses. Cholera in steerage was tragically rampant. The wealthy were aware of it as they watched southern shores reveal the grandeur of plantation houses with sprawling garden walkways to the river. Evening hours travelers wandered the deck trying to catch a cool breeze as lumbering barges carried cotton north.

Nearing St. Louis the Ohio River spilled into the Mississippi. Probably everyone was amazed at the tremendous congestion. Over a hundred packet boats docked in St. Louis each day. Further north, railroad bridges dominated the skyline at river junctions. The great river was the transportation north and south, while railroads dominated east and west. La Crosse was a hub for transportation in the Midwest, with multiple railroad lines and a natural river harbor. Zachariah and Mary Moss had found a perfect place to call home.

Zachariah Lewis Moss was born a free man about 1824 in Wheeling, Virginia, an industrial town with two major railroads in western Virginia along the Ohio River. The population, a concentration of middle class German immigrants, held anti-slavery sentiments. Political and social convictions were changing rapidly within the United States, peaking with the election of 1860, which brought about the secession of Southern states. In 1861 West Virginia seceded from Virginia, and Zachariah Moss traveled to Wisconsin with his wife, Mary (Hunter) Moss (born in Georgia about 1845).

As dictated by fashion or comfort men searched for the services of a barber, as women did for a hair stylist. In centuries past wealthy men did not shave at home. These matters were taken care of by a personal barber, and this relationship was deeply regarded & respected.



*Zacharias Henry Moss
1866-1935*

Haircuts in the 19th century cost five to ten cents, and shaves three cents. African American barbers held a monopoly in La Crosse until 1875. In their shops barbers were ranked by seniority and served primarily white clientele. La Crosse had no businesses established for “Black Only” clientele. Barbers in most towns and cities North and South claimed they did not have the supplies available to cut and shave African American hair, but it probably had more to do with serving black clientele alongside white clientele; it might have destroyed the financial income of the shop.

The riverboat business was good for Zachariah and Mary Moss. They earned enough money to establish a barber business. They had never been slaves, probably never saw themselves as menials, and had a self-esteem gained from awareness as individuals. (Knights of the Razor; Black Barbers in Slavery and Freedom, Douglas Walter Bristol, Jr., 2009)

By 1866 Zachariah and Mary owned a barbershop with Augustus Thompson (Thompson and Moss) on Pearl Street between 2nd and 3rd streets. At that time there were five barbers in La Crosse.

Four were African American, including three men and one woman (shop of Lydia and Henderson Moss). By 1868 Zachariah and Mary owned two different properties on Pearl Street with new partner Abram Holland (Moss and Holland). *Continued on page 8...*

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Orby Moss Sr holding Orby Junior in front of his barber shop in 1942



Rarely did a barber shop have more than two chairs. Only shops in exclusive hotels had more than one chair. However, Zachariah “Zack” Moss, Sr. had a three-chair barber shop in 1890 with his son, Zachariah Henry Moss, Jr., and Ashley Shivers (who would become his brother-in-law in 1897). A shop such as this would have a bootblack, who worked for tips; an apprentice, who received his room and board from one of the owners; and a porter who received a regular wage to guide customers within the shop. Good service, good conversation, coffee, the morning paper and even a bit of breakfast made barbershops popular and profitable.

Within a few years of their arrival in La Crosse, Zachariah Lewis and Mary Moss had two children, Zachariah Henry and Ella. Zachariah Sr. made his income as a barber and his wealth through real estate investments. The Moss family found financial success along with the growing La Crosse community. They had two more children, Ernest and Anna. Mary Moss became known for her work with the Methodist Church. Literary circles and church organizations identified a social hierarchy in La Crosse, but also provided community programs. The La Crosse Historical Society publication, *Black La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1850-1906*, by Bruce Mouser, describes Zachariah Moss, Sr. as a “known” person.

The colloquialism of the day calls him a “swell,” or a person of wealth or high position, typically one perceived as fashionable or stylish. Zachariah and Mary Moss’s home was open to relatives getting newly settled in La Crosse, and they were available

for investments in business. Zachariah was also a labor leader, along with African American residents Nathan Smith and George Erwin Taylor.

In 1879 when Zack, Jr. was fourteen he came to work as an apprentice in the barber shop on the corner of Mill and St. Andrew Street in La Crosse. In 1884, Zachariah Lewis Moss, Sr. named his shop Moss and Son when Zack, Jr. was twenty-two years old.



Orby's wife, Robbi Moss, with Raymond and John in 1944

The La Crosse Leader in 1869 wrote about Zachariah Lewis Moss: “Go into Moss and Holland’s new barber shop...and see the old hands at work. Take down your old razor to get ground, get shaved while it is ground, and you will be sure to ‘leave’ it there...you will forget all about your razor.”

The La Crosse Argus in 1907 called Zacharias Henry Moss “one of the best known barbers” and “good fair prices his motto...whether a plain shave or a more elaborate service is needed Mr. Moss is the man to see.”

There were three generations of barbers in the Moss Family, and as many in the Revels Family. In 1900, five families worked as barbers in La Crosse: Zachariah Moss, Sr., Zachariah Moss, Jr. (married to Emma Waldon [Revels]), Ashley Shivers (married to Ellen Waldon [Revels]), Joseph Revels (married to Adelia Bass [Waldon-Revels]), and Charles Loving (son of Birletta Waldon [Revels] and Andrew Loving). Zack Moss, Sr., Zack Moss, Jr. and Ashley Shivers made it possible for young people from Cheyenne Valley to find beginnings in La Crosse. They opened their homes as boarding houses until the next generation could get themselves established in business.

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The Moss family is one of the longest continuous founding families in La Crosse, WI. Zack Moss, Jr.'s son, Orby Z. Moss, became a 3rd generation barber working in La Crosse until his death in 1972. His shop was on Copeland Avenue, not far from his father's shop on Mill Street.

The June issue of Past, Present and Future featured the story of Cheyenne Valley being settled by the Revels family in the 1850s.

Mycajah and Morning Jacobs

Revels had fifteen children, who married into 10 different families. Each of these children had ten to fifteen children of their own. By the 1880s their grandchildren needed to look for marriage partners outside the valley. After the Civil War many people were migrating north, and new families arrived in the valley, but there still was a great need for young people to move to the city.

Communities in Wisconsin such as La Crosse, Madison, and Prairie du Chien were situated along the rivers, rail and stagecoach routes that crossed near Revels Valley. These communities provided the goods not manufactured by hand, grown or hunted in the valley, offered schools of higher education, and enticed young people away from home.

Elizabeth (Revels) and Samuel Waldon were married in the Lick Creek Settlement, after moving from North Carolina in 1830s, and were part of the original group to move to the valley. Five of their daughters lived in LaCrosse at some point in their lives. Ashley Shivers and Ellen Waldon married in Cheyenne Valley and then moved to La Crosse, taking her sisters Mariah, Malinda, and Birletta with them. Eventually Birletta moved to Sparta where other Waldon members lived. Here she married Andrew Loving. Emma Waldon moved to Battle Creek, Michigan, with other relatives. While living there she married Zack Moss, Jr. and later moved to La Crosse.

In conjunction with the La Crosse County Historical Society, I (Rebecca Mormann-Krieger) am writing a drama, called Enduring Families, about the Shivers, Revels, and Moss families, who are founding families



*Orby Moss in his barbershop
1971*

in the La Crosse and Hillsboro area. The research through primary documents, personal interviews, state and federal documents, and newspaper collection stretches from Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia to Indiana and Michigan and finally to La Crosse. It follows the twenty year, cross-country movements of roughly twelve families as they kept one step ahead of the Indian Removal Act, Black

Codes, and Fugitive Slave Act, and then settled in Hillsboro and established

a strong economic and social relationship with La Crosse. Rebecca Mormann-Krieger, Denise Christy-Moss, and Glen Scott Copper are doing the research and writing the play. George Italiano is assisting with the research collections at the La Crosse County Historical Society.

This drama is slated to begin school performances in May 2018. Enduring Families supports the idea that diversity and inclusion are as easy or difficult as living within a family unit or neighborhood. The Revels Family established a unique community in Cheyenne Valley. After the Civil War people migrated to the valley but by the 1880s it became necessary for young people to search outside the valley for financial opportunities, as well as spouses.

The drama interweaves family history with the regional history of La Crosse. The families are enduring not only because their descendants are still here, but because we all are still here. Wisconsin created an environment where we all were able to find a home, creating vibrant communities that welcomed each generation of migrant or immigrant people. The strength of our relationships is not based upon race, ethnic background, or religion, but rather the sturdiness of our character.

(All photos courtesy of the Moss family)

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