Sojourner Truth
Isabella Van Wagenen

Birth: 1797 (approximate date)
Death: Nov. 26, 1883
Family: 
  Father - Baumfree (tree)
  Mother - Mau-Mau Bett
  Spouse - Thomas
  Children - Diana, Peter, Elizabeth and Sophia
Accomplishments: Slave, Christian, abolitionist, author, public speaker
IN
MEMORIAM
SOJOURNER
TRUTH
BORN A SLAVE IN
ULSTER Co. N.Y.
IN THE 18TH
CENTURY
DIED IN
BATTLE CREEK
MICH.
NOV.26,1883.
At an undetermined date in Alster County, New York, a baby girl was born to slaves. She was the daughter of slaves and the property of slave masters. This baby girl was named Isabella. She was called Belle by everyone who knew her. Little did Isabella's owners or parents know of the impact her life would make.

Belle and her parents were the property of a Dutch landowner, Charles Hardenbergh. It is said they owned about 2 million acres of land between the Hudson and Delaware Rivers in New York.

Belle's life began in the cellar of the Hardenbergh's home. It was damp and dark down there. When it rained the cellar would become muddy. The boards they slept on would be saturated. As you may imagine the slaves were not living healthfully. The lack of a clean dry place to live produced crippling diseases such as: arthritis, rheumatism, and tuberculosis, for the slaves.

Isabella's first language was West German. Her mother's low-Dutch name was Mau-Mau Bett. Her father was called Baumfree which translated as "tree". Most slaves spoke the language of their owners. You see many people were immigrating to the New World. They often did not need to learn a new language if they settled in a community of the same heritage or ethnic background.

Slave families were often not allowed to stay together. Most owners would sell the weakest and youngest. Belle's older brothers and sisters were sold when very young. She remembered her mother's sorrow at the loss of her children. She lived in constant fear of being sold.

The day finally came for Belle to leave the only home she ever knew. Her master died and the property was to be divided among the owner's family or sold for cash. It was in 1806 that Belle first faced the inhuman, degrading experience of an auction. She was squeezed and examined all over by merchants. She felt so alone. She could not understand why she was treated like the animals in holding pens. Was she not a person like the white merchants and her former owners?
Belle was not a pretty child. She was thin and tall when she was 6 years of age. She was not a marketable product by herself. She was eventually sold in a package deal with some sheep. Her new owner was John Neely of Trwaalfskill, New York.

The Neelys spoke English. This was a problem for Belle. She was frightened and nervous about her new life. Mrs. Neely did not understand why she could not understand the simplest command. She thought Belle was deliberately misunderstanding her commands. The only way to get a slave to obey was to punish them. She instructed her husband to carry out the punishment.

Sometimes the punishment tool was a bundle of firesinged twigs tied together. Belle was punished with such an instrument. Her hands were bound and she was severely beaten. She carried the scars with her for the rest of her life.

Belle remained with the Neelys a few more years, after which she was sold twice. She remembered living at the Martin Schryver's tavern in Kingston. He was a fisherman. She enjoyed working for Schryvers. She found the atmosphere stimulating. She was given more freedoms and treated much better than where she worked before.

By this time Belle's personality and character were developing at a rapid rate. The customers who frequented the taverns would speak of their travels. She heard of many countries and lifestyles. The fishermen and sailors did not mind servants or slaves speaking their mind occasionally. Belle was quick-witted. She learned quickly, thought quickly and could make people laugh.

However, the day came when she had to leave Martin Schryver's tavern. He had been offered three hundred dollars for Belle. You can see that she must have been an excellent worker. Three hundred dollars was a lot of money in those days! Her value had certainly increased since the first time she was sold. Belle became the property of John J. Dumont of New Paltz Landing.
Belle was a teenager who could do an adult's share of work. She was tall, muscular and diligent in all her assignments. Dumont saw these qualities and took advantage of them. She would be assigned to do the family washing which was an all day and night occupation. Then after very few hours of sleep she would be assigned to the fields to rake and bind the crops. She did her work well but was not rewarded. Dumont was hard. Her remarkable working abilities made it hard for her among some of the slaves. Jealousy would spur some of them to deliberately make trouble for Belle.

One such incident happened when she had to prepare part of the breakfast by stoking the fire then scrubbing and peeling the potatoes. She would put the potatoes on to boil then went to the barn to do the milking. Belle could not understand why the potatoes would appear dirty. Of course she had not time to prepare another batch. She had to serve the food to her master's family. They were not pleased about the appearance of the food!

Mr. Dumont's young daughter, Gertrude, was disturbed about Belle's treatment by her parents. She decided to get up early and wait around the kitchen when Belle made breakfast preparations. Belle followed her normal routine. When she went out to milk the cows, one of the servants whom Gertrude suspected came in with a dirty broom. When this servant thought the master's daughter was not looking she shook the dirty broom over the pot of potatoes. Ashes fell into the pot. Gertrude's suspicions were confirmed. She was so angry about the injustice that she ran to her father and told him what she witnessed. Belle was never accused of untidy work again. She held a warm spot in her heart for Gertrude.

While working for the Dumonts Belle was directed to marry a slave named Thomas. Marriages for slaves were always arranged by their owners. Belle gave birth to five children. One died very early. The others were called Diana, Peter, Elizabeth, and Sophia.

It was shortly after Sophia's birth that Belle heard that the new freedom of slaves law had passed in New York. Her heart must have beaten faster at the thought of freedom. It was always a dream. She knew that her parents were set free when Charles Hardenbergh died. She longed for that same privilege. The year of freedom was 1827.
Mr. Dumont promised Belle that if she worked extremely hard she would be free, perhaps even one year earlier. It seemed that her work load doubled. Belle was determined to handle it. Harder work meant FREEDOM!

Well, disaster struck one day when Belle was working in the fields. She cut her hand on the blade of a scythe. Her hand was not given time to heal because Mr. Dumont insisted on giving her hard tasks. She was often in pain. Sometimes she became discouraged, but when she remembered her master's promise of freedom she would feel stronger. She would do what she had to do to become free!

The year finally came. Belle could not understand why Mr. Dumont did not approach her about her freedom. She decided to ask him about it. She was shocked to find out that he thought she had deliberately slowed down her work because of her hand injury. He said she would not earn her freedom until she made up the year's work.

After that, life became so unbearable for her. She worked as hard as she could, but to no avail. She realized that Dumont had no intention of freeing her or other slaves. Belle decided to run away. She made sure that her work was completed. She left the Dumonts on an autumn night with her youngest child, Sophia.

Imagine a six-foot woman carrying a child and a pillowcase of possessions along dusty roads. She had no money, no place to go or home. She continued to walk.

While walking along the road, she came to the home of Levi Rose. He had promised to help whenever she needed it. However, he was in poor health. He directed her to a Quaker couple's home some miles down the road. Their names were Isaac and Maria Van Wagenen.

Belle trudged those miles, tired and apprehensive. She approached the Wagenen home in fear, wondering whether she would be turned back. After introducing herself she explained her circumstances. Mrs. Wagenen welcomed her into her home and served mother and child refreshments.

Both Wagenens welcomed her and told her she could have a place to sleep and work. Belle appreciated their love and care. They treated her as an equal. It was possibly through the Wagenen's example that she learned more about Jesus and God the Father.

Belle at first was often homesick for her family. She missed her children and the friendships of the Dumont slaves. Her fear that Dumont would find her was another factor for considering a return to slavery.
One day Belle decided to leave the Wagenens. She felt so homesick. She gathered her possessions and child then made her way to the gate. She heard a voice distinctly say "Not another step." She returned to her room and stated that she could feel the presence of God. Peace and love surrounded her.

Belle was fortunate that the Wagenen's did not believe in slavery. When Dumont threatened them they reminded him that Belle would have to be set free by law. Mr. Wagenen decided to offer Dumont $20 for Belle and $5 for Sophia if Dumont would leave her alone. Isaac Wagenen was paying for Belle's freedom not buying her servitude! Dumont agreed to the offer. Belle was free at last.

Now Belle's mission of equality for all and freedom for slaves began with her own son Peter. Apparently the Dumonts had sold Peter to a doctor friend who in turn gave Peter to his brother. Peter was then sold to a southern farmer. According to the New York state law at that time it was illegal for slaves to be sold to the south. Belle was determined to press charges against the doctor's brother and the southern farmer.

Belle made history in the town of New Paltz. It was unheard of that a former black slave would bring suit on a white man. The citizens of New Paltz blamed the local Quakers for putting foolish ideas into her head. Belle was not deterred. She solicited money from her Quaker friends and hired a lawyer. After much waiting and deliberation Belle won the case. Her son Peter was free! Peter had suffered much at the hands of his owners.

Belle decided to leave the Wagenens and start a new life in New York City. She traveled there with Sophia and Peter. By this time her style of dress was what the Quaker women wore, a close fitting cap, long loosely fitted dress with a wide white shawl around the shoulders.

Even though she felt much closer to God, Belle was not thinking of representing her people and fighting for rights while traveling to New York. She wanted to make money and put it in a savings account. Just before she died she told a visitor that because of her capacity to work hard she realized her service and payment for it, prevented other needy people from making a decent life for themselves. She was overcome with remorse. Belle wanted to give back all she had worked. She prayed to God about it and a voice seemed to tell her to leave the city. After another session of thought and prayer she decided to travel east.
Belle was living and working with the Whitings at the time. She told Mrs. Whiting of her decision to leave. Mrs. Whiting asked her where she was going. When Belle gave her a vague answer "going east", Mrs. Whiting asked her what that meant. Belle told her employer that the Lord had directed her to go East and she should leave the city at once. Mrs. Whiting was angered. She called her husband stating that Belle was crazy. Her husband replied that Belle wasn't. Mrs. Whiting tried to explain further.

"But I tell you she is; she says she's going to have a new name, too. Don't that look crazy?"

Mr. Whiting replied, "Oh, no."

He then urged Belle to eat some breakfast. She declined and went to the docks with her possessions in a pillowcase. She paid 25 cents for a fare at the Brooklyn dock.

It was on this momentous journey towards her new life that Belle decided on calling herself "Sojourner." She had stopped by the wayside for refreshments, when a Quaker woman offered some water to her. The lady asked what her name was. Belle replied, "My name is Sojourner."

"Where does thee get such a name as that?"

Said I, "The Lord has given it to me."

"Thee gave it to thyself, didn't thee," said she, "and not the Lord?!"

"Has that been thy name long?"

Said I "No."

"What was thy name?"

"Belle."

"Belle what?"

"Whatever my master's name was."

"Well thee says thy name is Sojourner?"

"Yes."

"Sojourner what?"

Sojourner was perturbed about the woman's attitude towards the name she had picked. She wanted her new life's purpose to be evident in her name. The word "truth" came to mind. Yes, that is what she would call herself, "Sojourner Truth." Her new name reflected the meaning "traveler of truth."
When Sojourner embarked on that ferry ride to Long Island she was beginning a life that would be filled with moments of great hardship and sorrow coupled with times of fulfillment. She would work for pocket money as she traveled through the country. In Huntington, she attended temperance meetings. Most of the lectures and presentations coupled abstinence with biblical philosophies. In Hartford, Connecticut she attended Millerite meetings. She did not approve of the tumult the Adventists were raising in 1843 concerning the second advent of Christ. However, she made lasting friendships with some of them.

It was said that wherever Sojourner spoke, her deep quiet presentation would move the audiences from laughter to tears of sorrow and back again. She enjoyed sharing her experiences about slavery and her Savior God. Sometimes she would recall the first religious meeting she attended. She stood outside a private home to view the service. A circuit rider named Ferris was presenting the main text of his sermon.

"Behold, I come quickly, and my reward is with me to give every man according as his work shall be." When she heard this text, it seemed to her that it would never be forgotten. The text was a promise from her God. It also implied the need for every human being to stand up and help each other. That is what she was doing with her life!

Sojourner stayed for three years with a group called Northampton Association of Education and Industry. This group was situated in Florence, Massachusetts. The group's purpose was to promote truth, justice, humanity and equal rights and ranks for everyone. The community was housed in a three-story building that resembled a typical New England mill. The members lived and worked there. The main industry was the weaving of silk. Living conditions were very crude. However, the association with notable people of the day who all were united in one purpose stimulated the mind of Sojourner. She could not read or write. However, her mind was very active and she set out to learn all she could from these well-versed people.
There would often be guest speakers or short-stay residents such as Frederick Douglass, the runaway slave and abolitionist. She met a blind black doctor who disregarded personal threats of danger to help the underground railway. His name was "Doc" Dave Ruggler. One frequent visitor was William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the famed paper "The Liberator." He was cousin to George Benson, co-founder of the community.

It was during her life at Northampton that Sojourner was encouraged to tell her story so that it could be printed. She was particularly encouraged to do this when Frederick Douglass had written a narrative about his life. Sales of his life story at first were good. However, slave owners began to stir trouble because they realized he was not a free slave but a fugitive. Douglass had to flee to England. Some friends over there negotiated and obtained his freedom. When Sojourner's story was published it was not possible to sell her account because of the upheaval that had taken place about Douglass. So she decided she would take some copies in her carpetbag to sell for a small income while she traveled.

Sojourner continued to speak out about slavery and its evils. She continued to preach about the care and love of God. She was determined to present her experiences in a peaceful and uplifting way.

Once at a crowded public meeting in Faneuil Hall, Frederick Douglass was one of the chief speakers. He had been describing the wrongs of the black race, growing more and more excited, finally ending by saying that they had no hope of justice from the whites—no possible hope except in their own right arms. They must fight for themselves, and redeem themselves, or it never would be done. Sojourner was sitting, tall and dark, on the very front seat, facing the platform, and in the bush of deep feeling, after Douglass sat down, she spoke out in her deep, peculiar voice, heard all over the house, "Fred! is God dead?" The effect was electrical, and thrilled through the house changing, as by a flash, the whole feeling of the audience. Not another word she said, or needed to say; it was enough.

One might think that Sojourner would have been swayed by the notoriety she received from the meetings and discussions she had with the famous people of her time. She met Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Ulysses S. Grant and Abraham Lincoln.
Her meeting with president Lincoln was very pleasant. He claimed that he had heard of her when he was young. He had followed her progress in working for her people and admired her very much. She told him she had no knowledge about him until he became president. He wrote in her Book of Life: "For Aunty Sojourner Truth." A. Lincoln, October 29, 1844.

Sojourner helped to train and bolster the waning morale of free slaves. She sought to change legislative policy in order to provide land and training for her people. She helped to protect the black soldiers during the civil war. They were often kidnapped and made slaves again when raiders for slave owners invaded their camps. She sometimes felt discouraged. Yet when she thought about God, she was uplifted. She was confident in his wisdom and care of her.

The last days of Sojourner's life was spent in Battle Creek, Michigan. She owned a small home there. She would often receive her visitors who eagerly sought her company. She was so interesting to listen to.

Sojourner suffered a stroke that paralyzed half her body while she was trying to nurse her grandson back to health. She also developed ulcers on both legs. Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, director of the Battle Creek Sanitarium decided that the best treatment for her problem would be a skin graft. This was almost unheard of in those days. Sojourner agreed to have the treatment. However, when Dr. Kellogg asked for donors not one person wanted to volunteer their skin. So he took grafts from his own body. The treatment was successful!

Sojourner was confident in her God. She knew she was going to die soon. She was not afraid. She realized that she had done all she could. Her life is an inspiration to all. No matter what hardships she faced she always believed in God and trusted in His wisdom. She knew that He would see her through. Her positive outlook, her undaunting resolve to do what she had for her people should inspire each person who lives to do his/her best. Work, too, for the truth, be prepared to do what has not been done before.
1. What was Sojourner's birth name?

2. Where did she live on the plantation?

3. Describe the conditions of housing for the slaves living in the cellar of the main house.

4. Name the diseases the slaves caught.

5. Why was it a frightening and humiliating experience for Belle to be sold with animals?

6. Name the owner who promised Belle freedom then denied it.
7. Why was Belle regarded as a better slave than a man?

8. What did the Wagenens teach Belle that she never had experienced before?

9. Why was choosing another name important to Belle?

10. Why had Sojourner's life affected the people of her day when she spoke and visited with them?

11. Why were Sojourner's work and thoughts different from those of Frederick Douglass?