



B.T. Roberts
(1823-93)

Free Methodist Historical Society

Newsletter

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The \$700 Little Book

The Historical Center recently acquired *Shadow and Sunshine*, by Eliza Suggs (Omaha, Nebraska: 1906) through the kindness of Esther (Mrs. Gilbert) James.

Alerted to its value by Stephen James, Esther's son, we discovered two copies for sale on the Internet, one for \$650 and the other for \$750!

The commercial value of this little 96-page book is due to the book's rarity and the fact that it is a slave narrative written by an African American woman. The book's true value, however, is historical and spiritual.

The two copies for sale are described on abebooks.com, a leading Internet used-book site. Neither description mentions the Free Methodist Church, though one mentions Orleans Seminary (forerunner of Central Christian College in Kansas)

and Burton R. Jones and C. M. Damon, Free Methodist leaders. The other description, which contains several errors, notes that *Shadow and Sunshine* "is often

described as the first memoir written by an African American female"—though in fact it wasn't. It also comments that a seminar on Eliza Suggs' life was held at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln, and that the book has been republished by the University of Nebraska Press and is now available online as well.

This remarkable book is a story of sin and redemption—indeed, of shadow and sunshine. It mentions B. T. Roberts, E. P. Hart, and other FM leaders and is a key source on the history of African Americans in the Free Methodist Church. (See the article on pages 2 and 3.)



Eliza Suggs (left) and her four sisters: Mrs. L. E. Selby, Miss K. I. Suggs, Mrs. S. M. Williams and Mrs. S. E. Thompson

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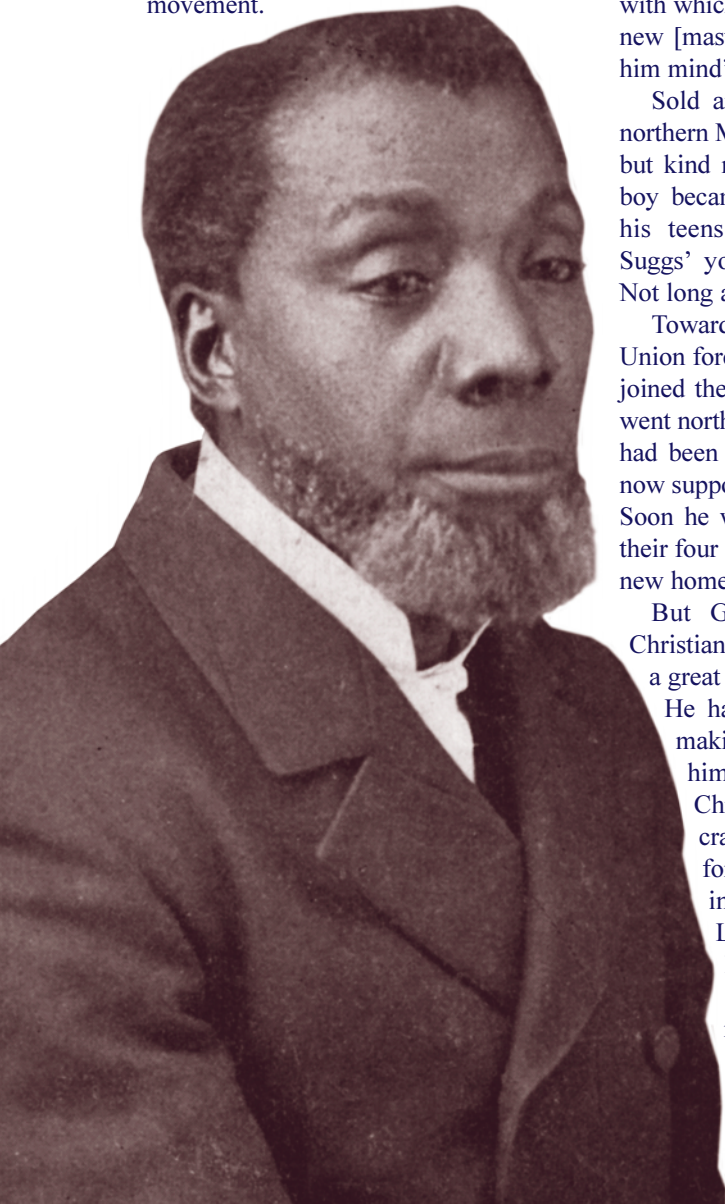
To live out and act out divine love is the most effectual testimony that we have in our hearts. If we are in communication with The Fountain, or that flowing well of Love, it will flow out naturally, and easily, and its manifestation will be spontaneous and unceasing. There will be no hard work about manifesting it to all.

— Ellen (Mrs. B. T.) Roberts, "Divine Love," *The Earnest Christian* (June 1890), 169.

EARLY AFRICAN AMERICAN LE IN THE FREE METHODIST CH

(Adapted from Howard A. Snyder,
Populist Saints: B. T. and Ellen Roberts
and the First Free Methodists, chapter 33)

Early Free Methodist *Disciplines* noted that “The first Free Methodist Church ever organized was in St. Louis, a slave-holding city, and at a time when slave-holders were freely admitted to the churches generally. Yet they made non-slaveholding a test of membership, prohibiting, as they have ever done, ‘the buying, selling, or holding a human being as a slave.’” It is not surprising therefore that early Free Methodism from time to time attracted African Americans to its ranks. Some of these, both men and women, became preachers or workers in the movement.



The Suggs Family

Consider Eliza Suggs and her father, James Suggs (1831–1889), who was ordained by B. T. Roberts in 1879. Eliza tells the story in her remarkable memoir, *Shadow and Sunshine*, which she published in 1906.

James Suggs and his wife Malinda were both slaves. Born in North Carolina, James was sold at age three, permanently separating him from his parents and twin brother. “In after years he had a faint recollection of his mother, and could remember distinctly the words of introduction with which he was handed over . . . to his new [master]: ‘Whip that boy and make him mind’” (*Shadow and Sunshine*, 13).

Sold and resold, James ended up in northern Mississippi, owned by a wealthy but kind master named Suggs. Thus the boy became known as James Suggs. In his teens he married another of Mr. Suggs’ young slaves, Malinda Filbrick. Not long afterwards he was converted.

Toward the end of the Civil War, with Union forces nearby, James ran away and joined the Union army. After the war he went north, now a free man. As a slave he had been trained as a blacksmith, so he now supported himself through this trade. Soon he was able to bring Malinda and their four children from Mississippi to his new home in Princeton, Illinois.

But God was calling James into Christian ministry. Eliza writes, “He had a great struggle over his call to preach.

He had worldly ambitions and was making money, and it was hard for him to give up all and follow Christ.” But he made a full consecration, giving up blacksmithing for preaching. “He began preaching around in school houses. Large crowds gathered to hear him, and from that time on, it was the business of his life to minister Divine truth to dying men and women” (*Shadow and Sunshine*, 14–24, 48–49).

Suggs became a Free Methodist through contact with preachers such as C. E. Harroun, Jr., and C. M. Damon. B. T. Roberts ordained him deacon in the Illinois Conference in 1879. That same year—“the year of the great drouth [sic] and grasshopper scourge”—Suggs went to Kansas as an evangelist, a pioneer in Kansas Free Methodism. In 1884 he was ordained elder by E. P. Hart in the new West Kansas Conference.

Suggs discovered a “colony of colored people” from the South that had settled in Graham County, northwest Kansas, in a town they called Nicodemus. Finding them “nearly starving, and with scarcely enough clothing to cover their nakedness,” Suggs became their advocate. He got encouragement but little help from Kansas governor John P. St. John, so he returned to Illinois to solicit aid. The Illinois Conference endorsed Suggs’ work, commending him as a “person appointed by the Governor of Kansas to raise funds for the colored refugees” there. Soon Suggs was sending “barrel after barrel of clothing” to the struggling black community (*Shadow and Sunshine*, 27; Ralph Helsel, “The Slave with Two Masters,” *Light and Life* [Feb., 1992], 17).

Later Suggs acquired a homestead in northern Kansas and fetched his family from Illinois. One time after preaching he was arrested and falsely accused of murder, but even in prison he continued preaching. Eventually he was released and resumed his ministry. His evangelistic work “was quite widely known within the bounds of several different conferences, the Illinois, Iowa, West Iowa, Kansas, West Kansas, and Nebraska conferences, each having claimed some share of his time and labor” (*Shadow and Sunshine*, 29–32).

In 1884 Free Methodists established a school at Orleans, Nebraska, about thirty miles north of the Suggs homestead. The Suggs children were among its first students, and in 1886 James moved his fami-

Rev. James Suggs

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ly there to be close to the school. He continued evangelistic work until his death in 1889.

Eliza Suggs, James and Malinda's youngest, was born in 1876 in Illinois. As a baby she had soft bones that frequently broke, leaving her crippled, stunted and unable to walk—a n extreme case of rickets, caused by lack of vitamin D. Because of this people often treated Eliza as a child or a curiosity. But she developed intellectually and spiritually and became active in the temperance movement and in literary pursuits. C. M. Damon, a leader in West Kansas Free Methodism and friend of the family, described Eliza's public ministry:

Carried in arms or wheeled about in a carriage, her frail hands and well developed head have accomplished wonders, obtaining a fair education, which makes her a valuable asset, sometimes as secretary of religious organizations and work. [At times] she assisted her father . . . in evangelistic work, and she has presided in public meetings with marked dignity and ability. Carried on the platform and moved about as occasion required by kind and willing attendants [she would lead meetings;] I have perhaps never seen more clock-like precision than the execution of an interesting program, at which she presided in a public temperance meeting in the M. E. Church, during my last pastorate in

Orleans (C. M. Damon, "Personal Reminiscences and Testimony," in Suggs, *Shadow and Sunshine*, 8).

James and Malinda Suggs, Eliza, and others in the Suggs family count among the hardy pioneers of Free Methodism in Kansas and Nebraska.

Emma and Lloyd Ray

Mrs. Emma (Smith) Ray and her husband Lloyd were both Free Methodist preachers. They served in the late 1800s and early 1900s, as recorded in *Twice Sold*,

Twice Ransomed: Autobiography of Mr. and Mrs. L. P. Ray, largely written by Mrs.

Ray (Chicago: Free Methodist Publishing House, 1926).

Emma was born of slave parents in Missouri in 1859.

"When I was one month old," she writes, "I, my sister, who was one and one-half years old, and my mother, who held me in her arms, were sold at the auction block to the highest bidder."

They were bought by the family of Emma's father's master, so the family was not scattered. Lloyd Ray

was born in Texas of a slave mother and a white father (*Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed*, 15, 54).

Lloyd and Emma eventually became revivalists and city mission workers, serving primarily in Kansas City, Kansas, and Seattle, Washington. Emma was also active in the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, directing WCTU prison ministry in Seattle. The Rays developed associations with the Free Methodists about 1890 and became workers at Seattle's Olive Branch Mission after it was founded by Free Methodists in 1903. They joined the Free Methodist Church—attracted in part by the lively, demonstrative worship—though much of their ministry remained interdenominational.

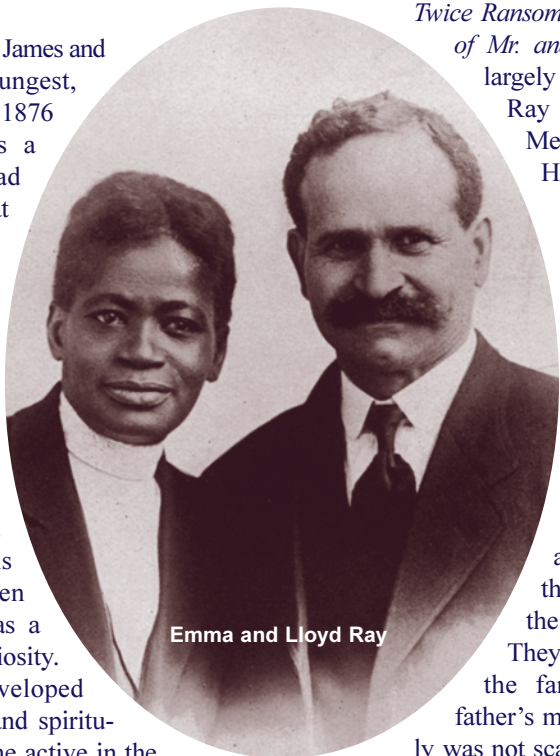
Emma and Lloyd devoted over thirty years to ministry. They apparently had little or no direct contact with B. T. or Ellen Roberts, but theirs was just the kind of

ministry B. T. and Ellen supported and encouraged.

Confronting Racism

Though these and other African Americans found a home in Free Methodism, the church was not totally free from racism. Amanda Berry Smith, the famous black holiness evangelist, recounts a telling incident. In New York City around 1868, before she was well known, Amanda and a friend were made to feel unwelcome in a Free Methodist congregation they visited. Amanda told them frankly, "I think you have the spirit of prejudice among you just like other people." However she commended Joseph Mackey, B. T. Roberts' friend and a prominent member of the congregation. Mackey, "well known all over New York" was "a good friend to the colored people," for years conducting "meetings at the Colored Home in New York. When we went into the [Free Methodist] church he was there, and was so glad to see us. He shook hands, and seated us, and was so kind." Attracted by the Free Methodists' plainness and holiness message, Smith considered joining them but decided against it once she uncovered the prejudice (Amanda Smith, *An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith the Colored Evangelist* [Chicago: Meyer & Brother, 1893], 112–15; see Susie C. Stanley, *Holy Boldness: Women Preachers' Autobiographies and the Sanctified Self* [University of Tennessee Press, 2002], 193).

These stories show how Free Methodism both extended and at times compromised B. T. and Ellen Roberts' vision "to maintain the Bible standard of Christianity, and to preach the Gospel to the poor."



Emma and Lloyd Ray

News

▷ PASTORS' SABBATICAL PROGRAM applications are now available. Contact the Historical Center for information on scholarships and scheduling.

▷ EXTRA COPIES of the Newsletter are available free of charge upon request (up to ten copies to one address). If you wish to send current or back issues to friends or family, contact the Historical Center by phone or letter or by email at History@fmcna.org.

Book Reviews

Measures of Breath, by U. Milo Kaufmann (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Poetry Press [Edwin Mellen Press], 2004). 70 pp. ISBN 0-7734-3586-7 (clothbound).

This marvelous collection comes from Milo Kaufmann, retired University of Illinois English professor, author, and Free Methodist activist who would be our poet laureate if the church had one.

Measures of Breath presents thirty-four brief poems in five sections: Beginnings, Childhood, Manhood, Late Maturity, and Endings—a journey through life, beginning with the poet's growing-up experiences in Cleveland, Ohio.

The book can be read, satisfyingly, at several levels. It is a story book but also a philosophical treatise presented poetically, with great economy of words. Many of the poems speak of light, perception, ways of seeing. In the book's introduction Patrick Grant of the University of Victoria says these poems are "concerned with how we might catch, intermittently and as if out of the corner of an eye, glimpses of the unmanifest energies and powers suffusing our everyday world." One hears "resonances of the author's favourite seventeenth-century poets—Henry Vaughan's gleams and fractions of light, Thomas Traherne's glorious cornfield, John Bunyan's emblematic lucidity." Yet readers unfamiliar with this poetic tradition will find the poems fascinating and easy to read.

My favorite is "The Fixing." Here a young child playing in a mud puddle discovers self-awareness:

Then came the moment of fixing,
the mind's eye three feet above

and behind the boy squatting.
The viewer and viewed were distinct
and the year was nineteen-hundred and forty.
I knew I was five years of age
in a world immeasurably older.

When the moment had passed, all had changed,
for I was both self and another.

Thus began "the speeding of years, / the smaller swooning forever / into the arms of the greater."

Though Christian faith suffuses these poems (especially if one knows the author), this is more implied than stated. The most clearly Christian poem is "At the Wall," near the book's end. In a vision reminiscent of one John Wesley Redfield records in his autobiography, a traveler encounters a stupendous stone wall blocking the road. No way through, around, or over; but music is heard from the other side. Finding all efforts vain, and finally crying out for help, the traveler sees the wall opening before him, and "the radiant

Hero comes through." It is a beautiful poem, ending in a bright, music-filled country—music that, the traveler realizes, he "had heard for the whole of [his] journey."

The book ends rather on a downbeat—"In the Rain, Out of Time"—but the reader will not have forgotten the encounter "At the Wall."

Some poems are humorous, some whimsical, some obscure, some mysterious. Generally they pack their punch in the last line or two. All the poems evoke the wonder and mystery of life, and all merit reading more than once.

—Howard A. Snyder, *Asbury Theological Seminary*



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