

LIFE OF PETER PETERSON AND HIS SON EVERETT:

**A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BOTH MEN AND A DISCUSSION OF DIFFERING
LEVELS OF RACISM BETWEEN GENERATIONS**

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Abstract

Everett “Peter” Peterson I was a young slave living in the south during the time of the Civil War. He was taken in by a Lieutenant who was traveling with General William T. Sherman during his famous march. Peter was brought back to Shawano County, Wisconsin and raised in the area with very few other African-Americans. He was married to a white woman from Leopolis, Wisconsin and started a family. One of his son’s, Everett, also married a white woman from Navarino, Wisconsin. Both of these men lived in an area with few African-Americans but as a result of progressivism and changing attitudes in Wisconsin. Everett, however, encountered much more racism and opposition to his life choices on account of his race than his father did.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTSIV

INTRODUCTION.....1

LIFE OF EVERETT “PETER” PETERSON I.....4

LIFE OF EVERETT PETERSON II.....13

DIFFERING LEVELS OF RACISM.....16

CONCLUSION.....22

APPENDICIES.....23

BIBLIOGRAPHY.....27

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Introduction

The topic of this essay, Peter Peterson, was chosen for a variety of reasons including interest in material, locality of events and lack of coverage by other historians. But the main reason I personally chose this topic is because of my relation to the subjects of this essay. Peter Peterson was my great great grandfather and his son Everett was my great great uncle. My mother personally told me about Peter and his story when I was in sixth grade. I remember being very interested in learning more about it, but at that time did not have the means to do so. The memories of my almost forgotten ancestors weighed on my mind while I grew. When I was a senior in high school, my grandmother gave my mother a few obituaries and other newspaper clippings that included information about Peter and his life. I remember reading these and being captivated but was left still wanting to find out more. This could well be described as a turning point in my life because it later effected my decision to study history here at University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire.

Needless to say that when I was first introduced to the idea of a capstone paper in history my mind immediately recalled what I had learned about my ancestors from my mother and my grandmother. After only a small amount of research I approached my grandmother and grandfather to gain more information through interviews. It was at this time that I sadly discovered that the little I had learned from the obituaries and small amount of census data I had looked at was as much as both of my grandparents knew. It is interesting when one realizes how soon we forget the past and where we came from. This fact made me do my utmost to recreate the life of my Great Great Grandfather Peter Peterson so that future members of my family would not forget so easily.

Peter and his son Everett (who is the other main character discussed in this essay) lived in the same area for a majority of their lives. However, Everett encountered much more hardships on account of his race. This without a doubt has much to do with the changing ideals of the times. In the period between the 1890's and 1920's progressivism became a main theme in political life. Progressives were intellectuals who were interested in change and in their minds creating a better country. Some of these intellectual progressives clung strongly to a racist doctrine in which they believed that whites were a supreme race. This can be seen in many facets of society during this time period. Jim Crow segregation laws were put into effect in many places throughout the United States, not just the south. Supreme court rulings such as the famous *Plessy v Ferguson* justified these segregations laws and white supremacists propagandists tried in every possible way to illustrate a negative picture of African-Americans in the media.¹

With the growth of progressivism came the growth of racial intolerance. As these intellectuals spread their messages many common people began to believe them. As a result of this spreading racism people in the North just as well as the South became more and more racially intolerant. This can clearly be seen when looking at the lives of these two men. The following essay will discuss these issues with the use of three main components. The first is a brief biography of Peter's life, the second another brief biography of Peter's son Everett and third a discussion of the differing levels of racism both men encountered as well as discussion of reasons for the differences. Being a direct descendent of these men I realize that it is possible for bias to be present in my writing. I want to assure the readers of this paper that I strived to the

¹ Woodward, C. Vann. *The Strange Career of Jim Crow Third Revised Edition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974, 74-86.

best of my ability to approach this topic in an impartial manner. What has resulted is a paper focused on two distinct individuals in a specific historical time and space. Peter and Everett Peterson along with those mentioned in conjunction with them in this essay will be less easily forgotten by future generations as a result of this paper.

Life of Everett “Peter” Peterson I

Everett “Peter” Peterson (who will be from here on referred to as Peter) was known by that name only for about fifty years of his approximate sixty year life span. The first eleven or so years of his life were spent on a plantation in either South Carolina or Virginia, depending on source material. Because he is known now only by Peter Peterson it is nearly impossible to track exactly where he lived or who his master was. Census information sets the approximate date of Peter’s birth in June of 1855. An obituary for Peter from the Shawano County Journal on June 6th, 1918 offers the little information about his early childhood that is currently known. The obituary states that “Peter was born a slave, and was owned by a hard-fisted master down in South Carolina.” Peter’s name would of “been that of his master,” if it were not for Alex Peterson of Belle Plaine, Wisconsin.²

Alex Peterson was born in Maine on October 2nd, 1842. When Alex was only five years old his family moved from Maine to Omro, Wisconsin where they lived for six years before moving to Belle Plaine, Wisconsin. When the Civil War began Alex and his brothers joined up for service in the Union Army. Alex was hurt early in the war and was allowed leave so he could recover from his injuries. After recovery he rejoined the army for a short period and then was again discharged to recover from illness in a hospital in Atlanta, Georgia. After he recovered again he re-enlisted; this time he was placed in the ranks of General William T.

² “Famous War Negro Dead at Leopolis”. Shawano County Journal, 6 June 1918. Peterson Family Collection, Privately held. Shawano, WI.

Sherman's army and was raised to the rank of Lieutenant. It was on General Sherman's famous march that Alex encountered a young slave boy somewhere in South Carolina³.

Alex and Peter's first meeting is briefly described in Peter's obituary from the Shawano County Journal. The obituary states that Alex and his company were eating supper when a young African American child rushed into their camp. The men of the company guessed the boy to be approximately eleven years old. The author of this obituary put it best when he said, "At that moment the boy was transmuted from a slave to a freeman."⁴ Another account of the story in Alex's obituary states that Peter traveled with Alex and his company on General Sherman's march to the sea.⁵ After the war Alex, being an officer, was allowed to bring Peter home to Shawano County Wisconsin.

Peter was accepted by the family and taken into the home. An article from 1997 that focuses on some of Alex's descendants has some information about Peter. This article states that Peter was never officially adopted but was given the Peterson name.⁶ He was bestowed this Peterson name and lived with Alex's family until he was the age of thirty.⁷ In 1870, however, Peter was listed in the census as not living with Alex and his immediate family but rather on neighboring property owned by Abe Peterson, who was Alex's father.⁸ Abe is listed at an age of seventy-two and his wife at seventy-one. Alex must have had Peter, who was listed as sixteen

³ "Was Widely Known in Shawano County." Shawano County Journal, 7 November 1929. Peterson Family Collection. Privately Held. Shawano, WI.

⁴ Famous War Negro.

⁵ Was Widely Known.

⁶ Michael J Boucher. "Horsin' Around: Shawano Family has enjoyed farm life." Shawano Leader, 23 August 1997. Peterson Family Collection. Privately Held. Shawano, WI, 3.

⁷ Famous War Negro.

⁸ *Commemorative Biographical Record of the Upper Wisconsin*. J.H. Peers & Co Publishing, 1895. Peterson Family Collection. Privately held. Shawano, WI.

years old at this time, live with his father and mother so Peter could help these aging farmers with their daily chores. This 1870 census contains a contradiction of information in that it states Peter was born in Virginia. This census also affirms that Peter was attending school and is able to read and write⁹. It is not known exactly where Peter attended school, but Alex's wife Mary was a graduate of Oberlin College and taught in the Shawano school system; this fact makes it safe to assume that young Peter either attended the schools in Shawano or was homeschooled by Mary¹⁰.

What happened for the next thirty or so years in Peter's life is difficult to ascertain by the primary documents available. Neither Peter nor Alex show up in the 1880 census and the surviving portion of the 1890 census did not include either of these two men. Alex is listed in available census data as being a farmer, but his obituary alludes to the fact that he did much more. During his life-time in Belle Plaine Alex ran his farm, opened the first store in town, was involved in the lumber business, was county treasurer for one term, was town treasurer for 18 years, was school treasurer for twenty-five years and also was the postmaster for twenty-three years¹¹. Peter, as Alex's son, would have clearly been involved in many of the same activities as his father while living at home with him.

It is safe to assume that Alex's involvement in the lumber business was the reason that Peter became a lumber worker on the Wolf River. While working on the Wolf he was known as "Nigger Pete" and "...was noted far and wide for his physical prowess." During Peter's time on the river is the only specific documented case where racism towards Peter is evident. His

⁹ U.S. Board of Census. 1870 United States Census. Accessed through the online database at <http://www.ancestry.com>. [Accessed on March 31st, 2008].

¹⁰ Was Well Known.

¹¹Ibid.

obituary tells the story. The story starts by explaining that Peter would never start or search out a fight because he was peaceful in demeanor and was good at making friends. In one instance, however, while working on the Wolf River Peter encountered a “river bully” by the name of John Vader. John was known as one of the most “dreaded” men on the Wolf River, which runs between Shawano and New London. For some unknown reasons Peter and John got into an altercation (possibly John making racial comments or threatening Peter because of his race). “[After]...the smoke had cleared away John Vader had changed his mind and from then on he was as gentle as a kitten.¹²” Other than this incident no other specific incident where Peter dealt with racism is documented although in his other obituary this quote is contained, “Owing to the fact that he was colored he was forced into many a scrap and always to the other fellows sorrow as he possessed a punch like Jeffries and never experienced any difficulty in landing it.”¹³

Other than encounters such as the one above involving the color of his skin Peter undoubtedly faced many other non-racial challenges while working on the river. During this time period lumber that was logged off during the winter months was stored until spring. When the ice from the winter had melted away the logs were put into the river to float to their destination. The job of a log driver could be very dangerous. These men had great balance and strength and needed to be extremely skilled to ride floating logs down the river. They would also have to worry about log jams that could stretch across the river for miles and contained thousands of logs. Clearing these log jams was the most dangerous task for river workers and their methods to do so varied depending on severity of the jam. Small jams could be cleared by a

¹² Famous War Negro.

¹³ “Death of a Leopolis Pioneer”. Shawano County Advocate, 4 June 1918 Peterson Family Collection. Privately held. Shawano, WI.

few men using long poles to pry loose the stuck logs. Larger jams could be cleared using horses to pull logs along the shore or if a jam was very severe black powder could be used to explode the logs and loosen the jam.¹⁴

In the late 19th century the introduction of the railroad made it less dangerous and quicker for the logs to travel to their intended sawmill.¹⁵ It is this fact or possibly the fact that he was aging that must have prompted Peter to settle down. It is unknown exactly when but at an estimated age of thirty-two (so approximately 1886) Peter was married to Minnie Bucholtz¹⁶, a white woman of Leopolis in Shawano County, Wisconsin.¹⁷ It was there¹⁸ that they owned a home, had a family and created a life together. In the census of 1900 Peter, Minnie and their family was living on a farm in Leopolis. By this time Minnie had already given birth to all four of their children. This is where census information and information contained in the obituaries of Peter begin to contradict slightly. In the 1900 census it list Peter at an age of forty-five and that he had been married to Minnie for fifteen years (placing their marriage in 1885 when Peter was thirty). Also in this census Peter's place of birth as well as the place of birth of both his biological father and mother is listed as South Carolina, contradicting what is listed on the 1870 census. Peter's occupation is listed as a laborer, so it is possible that he was still working on the

¹⁴ Mcdevitt , Robert Ed.. From Sawmills to Villages *The early History of: Big Falls, Caroline, Leopolis & Pella and Buckbee, Granite City, Hunting & Split Rock*. Marion: Marion Advertiser, 1992, 5-7.

¹⁵ Ibid, 7.

¹⁶ Famous War Negro.

¹⁷ Was Well Known.

¹⁸ The family lived in the Township of Pella in closer proximity to the Town of Leopolis rather than the Town of Pella. Census data states they live in the Township of Pella and other sources say they live in Leopolis.

river at this time or perhaps he was working as a laborer on another farm. Peter is listed on this census as the owner of the property and the property is classified as a house.¹⁹

The 1900 census also contains much information about Peter and Minnie's four children. The children's names, sex and ages are as follows: Everett, male age fifteen; Poessir, female age fourteen; Freeman, male age five; Merle, female age one. All four children are classified as black in the race column rather than mixed or mulatto. Everett and Poessir are both listed as attending school and are listed as being able to read and write.²⁰ It is uncertain where the children attended school but the first school in Leopolis was built in 1871. A new school was built in 1898. The children could also have attended the Fairview school in Pella which was first established in 1850.²¹

Although the Peterson family consisted of five of the total twenty-two African Americans listed as living in Shawano County at this time²² life for the Peterson family was similar to the many others living in small rural towns in east-central Wisconsin. In 1900 Leopolis had an approximate population of 200 people. The town at this time contained a sawmill, two general stores, a hardware store, a blacksmith, a furniture store, a harness shop, a creamery, two hotels and four saloons. The farm land was described as composed of mostly a clay type soil that was very productive. The family undoubtedly grew many of their own vegetables and fruits in their garden and got other provisions from one of the two general stores in town. For entertainment the family had a few possibilities. The saloons in both Pella and Leopolis usually housed a

¹⁹ U.S. Board of Census. 1900 United States Census. Accessed through the online database at <http://www.ancestry.com>. [Accessed on March 31st, 2008].

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Mcdevitt, 169.

²² U.S. Board of Census. 1900 United States Census, Bulletin 8 – Negroes in the United States. Accessed through online database at <http://www.census.gov>. [Accessed on May 1st, 2008].

dance hall on their upper floors. One of the hotels contained an area for gatherings called Schmidt's Hall. At these halls there could be dances every week for almost any occasion such as: Grand Harvest Dance, Easter Dance, Leap Year Dance and Old People's Dance among others. Also on occasion local and traveling bands would make stops at these places of entertainment. While these dances could be held year long there was also seasonal entertainment available for residents of Leopolis. In the summer residents could head to the park located by St. John's Lutheran church to watch the Leopolis Sluggers play baseball against other local teams. In the winter during this period the ice was always in good condition for skating due to the fact that it had to be kept clear of snow for cutting later in the season. Also in the winter children could find enjoyment in sledding down the hill on which St. Mary's Catholic Church would later be built.²³

Sometime in the decade following the 1900 census Peter switched his profession from a laborer to a farmer. In the 1910 census Peter's job is listed as farmer in the industry of general farming. This probably meant that Peter grew a variety of grains, had a garden and a few cattle. Also his estate was now classified as a farm rather than just a house. Once again this census contradicts the previous enumeration information regarding the birthplace of Peter and his biological parents. The 1910 census it lists Peter birth place as well as the birthplace of his biological father and mother in Virginia, rather than South Carolina as it was in the 1900 census. The length of the marriage between Minnie and Peter has changed here as well; the 1910 census states that they have been married twenty-seven years (mathematically placing their marriage in

²³ Mcdevitt, 147-163.

1887 rather than 1885²⁴ or 1886²⁵ as stated in two other sources). Also at this time there is only three children remaining in the household; Everett, Freeman and Merle. Poessir is not present in the household anymore. The exact reason is unknown but there is a possibility for what happened to Poessir. Bessie was a sister to Everett, Freeman and Merle. This could possibly have been Poessir, she was married to a man whose last name was Quinn and she took that name. She move, presumably with her husband, to San Francisco, California and had a son named Claude. Little else is known about Bessie and the last correspondence between her and the Peterson family was in 1966.²⁶ Another difference from the 1900 census is the classification of the three remaining children's race. Rather than black, as they were classified before, they are listed as mulatto, where as Peter is still listed as black. Possibly the family had a few financial problems within the ten years previous to the 1910 census because the property was now listed as mortgaged rather than owned free as it had been in the 1900 census. Everett was 25 years old by 1910 and was out of school and working. His job title is listed as odd jobs. Freeman was 15 and Merle 11; they are both listed as attending school in this census.²⁷ They lived in the Pella school district but were allowed to attend the Leopolis School because they paid a \$10 tuition fee.²⁸

Peter continued life on his farm with his family for the next eight years. He died on June 2nd, 1918. He is buried in St. John's Lutheran Cemetery near Leopolis. Both obituaries state that he was about 60 years old at the time of his death and neither gives a cause of death. The first of the two obituaries was printed on June 4th in the Shawano County Advocate and was taken from

²⁴ U.S. Board of Census 1900.

²⁵ Famous War Negro.

²⁶ Carol J. Peterson, interviewed by author, administered via e-mail, Leopolis, WI. 30 April 2008.

²⁷ U.S. Board of Census. 1910 United States Census. Accessed through the online database at <http://www.ancestry.com>. [Accessed on April 1st, 2008].

²⁸ Mcdevitt, 169.

the Marion Advertiser.²⁹ The article was a small one paragraph blurb that slightly overviewed Peter's life. The second was printed two days later on June 6th in the Shawano County Journal. This second obituary was much larger and filled with many more details. It was even placed on the front page of the Shawano County Journal right next political cartoon entitled "Doormat and Potsdam." The title of the obituary was "Famous War Negro Dead at Leopolis". Underneath the title was a subtitle that read "Came to Alex Peterson's Company-Was with Sherman on Great March." Yet another subtitle was below that and it read "Well-Known as "Nigger Pete"." The final subtitle read "Leave a Snug Sum Amount of Property to His Surviving Widow and Children." This obituary was a half a column in length and much more in-depth than the other.³⁰ The fact that this obituary was printed on such a grand scale on the front page of a newspaper shows that, regardless of his skin color, Peter was well respected in the area.

²⁹ Death of Leopolis Pioneer.

³⁰ Famous War Negro.

Life of Everett Peterson II

Everett's life has been discussed in conjunction with the life of his father up until Peter's death in 1918. The next section of this paper will discuss the life of Everett Peterson as independent from his father. Everett was chosen to be analyzed rather than any of the other children on the sole basis of the next primary source that will be introduced.

A small newspaper clipping from the Peterson family collection is entitled "Navarino (Wis.) Merchant Crazed When Hit Daughter is Joined to Negro by Marinette Judge". It is not known what year or what newspaper the clipping is from but the article is dated June 13th. The clipping starts out by explaining that a marriage between "Lethy Gregory, a white girl from Navarino, and E. E. Peterson, a negro of Pella" almost started a "race-riot". The father of Lethy was an owner of one of the larger stores in Navarino. Lethy apparently disappeared for a period of time and her father went to Marinette, WI to find her but he arrived in the city five minutes after "the knot had been tied." Mr. Gregory arrived at the judge's home and Lethy and Everett were still present. The article states that it was with difficulty that Mr. Gregory was "restrained from doing bodily violence to the black." Mr. Gregory stated that he would do whatever he could to annul the marriage and verbally threatened Everett. This article also stated that residents of the city (presumed Marinette not Navarino) were not pleased with what had happened and threatened to "deal harshly with the negro in the event that he returns." Other African-Americans living in the city were said to have become frightened by the display of ropes and guns being carried throughout the city by its residents. The end of the article states that Everett and Lethy had known each other for a considerable amount of time and that Mr. Gregory

had given Lethy specific orders not to associate with Everett. The judge was harshly criticized as well and the article states that some believed he should be removed from office.³¹

Mr. Gregory's attempts to annul the marriage must have been unsuccessful because in the 1920 census Everett is living in a rented property in Pella with his wife Lethy and their two children Eva, age four and Marshall, age one. Everett and both children are classified as mulatto in the race section of this census. Everett's occupation is listed as general farmer, it is important to note that he is the only farmer on this page of the census that is a general farmer and not a dairy farmer. It is unknown whether he worked his own farm, or as a worker on his mother's farm near his home. During this time Minnie was listed on the census as the head of her own household because Peter had obviously passed away. Merle had left the house by this time as well and Minnie lived with Freeman and his new wife Lena who was white. They had a one year old child by the name of Owen, who was classified as mulatto.³²

By the 1930 census Everett had expanded his family even more. At this time he and Lethy were listed at ages forty-five and thirty-eight respectively. The article about their marriage discussed earlier did not have a year as to when they were married. This 1930 census states that Everett was twenty-eight at first marriage and Lethy twenty-one; mathematically that places their marriage in the year 1913. In 1930 Everett was still renting, but his occupation title has been changed. He is still listed as a farmer, but this time his industry is specified as dairy farmer. In

³¹ "Merchant crazed when his daughter is joined to negro by Marinette judge." Peterson Family Collection. Privately held. Shawano, WI.

³² U.S. Board of Census. 1920 United States Census. Accessed through the online database at <http://www.ancestry.com>. [Accessed on April 5th, 2008].

the previous decade Everett changed his style of farming to match the rest of the area, which had now switched mainly to dairy farming.³³

Strangely there is a new oldest of Everett and Lethy's children listed in the 1930 census that was not present in the 1920 census. Inez, female age seventeen, is the oldest sibling. She is listed as negro as well as the rest of the children and Everett, a change from the previous census when they were listed as mulatto. Why Inez it not listed in the 1920 survey is unknown. The rest of the children in the household are as follows Eva, now age fourteen; Marshal, now age eleven; Ethel, female age nine; Stanley, male age four; and Wildadeam, female age two. Ethel, Marshall, Eva and Inez are all listed as attending school and all of them can read and write except Ethel.³⁴

The 1940 and 1950 U.S. census has not yet been made available for public inspection so to obtain information on Everett and the other members of his family is difficult. It is known that the family stayed in the area and continued to farm. An obituary for Everett could not be found but he died in 1950 at the age of sixty-five and is buried in the same cemetery as his father, St John's Lutheran, near Leopolis.³⁵

³³ U.S. Board of Census. 1930 United States Census. Accessed through the online database at <http://www.ancestry.com>. [Accessed on April 5th, 2008].

³⁴ U.S. Board of Census, 1930.

³⁵ Carol J. Peterson.

Differing Levels of Racism

Without a doubt Peter and all his descendants were in some way affected by racism. As was shown earlier in the essay in the section about Peter's life he was allegedly confronted by uncomfortable situations or altercations because of the fact that he was an African-American. However, it seemed that there was little controversy over his marrying of a white woman of Leopolis and in no documented case was Peter in danger of losing his life. On the other hand, Peter's eldest son Everett married a white woman from Navarino in secret against the wishes of the woman's father. In this instance Everett was threatened and as a primary source indicated Everett was probably in fear for his life following the incident because white members of the community were parading through the streets with ropes and guns. It can be stated that generally as time passed in the United States people have become more and more tolerant of minorities; strangely it seems in the case of Peter and his son Everett the opposite happened. The next section of this essay will discuss the possible reasons for the increased levels of racism that Everett faced rather than his father Peter.

One of the main possible reasons that Peter did not feel the effects of racism as intensely as his son is because of Peter's adopted father and his status in the surrounding community. Although Peter was not officially adopted he was given the Peterson name and raised as a son. In the town of Belle Plaine and in the surrounding area the Peterson name was as good as gold. Alex was not only a veteran officer of the Civil War he was also a prosperous farmer and store owner. He also held various different treasurer positions in the area throughout his lifetime. Alex was obviously was a much respected individual in this area during this time period and is today considered one of the original Belle Plaine pioneers. In a small biography written about

Alex in 1895 while he was still alive, he is quoted as being one of the “most progressive and prosperous agriculturist and merchants of Belle Plaine.”³⁶ Because so many people knew who Alex was and how involved he was in local politics and the local economy, they more than likely knew that he had brought home an African-American boy from South Carolina (or possibly Virginia) when he returned from the war. It is safe to say that the many in this area would not in any way insult or threaten Peter for fear of disrespecting Alex. Another possibility is that Alex’s good standing in the eyes of the community allowed for his tolerance to trickle down to the other members of the community and they became more tolerant themselves because they wanted to emulate Alex and his great success and character. It was stated in both of Peter’s obituaries that he was very adept at making friends and an extremely gentle and kind person. It is also possible that more members of the community were forced to converse with Peter on behalf of his helping at Alex’s local general store. If some were forced to converse with Peter rather than judge him from afar they could have been very impressed by his courtesy and kindness and that could have swayed them away from intolerance.

While many knew Peter as the adopted son of Alex, it is safe to argue that fewer knew that Everett was Alex’s grandson.³⁷ Everett was a generation removed from Alex and so were his peers. This detail suggests that the people who Everett interacted with knew less about Alex and quite possibly had no idea who Alex was at all. Henceforth, those who met Everett had little or no fear of offending a locally respected figure such as Alex. People in the town of Navarino, which is about thirty miles from Leopolis, and especially in the city of Marinette, which is about

³⁶ Commemorative Biographical Record of the Upper Wisconsin.

³⁷ In Alex’s obituary in regards to the offspring of Peter and Minnie it states that these children always refer to Alex as grandpa.

eighty miles from Leopolis, had little or no idea who Alex was so they would of in they were at all racist they would not have given Everett the benefit of the doubt on his character. The aforementioned is definitely a reason as to why Everett and Lethy's marriage caused such an upheaval.

One easily arguable reason for Everett seeing an increasing level of racism is the changing of ideas and views of African-Americans by whites that was brought about by Progressivism. In large scale publications the writings of northern liberal leaders and those that spoke in favor of abolition thirty to forty years earlier had now changed in tone. Some of these writers now wrote about the inferiority of African-Americans and complained that they would never fully fit in with white society. The weakening of resistance to racial intolerance can be seen in other examples as well. In the famous supreme court case *Plessy v Ferguson* of 1896 the very phrase "separate but equal" justifies segregation and shows that many whites were not yet ready to live in fully racially integrated societies. It has been shown that during the turn of the twentieth century, "...racism [had] reached a crest of acceptability and popularity among respectable scholarly and intellectual circles."³⁸ Clearly if racism had become such a widely accepted doctrine among intellectuals there works and ideas would be spread throughout the country in the form of books, speeches, works of art and other mediums. These ideas put forth by intellectuals would more than likely be fully accepted by those less informed contributing to the spread of racism throughout the United States.

White supremacists that had the means used propaganda to aid in the disenfranchisement of African-Americans. In newspapers throughout the country crimes by African-Americans

³⁸ Woodward, 74.

became a common headline. Charges of rape and other crimes were plastered all over the front pages of newspapers throughout the country. Using these extreme examples allowed white supremacist affiliated publications to paint a false picture of African-Americans as inherently evil and prone to crime. Stories like these published throughout the country could only hinder the relations between races.³⁹

If increasing racial intolerance among intellectuals and white leaders is not enough to prove that United States citizens were becoming more racist than surely the increase in violence directed towards African-Americans is. After the turn of the 20th century lynching of African-Americans continued as a weekly event as well as large scale mob violence against black communities throughout the country.⁴⁰ These lynchings were without a doubt always inhumane and made into somewhat of a public spectacle. For the most part these lynchings were unfair and unjust. In many cases African-American men were lynched quickly with little or no trial so it is safe to assume that many men charged with these crimes and lynched were innocent. In some extreme instances, however, people could be lynched for completely unjust reasons. One man was killed because he had defeated a white man in a fight. And in another instance a man was lynched for being a rapist, along with his wife and son just for being the family of a rapist.⁴¹

Most of the instances detailed above are instances from the south. There is an extreme example however that occurred here in the Midwest as well. On June, 15th 1920 three young African-American men were lynched by a mob of approximately ten thousand people in downtown St. Paul, Minnesota. These three young men were accused of rape and were in jail at

³⁹ Ibid, 86.

⁴⁰ Shapiro, Herbert. *White Violence and Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988, 93.

⁴¹ Shapiro, 32.

the time awaiting trial. The mob stormed the jail and pulled three of the six men from the jail. After brutally beating and cursing them while dragging them through the streets the men were hanged and killed on a street light pole in downtown St. Paul. Afterwards about fifty men are captured in time as horrible bigots because they all posed next to the three dead bodies for a disturbing picture.⁴²

Another factor that illustrates increased levels of racism directed toward Everett is the growth of the Ku Klux Klan and racial intolerance in Wisconsin and other parts of the United States. Around the turn of the century Thomas Dixon's play *The Clansman* was being shown in theatres in the United States, this play glorified the Ku Klux Klan and was filled with racist undertones.⁴³ It was in 1915 when the controversial play was made into the film *Birth of a Nation* was first shown. At the time this was the longest and most well put together films in U.S. history and had a lasting impact on those U.S. citizens that viewed it. This film was a product of the growing racism in the United States and wildly popular. Even Woodrow Wilson President at the time and possibly the most racist President in the history of the United States was supportive of this blatantly racist propaganda.⁴⁴ Although the controversy over the marriage between Everett and Lethy happened in 1913 the production of a major motion picture in 1915 suggests that racist ideals were being expanded throughout the country.

As another example of evidence of the growth of the Klan and racial intolerance in Wisconsin take a look at Ku Klux Klan Honorary Junior Society that was formed in 1919 at the

⁴² Fedo, Michael. *The Lynchings in Duluth*. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000.

⁴³ Shapiro, 97.

⁴⁴ Messer-Kruse, Timothy. "The Campus Klan of the University of Wisconsin: Tacit and Active Support for the Ku Klux Klan in a Culture of Intolerance." *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, no. 77 (1993): 2-38, 5.

University of Wisconsin in Madison.⁴⁵ These students were educated individuals and not just ignorant bigots which is a stereotype far too often placed upon those who are involved in racist activities. The fact that these educated students found truth and believed in the ideals put for by the Ku Klux Klan is information enough to argue that racism in Wisconsin was becoming more prevalent than it had been when Peter was growing up in Wisconsin.

The Klan was officially re-instated in Wisconsin in 1920 in Milwaukee. Racial intolerance had become an organized reality in Wisconsin at this time. The Klan had not been active in Wisconsin for some time previous to this. The reemergence of the clan at this point in time was proof that this intolerance existed and was growing. The Klan had four major regions in Wisconsin. The Fox River Valley and the surrounding area are where Everett lived at the time. This region was considered the third most active out of the four regions at the time.⁴⁶

All the issues discussed above suggest the growing racial intolerance of the citizens of the United States. It is safe to assume that as these ideals spread they made their way into the minds of some of the citizens of Shawano County, Wisconsin. Many of these viewpoints were then justifications to treat Everett and the members of his family unfairly based solely on the color of their skin.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 2.

⁴⁶ Ostwald, Paul D. *Activities of the Ku Klux Klan in Chippewa County during the 1920's*, 4,8.

Conclusion

In hindsight besides the few instances where Peter or Everett directly encountered racism they lead lives very similar to that of the rest of the people in this area in Shawano county Wisconsin. When young they both attended local school houses where they learned to read and write. Both Peter and his son Everett farmed the areas in the Township of Pella. They both raised families with multiple children. The major difference in their lives was the amount of troubles they had on account of the color of their skin.

Peter seemingly had no problems with his interracial marriage where Everett on the other hand encountered great difficulty. This was akin to the growing levels of racism that were present in Wisconsin during Everett's life. The progressivism of the time fueled racism throughout the country. White supremacists in positions of power spread their racist ideals in whatever way possible. These ideals in turn rubbed off on common people. Outspoken hatred and beliefs that African-Americans were inferior began to run rampant through the country. Jim Crow laws were commonplace in the South and also present in the North. These segregation laws were even justified by the Supreme Court in a few specific examples. Horrific violence was being committed on innocent African-Americans throughout the country as well. Luckily violence of this magnitude was never a part of Peter or Everett's life. While Peter farmed his land and raised his family in relative peace Everett had to be aware of the changing of the way his neighbors viewed him and his family. Everett was legally as much a freeman as his father had been after he was brought to Shawano County, but he saw boundaries that were much more difficult to break on account of socially constructed constraints that were being strengthened by the growing racist ideals of the country.

APPENDIX A

Peter



Peter on right, name of other man, dog and date of photo unknown.

APPENDIX B



Picture taken in 1911 by Embarrass River near Leopolis. Peter is on right near horses.



Harmonica found on a support beam inside a wall during remodeling at Peter's former residence. Year on harmonica is 1881, photograph courtesy of Barb Carley.

APPENDIX C



Freeman, date of photo unknown.



Bessie -
Freeman's
sister

Bessie, date of photo unknown.

APPENDIX D



Lethy, Everett's wife, and one of the couple's daughters.

Bibliography

Primary Sources - Peterson Family Collection. Privately held. Shawano, WI.

Commemorative Biographical Record of the Upper Wisconsin. J.H. Peers & Co Publishing, 1895. Peterson Family Collection. Privately held. Shawano, WI.

This is short biography of Alex Peterson's life written in 1895. This source was useful in finding out information about the activities of Alex in the Shawano County Area.

"Death of a Leopolis Pioneer." Shawano County Advocate, 4 June 1918 Peterson Family Collection. Privately held. Shawano, WI.

This is the shorter of two obituaries printed for Peter Peterson. It contains brief information about his life.

"Famous War Negro Dead at Leopolis." Shawano County Journal, 6 June 1918. Peterson Family Collection. Privately held. Shawano, WI.

This is a longer re-printed version of the obituary for Peter. It was printed two days after the previous obituary and contained a brief but thorough re-cap of Peter's life.

"Merchant crazed when his daughter is joined to negro by Marinette judge." Peterson Family Collection. Privately held. Shawano, WI.

This is a small article that details the happenings of the controversy over Everett and Peter's marriage.

"Was Widely Known in Shawano County." Shawano County Journal, 7 November 1929. Peterson Family Collection. Privately Held. Shawano, WI.

This is an obituary for Alex Peterson. It is a rather large and detailed obituary that talks about many of the things he did in his life including his taking in of an African-American child during his duty in the Civil War.

United States Census Sources

U.S. Board of Census. *1870 United States Census*. Accessed through the online database at <http://www.ancestry.com>. [Accessed on March 31st, 2008].

This Census information was used to ascertain Peter's whereabouts relatively soon after the end of the Civil War. Peter is listed as living with Abraham Peterson who is Alex's father and neighbor.

U.S. Board of Census. *1900 United States Census*. Accessed through the online database at <http://www.ancestry.com>. [Accessed on March 31st, 2008].

This is the first census where Peter is on his own. He is living on a property near Leopold and at this time has four children with his wife. This source offers useful information about the literacy of the family, their ages and their occupations.

U.S. Board of Census. 1900 *United States Census, Bulletin 8 – Negroes in the United States*. Accessed through online database at <http://www.census.gov>. [Accessed on May 1st, 2008].

This source was used to give the number of African-Americans living in Shawano County during the 1900 census.

U.S. Board of Census. 1910 *United States Census*. Accessed through the online database at <http://www.ancestry.com>. [Accessed on April 1st, 2008].

This is the last census that Peter is listed in because he passes away in 1918. This source once again offers useful information about the literacy of the family, their ages and their occupations.

U.S. Board of Census. 1920 *United States Census*. Accessed through the online database at <http://www.ancestry.com>. [Accessed on April 5th, 2008].

This census gives information about Everett who is now living on his own with his new wife Lethy. Peter is passed away but Minnie still lives in the same residence with her son Freeman and his new wife Lena. This source offers useful information about the literacy of the families, their ages and their occupations.

U.S. Board of Census. 1930 *United States Census*. Accessed through the online database at <http://www.ancestry.com>. [Accessed on April 5th, 2008].

This census is the most recently released for public inspection and has information about Everett and his family. Everett and Lethy have six children in the household at this time. This source offers useful information about the literacy of the family, their ages and their occupations.

Secondary Sources

Boucher, Michael J. "Horsin' Around: Shawano Family has enjoyed farm life." Shawano Leader, 23 August 1997. Peterson Family Collection. Privately Held. Shawano, WI.

This source from the Shawano Leader is a look back at the history of the Peterson family in the Shawano County Area. It discusses Alex in detail with a small amount of information regarding Peter.

Fedo, Michael. *The Lynchings in Duluth*. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000.

This source was used to discuss the stipulations of the lynchings in Duluth, Minnesota.

Messer-Kruse, Timothy. *The Campus Klan of the University of Wisconsin: Tacit and Active Support for the Ku Klux Klan in a Culture of Intolerance*. *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, no. 77 (1993): 2-38.

This article is mainly about the activities of the Ku Klux Klan at the University of Wisconsin- Madison. It was used to support the argument of the growing levels of racism in after the turn of the 20th century.

Mcdevitt , Robert Ed.. *From Sawmills to Villages The early History of: Big Falls, Caroline, Leopolis & Pella and Buckbee, Granite City, Hunting & Split Rock*. Marion: Marion Advertiser, 1992.

This source is interesting because the editor was a teacher of mine in my senior year of high school. This source was used to help fill in the blanks of what life was like for the Peterson's near in the Leopolis area during the time around the turn of the 20th century.

Ostwald, Paul D. *Activities of the Ku Klux Klan in Chippewa County during the 1920's*. A thesis paper written in candidacy for a Master's degree from University Wisconsin Eau Claire. Contained in UWEC archives, 1976.

This source was briefly used to look at some information regarding Klan activities in Wisconsin.

Peterson, Carol J., interviewed by author, administered via e-mail, Leopolis, WI. 30 April 2008.

This interview was administered by e-mail. Carol, who is my grandmother gave me information regarding the death of Everett II, information about Bessie and confirmed to me that both of these two men are buried in St. John's Lutheran Cemetery near Leopolis.

Shapiro, Herbert. *White Violence and Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.

This source was very useful in giving specific instances of white intolerance of blacks and the violence that resulted.

Woodward, C. Vann. *The Strange Career of Jim Crow Third Revised Edition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.

This source was useful in discussing the Jim Crow laws and giving other examples of the justifications of segregation and racism.