“A Slave’s Pride”

How we connect with people can be fascinating and it sometimes makes me feel that, to paraphrase Shakespeare, life is one big play and we’re all actors, merely following our scripts. In September, 2016, on our annual “surprise” anniversary trip, Laura chose French Lick, Indiana, a historic resort nestled in rural southern Indiana.

For entertainment, she scheduled a three-hour ride on an old train line, taking us through the countryside while the guide gave us glimpses into Indiana history as we rode along. She made sure it was handicap accessible since she was struggling to walk at the time. Yes, the train was accommodating, but required us to sit in the last section where Laura could be raised up on a lift to get into the train. We sat in the first seat, next to and around three young black couples. Do you see where this is going? No, you don’t.

They were millennials – all under 30 or perhaps 35. And they were fun. We laughed, joked, and enjoyed the scenery. Then Laura brought up my barn painting, which I expounded on – the short version only. The one most interested sat behind me and told me that he was from a farm near Lebanon, Kentucky, and that this farm went back to his grandparents. A black farmer? And Kentucky, no less – the only state in the Union that continued slavery laws throughout the Civil War. He got my attention.

Tyson, about 25, lives near Louisville and works as a mental health therapist. He told me his family farm is near Lebanon, about 30 minutes from Gethsemani – where I make an annual retreat. He earned his master’s degree from St. Catherine College, which is Catholic and close to Lebanon. Why did we ride in that end car on the train? Why did Laura bring up barn painting? Why did Tyson volunteer his story? Are these things random or are they connected for a reason?

Curious, I dug deeper. Marion County is the most Catholic county in Kentucky and the county seat Lebanon has a black population of 20 percent. Still, it didn’t make sense: black Catholic farmers? Could this be in the state of Kentucky where, in 1924, a county erected a 360-foot monument to Jefferson Davis. And don’t forget that Adolph Rupp and his all-white U.K. Wildcat basketball team weren’t too happy to lose the national championship to the mostly-black UTEP in 1966.

The abbey of Gethsemani lies in neighboring Nelson County, where Bethlehem High School and a local cathedral date to the mid-1800s. There’s an all-black Catholic church, St. Monica’s, in Bardstown. There’s another one, Holy Rosary, in nearby Springfield. Towns, located in both counties, bear names such as St. Francis, St. Catherine, Holy Cross, Loretto, New Hope, and St. Mary. In fact, the sisters of Loretto, the first American order of Catholic nuns, established in 1812, sold the Gethsemani farm to the Trappists when they arrived from France in 1848. What’s the link between this little pocket of Catholicism in the Bible Belt South, blacks, and black farmers? I hoped that Maggie Burton could help me. Yes, Tyson and his parents are Catholic. She’s the first Magdalene I’ve met.

Unfortunately I didn’t meet Maggie, since her work at a shelter for the abused kept her longer than she anticipated. I waited for her at her farm, a few miles outside of Lebanon, and directly across from St. Charles Catholic Church, established in 1786, which sat on top of a hill, high above the farm. Strangely again, St. Charles (in Youngstown, Ohio) is where I went to church and grade school. So many coincidences.

I walked around the farm, took photos of the old barn and another one, and looked over a wood pile for some planks for picture frames. But even though Maggie couldn’t leave work, she gave me permission to take the wood and agreed to talk later. Since I don’t like to drive at night, especially on curvy rural roads where deer sometimes wander, I agreed to chat later on.

When I returned to the monastery, I called Maggie with a list of questions. She’s very Catholic, though only a handful of her fellow parishioners are black. She still attends St. Charles, the old church on the hill above her family home, though she no longer lives in the house. Her brother lives there. She was church secretary and taught religion for 29 years. She raised her three children Catholic and she never questions her religion. In her family it goes back a long way.

Her great-great-grandfather, Austin Smith, worked as a slave on this farm and lived in the same slave quarters home – now covered with aluminum siding – that Maggie grew up in back in the 1960s. Maggie, short for Mary Magdalene – she was named after an aunt – told me that this slave, Austin Smith, her ancestor, probably took his name and the Catholic religion from his owners.

When slavery was abolished in Kentucky after the Civil War, slaves were given their freedom, probably grudgingly from some slave owners, especially in Kentucky. However, Austin’s owners apparently treated him so well that, according to Maggie and the family legend, he dropped to his knees, begging them to keep him on their farm. He didn’t want to leave as the other slaves did. The owners agreed to keep him, but on the condition that he was a free to leave and that he would let them treat him as a son, which they did. These owners, childless, left the farm to Austin when they died. That was probably in the late 1800s.

In turn he passed the farm on, along with the Catholic religion, to Maggie’s grandfather, George Bernard Smith. Her mother, Ella Smith, one of eight children, and her husband, William Thompson, purchased the farm. Now Ella’s daughter Maggie is the fourth generation to own it.

It fascinates me that, in the South – and, yes, Kentucky is definitely Southern – a pocket of black Catholicism thrives. But there don’t seem to be a lot of black farmers here. Maggie knew of only one other – in nearby Washington County.

The Smith farm occupies about 50 acres and has three barns. I saw only a small part of it – a few hilly acres and two of the barns. Maggie told me that a convent was originally on the farm. I wondered if that was built by the Sisters of Loretto, who came here in 1812. She also told me that there have been documentaries made about the farm.

The barn I painted was the one closest to the old farm house and probably dates to the early 1900s – no hand-hewn beams but a lot of saw-cut lumber. One section of the second floor was held up by logs. Its days are numbered: the metal roof, patched in many spots, is leaking and some of the supporting boards are cracked. The other barn, high on a Kentucky knob, looks deteriorating as well.

Maggie says that they raise chickens, horses, and cows but no longer have crops. They used to raise corn and tobacco and they had a herd of dairy cows. Tyson told me that they’d find arrowheads after plowing the field and sell them to a man who’d come by occasionally, getting a few bucks to a few hundred bucks for each one. Kentucky used to be a hunting ground for Indians in the 1700s and earlier.

I am still puzzled by the concentration of Catholics and black Catholics in this area. Catholics, lay people and religious, refugees from the French Revolution, settled here as did Catholics from Maryland, the only original Catholic colony, when life in Maryland became congested after the American Revolution. In 1792 Kentucky became a spin-off state from Virginia.

However, Presbyterians from Virginia founded Lebanon, the county seat, and built a meeting house at Hardin’s Creek. Like the Quakers, they were anti-slavery, which may explain why Lebanon has 20 percent black population.