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FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2010

## Pennytown, Missouri National Historic Site



The Saline County silence is broken by buzzing honeybees and birdsong. The Pennytown Freewill Baptist Church, sitting on a sloping piece of Missouri prairie, is petite but regal. A white privy rests under the

protective branches of a spreading Osage Orange tree.

Clarence "Book" Lawrence looks at the small one room church with appreciation. "I only wish my mother could have seen this church," comments Lawrence.

Josephine Robinson Lawrence, instrumental in saving the Pennytown legacy died in 1992, four years before the church was restored. She had worked tirelessly trying to save the historic spot for future generations. She met one of her goals in 1988 when Pennytown was named a National Historic Site.

After the Civil War, freedman Joe Penny established Pennytown with an eight acre tract of land he had bought for \$160. Other Black families joined him amassing about 64 acres making the hamlet, south of Marshall, one of the largest Missouri African-American settlements. By 1886 a nearby white landowner allowed a plain frame church to be built on his land. That land was paid for eight years later when the church trustees paid \$20 for ownership. The frame church burned in 1924 and was replaced with a sturdy red brick structure by 1926.

By the 1950's most families had moved away. Eventually this brick building was the only remaining structure left of the original Pennytown settlement. It was in bad shape and Josephine Lawrence knew it had to be saved soon. "Bricks were coming loose, rafters were rotting," says Tracy Lawrence, a daughter-in-law. "Mrs. Lawrence lured us all into getting on board with the project."

Sometime after W.W.II, Book Lawrence's grandmother Nellie Jackson, Rev. Leonard Alexander, and Penelope Lewis started a yearly Homecoming with a basket dinner and church service. The annual celebration was scheduled for the first weekend in August which was near the traditional Black Independence Day. As people moved away, the celebration drew fewer people in attendance. Years later, Mrs. Jackson's

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daughter, Josephine, resurrected the event's popularity by drawing attention to its historical importance. Josephine Lawrence also went to work to have the church recognized nationally as a historic site while gathering donations of money and manpower.

Now on the first Sunday in August people once again gather for food, fellowship, games, and remembering, including a non-denominational church service. "After Mrs. Lawrence passed away, Book's sister, Virginia Huston, kind of stepped into her shoes," explains Tracy. "She plans the service, and it has become tradition for us to sing a hymn called Sweet, Sweet Spirit at the end of the church ceremony."

"We have had some interesting and varied guests over the years," explains Book. "Debbie Miles, a former Miss America, came and played piano for us. Panhandle Slim, a Black cowboy from Oklahoma was a guest one August, and five aging Buffalo Soldiers attended another year. David Haley, Roots author Alex Haley's nephew and a Kansas senator, visited in 2002.

"And then there was Warren Reed a few years ago," adds Tracy.

Warren Read wrote a book called The Lyncher in Me: A Search for Redemption in the Face of History. The book details the 1920 lynching of three black men in Duluth, MN. One of the victims was born at Pennytown in 1897, and Read's great-grandfather was involved in doing the lynching. The last chapter of the book relates his visit to Pennytown in August of 2006.

Read, a fourth grade teacher and father, lives and teaches in Bainbridge Island, Washington. When he came, he brought along a donation raised from the sale of seedlings propagated from Osage orange and oak seeds from Pennytown. "He was a very nice man, and it was quite an emotional visit for him and some of the Pennytown descendants," says Tracy remembering quietly.

Although many people are involved in Pennytown, it is a family affair for the Lawrences. Jon Lawrence, Tulsa, Oklahoma, represents a third generation that is involved in Pennytown's revival. He has helped the Board of Directors with raffle in the past by gathering donations from supporters. Some past raffle items have been prints by Missouri artist Jerry Ellis, an autographed poem from Maya Angelou, and books signed by Desmond Tutu and Dr. Cornell West.

Jon explains, "The money raised is used for maintenance projects to ensure that the church is not in disarray. These projects include, but are not limited to, roof repair, painting, electrical outlet additions, and general building upkeep. Past raffle money has also been used to purchase a historical site marker and develop a memorial brick garden."

In addition to the original Homecoming every year, an Old Fashioned Gathering has been held on and off in the month of June, trying to make two summer dates available for Pennytown events. The Gathering is more informal. Book often brings his large grill, smoking meat for the crowd. One year they planned games and sang songs residents of 1930 Pennytown might have participated in. Door prizes were handed out; horse shoe pits and checker boards were set up under the trees, along with areas for dominoes, marbles, and string games.

The trustees rely totally on volunteer labor and financial donation for maintenance and improvements to Pennytown. Looking to the future, Tracy Lawrence observes, "We would really like to add some plumbing out here. It would allow us to plan more events or longer days at our Homecomings."

For information on this year's Pennytown Homecoming, go to  
<http://pennytownchurch.com/>.



Posted by [Bookie](#) at [6:22 PM](#)  

4 comments:



**[Donna Volkenannt](#) said...**

Hi Claudia,  
What a fascinating post, and I love the photos.  
Donna

[March 1, 2010 at 8:47 AM](#)

**Anonymous said...**

Thanks very interesting blog!

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[March 17, 2013 at 4:07 PM](#)

**Anonymous said...**

Hi there this is kind of off topic but I was wanting to know if blogs use WYSIWYG editors or if you have to manually code with HTML.

I'm starting a blog soon but have no coding knowledge so I wanted to get advice from someone with experience. Any help would be enormously appreciated!

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[March 18, 2013 at 7:33 PM](#)

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