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From Mississippi to the Northwoods: A Search for Opportunity

Carol F. Colasacco

The journey toward understanding issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion is different for everyone. Surprising genealogical discoveries or DNA ethnicity results can make it deeply personal. When members of the Sunie-Steele family began to research their Steele ancestors' roots in the Northwoods about five years ago, little was known other than that the Steeles had settled in northern Wisconsin near Lake Superior in the early 1900s. Expectations were for rather mundane stories, not "exciting" or "adventurous" tales like those of the Finnish-immigrant Sunies, with their long voyage across an ocean, relatives left behind, and little grasp of the language in their adopted country. The Steeles were known to be of English heritage, but nothing else was known about their arrival and subsequent movements in this country; surely, theirs would be a more straightforward story. They did not face a similar language barrier and thus would have been able to integrate quickly into their new communities. These assumptions about an uncomplicated narrative proved naïve, however, and fascination grew as new details emerged, specifically regarding the possible motivations behind the Steeles' move to the Lake Superior region in the early 20th century. Efforts are now underway to document that history—one filled with challenges and struggles directly impacted by the larger events unfolding around the family.

Arrival in the Lake Superior Region

Oscar and Sarah (Reynolds) Steele came to the Lake Superior region in 1909 with their three children, Lillian, Charles, and George. Two more children, Iris and Vennie, were born following the move. They settled first in the town of Saxon, Wisconsin. According to federal census records from 1910, they were initially renters, but by 1920 they owned a farm in Gurney, Wisconsin, valued at $500. Family lore claims they were homesteaders. They relocated to northern Wisconsin at a time when there were organized efforts to encourage settlers onto the "cutover lands"—the stump lands remaining in northern counties of Wisconsin after railroad and lumber companies completed their timber clearing.[1] Those companies and other land promoters envisioned a progression from logging to farming similar to what had occurred in the northeast, especially in the state of New York. Oscar's great-grandparents, Eldad and Sybal Steele, had moved to western New York from Vermont around 1800 as part of that earlier progression. One hundred years later, in Wisconsin, optimistic promotion of agricultural settlements and advertisements of available farmland appeared in newspapers, many of them produced by the Wisconsin State Board of Immigration, the Wisconsin Immigration and Development Association, and other organizations created to promote the development of northern Wisconsin. In 1895, the Wisconsin State Legislature provided funds for a book prepared by Dean Henry of the College of Agriculture entitled *Northern Wisconsin: A Handbook for the Homeseeker*, and this volume was widely distributed and reported on in newspapers throughout the state.[2]

Newspaper articles, like one that appeared in the Watertown News in 1908 entitled "Riches in Store for New Settlers," declared that Wisconsin was a "land of opportunity" where

"new settlers can raise fortunes in northern [sic] part of state."[3] Such articles were likely seen by Oscar and Sarah, who lived in Delavan, Wisconsin, just 40 miles from Watertown at that time. Promotional cards advertising the prosperous lives of northern farmers and the potential of combining farming with timber sales were widely distributed, including one that featured Chas Kohlman, a farmer who lived near Butternut in Ashland County, Wisconsin. This card reads,

> "The fertility of the soil and the good prices which prevailed made it possible for them to pay for their land and improvements thereon, and to accumulate some stock and other personal property. In the winter time Mr. Kohlman found it profitable to sell wood from his land to charcoal kilns at Butternut. He not only sees a profit in farming, but also makes a good thing from his timber."[4]

Oscar and Sarah may also have read articles proclaiming that the climate of northern Wisconsin had "no fever, no malaria" with interest,[5] as they were both born and raised in Vicksburg, Mississippi, where yellow fever was commonplace. Oscar's grandparents, David and Jerusha Steele, had left Cayuga County, New York, for Mississippi in the late 1830s, likely inspired by stories shared by well-traveled relatives who settled in New Orleans. During their years in Mississippi, the Steele and Reynolds families had terrifying, firsthand experiences with yellow fever. In 1878, the year Sarah was born, two of her uncles died during a yellow fever epidemic in Vicksburg.[6] Oscar also lost an uncle to yellow fever. An environment free of such diseases would no doubt have been attractive.

Life in Mississippi

Oscar and Sarah were both biracial. Oscar's father was a white man named George Philip Steele. George was active in the Radical Republican Party in Vicksburg and an outspoken advocate for voting rights for formerly enslaved Black men. He held numerous elected offices during his adult life in Vicksburg, including those of justice of the peace and constable, and articles in the highly politicized and Democrat-leaning newspapers reveal what a controversial character he was. An article in The Vicksburg Herald in December of 1869 described how George had the audacity to engage two Black men to gather signatures for a petition to allow him to run for office, stating,

> "We have known that this young man had fallen almost as low in public estimation by his shameful conduct as was possible, but it seems he has, through Radical doctrine, sought out even a lower step and that is in employing negroes, ignorant and irresponsible, to canvass the city in his interest. Does he suppose he will get the name of a single respectable man in this city?"[7]

Another article published in the same newspaper in August 1870, described George as "the black sheep of the Steele family."[8]

In December of 1870 George married Louisa Saunders, a Black woman who had most likely been formerly enslaved. They traveled to New Orleans to marry, as it would have been easier for a biracial couple to marry there than in Mississippi. Little is known about Louisa except that she was a light-skinned Black woman born in Mississippi, and her mother, Cecelia

Saunders, was born in South Carolina. No information about Louisa's birth father is available. George and Louisa had seven children who lived to adulthood, including Oscar.

Figure 1: George and Louisa Steele (Personal Family Photographs)

George experienced considerable pressure and almost certainly threats of violence because of his political activities, if the criticism he received in the press is any indicator. While he was initially declared the winner in his bid for reelection as justice of the peace in 1886, the result was overturned when his opponent challenged the legitimacy of some of the voters who had signed his application to run again.[9] In 1891, he filed paperwork to run for reelection as constable, but his application was rejected for not containing an adequate number of signatures from "eligible voters."[10] These obstacles, erected by white office holders, were not uncommon in the South during that time, as initial strides to ensure voting rights for Black residents following the Civil War and Emancipation were negated by increasingly complex requirements for Black men to maintain their right to vote. Registered Black voters in Mississippi fell from 66.9 percent of those eligible in 1867 (60,167 voters) to only 5.7 percent in 1892 (8,715 voters) due to increased voter suppression efforts meant to counteract the record high turnout that occurred during Reconstruction.[11] In or around 1894, when heightened pressure had affected George's ability to support his family, the Steeles left Vicksburg for Chicago.

Moves to Chicago and Wisconsin

Despite the family's frustrating and even dangerous experiences in Vicksburg, George continued his political involvement after moving to Chicago. He and his son Oscar became engaged in voter registration efforts for Black men through an organization they helped found in

Chicago, the Twenty-Ninth Ward Colored Men Republican Club. George, a white man, held the position of secretary for the newly formed club, and Oscar was appointed to "canvass the ward in the interest of the club and of the Republican party."[12] As was common for many who left the South for the North during the Great Migration, life in Chicago proved difficult for the Steele family. Chicago's Black community was concentrated on the south side of the city which functioned as a "city within a city" rather than being assimilated into the city at large. The neighborhood where the Steeles lived expanded rapidly around the turn of the century, primarily due to migration from the South. It became referred to as the "Black Ghetto" and later by the less derisive names of "Black Metropolis" or "Bronzeville."[13] Many Black businesses were housed in residential and small storefront buildings, and Oscar was listed as an upholsterer in the 1900 Chicago Business Directory.[14]

In 1898, Oscar's brother Charles married a woman who had come to Chicago from Delavan, Wisconsin. By the end of 1900 much of the Steele family had moved to Delavan. They may have been enticed by Delavan's small-town atmosphere, tolerant political environment, and integrated population, but they may also have made the decision to leave the crowded Bronzeville area of Chicago after one of Oscar's sisters, Georgianna, died of tuberculosis in November of that year. The first record of Oscar and Sarah's arrival in Delavan is an advertisement for Oscar's upholstery services in a Delavan newspaper on December 27, 1900.[15]

Following George's death in 1907 and with Oscar's upholstery business struggling, Oscar and Sarah made the decision to move farther north. Oscar, having been exposed to the sorts of newspaper articles and advertisements described above, dreamed of a prosperous life as a farmer in northern Wisconsin. His dream was never realized. Farming in northern Wisconsin was difficult, but especially so for someone from the South with no agricultural knowledge or experience. In addition, it appears that Oscar and Sarah made the decision to pass as white when they moved north, as all records that include the documentation of race from this point forward list Oscar, Sarah, and all of their children as white. Thus, in addition to dealing with the financial uncertainties of northern farm life as inexperienced farmers, they were likely dealing with the added stress of navigating their new, unfamiliar community now identifying as white. Although the family survived, theirs was a hardscrabble life, often hand to mouth, without frills or excess. Their move north was undoubtedly prompted by dreams of a safer and more comfortable life, but fears of being "discovered" as Black would have been intense in northern Wisconsin, where very few residents identified as Black and the Ku Klux Klan is known to have been active during the early 20th century,[16] especially considering their prior experiences in Mississippi. The family's identity as white settlers of the Lake Superior region remained intact until fairly recently, when the knowledge of their Black ancestry and the Steele-Reynolds family journey from Mississippi to Wisconsin came to light.

Reynolds Family in Mississippi

Oscar had married Sarah Reynolds, also from Vicksburg, in the mid-1890s, Sarah leaving her own family in Vicksburg to move north with the Steeles. While Sarah's mother and an older

sister had died while Sarah was a child, her father, two brothers, a sister, and other extended family remained in Mississippi and were quite successful there. Her father, Charles Reynolds, worked as a waiter and bartender at an upscale seafood restaurant. Charles owned his own home and other property. When he died in 1899, just a few years after Sarah moved north, he left a will naming a family friend and pastor as guardian for his minor children. In the will, he specified that insurance policy proceeds should be used to educate and train his children so that they could support themselves. Charles was only eleven years old when the Emancipation Proclamation was signed by Abraham Lincoln in 1863, and the first known record of his life is an 1870 federal census record listing him as a "house servant." Charles' subsequent financial stability, independence, and thoughtful consideration of his children's future are remarkable.

One of Sarah's first cousins, Lucy Crump Jefferson, went on to establish the first Black-owned business in Mississippi in 1894, the W. H. Jefferson Funeral Home, with her husband, William H. Jefferson. Lucy and William Jefferson became well known for their business and charitable endeavors. They invited Booker T. Washington to Vicksburg to meet with prominent businessmen (and Lucy) in 1908. Lucy was acquainted with Booker T. and his wife, Margaret Washington, through the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs.

Figure 2: Sarah Reynolds Steele and her youngest child, Vennie. (Personal Family Photograph)

Another relative, Sarah and Lucy's uncle, Wilson Reynolds, was principal of the Vicksburg school for

Black students. In 1894, shortly before the Steele family's departure from Vicksburg, he was named president of Alcorn Agricultural and Technical College—later known as Alcorn State University, an HBCU still in existence. Sadly, Wilson died of influenza just four months after he assumed that position. Newspaper articles from that time reflect just how highly regarded he was. The Vicksburg Evening Post reported his death in January of 1894 "…with great pain and sorrow…. In his death the State has been deprived of one of its most efficient educators and a worthy citizen."[17] Other reports of his death are equally complimentary of his character and accomplishments, describing him as "one of the leading men of his race",[18] "a man who had the sincere regard and esteem of the best men of both races",[19] and "one of the most popular colored men in Mississippi".[20] It is notable that a Black man received such accolades in the white-owned, Democrat-leaning newspapers during that time in Mississippi. Wilson's presidential portrait now hangs in the Oakland Memorial Chapel on the Alcorn State University campus in Lorman, Mississippi and appears on the "past presidents" page on the university's website.[21]

Racial Identity Documentation

Documentation of a resident's racial identity was common during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In the 1900 federal census record from Chicago, George P. Steele's race is listed as "W" (white) and his wife, Louisa, as "B" (Black). In Mississippi records, George's race is always listed as "W" and Louisa as "M" for "mulatto." Census record designations for Oscar, Sarah, and their children are variable. In 1900 all are listed as white, whereas in 1905 they are listed as Black. Earlier Vicksburg records consistently list Oscar and Sarah, their children, and Sarah's parents, Charles and Eliza Reynolds, as "M." After Oscar and Sarah moved to northern Wisconsin, all census records that include a listing for race, beginning with the 1910 federal census, list all members of the family as white. Oscar's death certificate lists his race as white, while official records that include an indication of race for his siblings (Charles, Frank, Georgianna, Mathilda, Jerusha, and Luella) all indicate "colored" or Black. Results of DNA testing from 21st-century descendants of Oscar and Sarah further support the Steele family's biracial heritage.

George Reynolds Steele Family

Oscar and Sarah's third child, George Reynolds Steele, married Mabel Loomis, a white woman from Milwaukee, in 1924, and they raised their five children in the Saxon/Gurney area of northern Wisconsin. George was reportedly a more successful farmer than his father, and his business and financial sense drew him into involvement with Consumer Cooperatives. He was an original member of the board of directors for the Saxon Co-op Store, and ten years later the community of Saxon was lauded in a local newspaper for "its progress in community cooperation and especially their [sic] ability to toss aside differences of languages, nationality, religious beliefs, and to get together on worthwhile community projects which belong to the people in Saxon."[22] George's Consumer Cooperative activities proved a good fit for his interests, abilities, and personality, and the experience he gained while farming in the Lake Superior

region served him well in those activities and others throughout his life. In 1946, George and Mabel moved to Manistique, Michigan, where George had been hired to manage a Consumer Co-op store. Two of their daughters married men from Manistique, and one remained in the area after George and Mabel left in 1948. Other family members settled in the northern Michigan area near the Wisconsin border. George continued his new career as a store manager in various locations in Wisconsin, and he retired in 1966 after fifteen years as store manager of the Black Creek Consumer Co-op in Black Creek, Wisconsin.

Figure 3: George Reynolds Steele (Personal Family Photograph)

Conclusions

While George and Mabel Steele's grandchildren were not raised with knowledge of their African American background, the author, who is one of those grandchildren, has spent considerable time contemplating the hardships that her ancestors experienced in moving north and keeping their family's past hidden. Allyson Hobbs, assistant professor of history at Stanford University, has written extensively about the history of racial passing, and she highlights the many sacrifices made by those who chose to leave their families and cultural identities behind in pursuit of economic and social advantages in her 2016 book, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life*.[23] In her research, Dr. Hobbs recounts numerous stories of those who weren't able to attend family funerals or weddings after "crossing the color line" for fear of being discovered. She describes the everyday anxiety of racially ambiguous people who altered how they identified themselves and the grief resulting from the loss of family contact. For some, the anxiety and loss were too great to bear, and they returned to their former identities.

The price paid by Sarah Reynolds appears to have been particularly high. She made an enormous sacrifice by leaving her entire family behind in the South, along with their traditions and her own cultural identity. She never saw those family members again. While Sarah's Mississippi family undoubtedly faced challenges of their own in the South, they also found significant success in their Black community in Mississippi. In contrast, Sarah's life in the

Northwoods was one of near-constant struggle and financial distress. While we can never know how she felt about her decision to leave Mississippi, it is tempting to imagine what her life would have been like had she remained in the South. The options for Oscar and his family, however, are less ambiguous. The history of the Jim Crow South is replete with evidence of the kind of harassment and ridicule that George and Louisa Steele, as a biracial couple, and George, as an elected official with a Black wife and children, faced. Their experiences ultimately forced them to leave Mississippi for their own safety and well-being.

Discovering this surprising family history has presented an opportunity for education and growth, providing a unique perspective of historical and current events, and the Steele descendants have learned much from this process. They have personally experienced the challenge of African American genealogical research. The difficulty locating records for the African American Steele and Reynolds ancestors contrasts starkly with the ease of researching the white Steele ancestors who arrived from England as part of the Massachusetts Bay Colony settlement in 1631. Available records clearly document the Steele family in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Vermont, New York, and Mississippi, and earlier records trace the Steele family in England as far back as the 1400s. While African American genealogical records may be more difficult to locate, when they are discovered, they may be enlightening. In one instance, a Freedmen's Bureau marriage registration record for Sarah Reynolds Steele's grandparents was located that indicates that each had been "separated by force" from a previous relationship while enslaved. Both had children with their prior partners, making the identity of Sarah's biological grandfather uncertain. While it is heart-wrenching to imagine the trauma of that forceful separation, the existence of this record is a valuable piece of family history. Because the Freedmen's Bureau enabled formerly enslaved people, who had not been allowed to legally marry while enslaved, to register their established relationships with the government,[24] registries like this exist that provide priceless details for those doing African American genealogical research. These records also provide powerful illustrations of the profound personal impact of the institution of slavery on the human beings who were enslaved.

The full scope of the Steele family story in America has been difficult to piece together and is a complicated and at times uncomfortable one. While family researchers discovered that some of their ancestors in Mississippi had been enslaved, they also learned that some were slaveholders, most notably George's brother, Francis, and father, David. They discovered that two of George's brothers, Charles and Henry, served in the Confederate Army, while his sister, Helen, married a man from Ohio who served in the Union Army. They learned that George, only fourteen years old when the Civil War began, didn't serve in the Confederate Army. George, the youngest child of Jerusha Steele (his father, David, had died in 1860), remained with his mother in Vicksburg during the early years of the war. After the Battle of Vicksburg in 1863 he left for Ohio, likely to stay with his sister, Helen. He may have fled out of fear of being drafted to serve in the Confederate Army, or he may have wanted to support his sister whose husband had been drafted to serve in the Union Army. Whatever the reason, his time in Ohio seems to have

influenced George's perspective of enslavement and subsequent political activity in Vicksburg when he returned.

The financial and personal hardships experienced by many of the Steele family members after their move north to escape the hostility and potential threats to their personal safety are in sharp contrast to the proud and successful experience of Sarah Reynolds Steele's family who stayed in Mississippi. However, the Reynolds family undoubtedly experienced significant struggles of their own, with voter suppression and other discriminatory restrictions present in the South. This story, in all its complexity, illuminates a few of the many different aspects of the African American experience and provides an important perspective of the family history shared by Steele family descendants who now reside in all corners of the United States.

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