MEDIA PACK

“Altadena’s Connection to the American Civil War”

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Note: Mr. Champo has taught United States History in the Pasadena Unified School District since 1996 to 8th graders. With a Master of Arts in Religion, he is a current participant on the prestigious Teaching American History program for teacher’s enrichment at the Huntington Library, which shows his deep interest and devotion to the history of our country. This lesson was developed for to the Places and Time, UCLA History-Geography Project Seminar, sponsored by the Auto Club of Southern California, July 2009.

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Trail's End on Little Round Top

The sons of John Brown, the Liberator, after stormy years, found peace and seclusion in the mountain wilderness above Pasadena

By DOROTHY K. HASSLER

In the mountains north of Pasadena lies a lonely grave. It is marked by a granite boulder, inscribed:

"Owen Brown, son of John Brown the Liberator. Died Jan. 8, 1880, aged 64 years."

"John Brown, the Liberator? That could be none other than John Brown, the martyr of Harper's Ferry, of the historic fights at Black Jack and Osawatomie in the Kansas Territory, fights which resulted in that State's entry into the Union as free, not slave.

But Harper's Ferry and Osawatomie are long ago and far away from the grave in these California mountains. Why was Owen Brown buried in this isolated spot?

What were his claims to fame and immortality?

True, he did not die a martyr's death as did his father, but his, too, was a life dedicated to the abolition of slavery. With his brothers, he fought by the side of John Brown in Kansas, and he was with him at Harper's Ferry. After that tragic fiasco, Owen, with a price of $25,000 on his head, led six men in a daring perilous escape across the mountains. A vivid account of this flight, which was published in the Atlantic Monthly (March, 1870), is still available for exciting reading. After weeks of travel over the rough, uncharted terrain, with little but dried corn for sustenance, enduring the mountain cold of late October, Owen Brown brought four of his men into Ohio and safety. Two of the original party made reckless sorties for food which resulted in capture and hanging.

After the Civil War, Owen lived quietly on his brother's farm in northern Ohio, working part of the time as caretaker on a large estate bordering Lake Erie. Now that the bitter slavery question was settled, he wanted nothing so much as to be allowed to live out his life in gentle, unassuming dignity. His seclusion was therefore partly of choice, but partly of necessity. Through some unknown oversight, the price set on his capture had never been removed, and despite Appo-
mattax, there undoubtedly was many an unreconstructed Southerner who would have liked to lay his hands on Owen Brown.

In 1884, Jason Brown, Owen's brother, and his sister's family, the Henry Thompsons, came to Pasadena to live. Jason was also a veteran of the bloody struggles in Kansas. He bought 80 acres of land lying against the mountains, between the Arroyo Seco and Millard Canyon. The following year, Owen Brown joined his brother.

He received a hero's welcome in the City of the Roses. The Civil War had been concluded 20 years before, but the issues were still fresh in the minds of men. John Brown's body lay a-moldering in the grave, but his soul was, indeed, marching on. Furthermore, there not only were many Pasadenaans who had been in the Union army, but a few who had been actual friends and supporters of old John Brown. Small wonder that the members of the Brown family chose this area on their trek West—they would be among friends. For men who had been hunted like animals during the formative years of their lives, this last must have been a deciding factor.

Pioneer residents of Pasadena still refer to the two as the "Brown boys," although both were past middle age when they came West. Marked by their long beards and rustic attire, they soon became familiar and respected figures in the city. Jason was the shorter in height. Owen was six feet tall, and of all John Brown's sons was said to most closely resemble his father.

They lived on their land for a few years, then sold it and homesteaded a piece of land north of their old holdings, about 3½ miles from the center of town. The mountain peak towering above their place they named for their father—John Brown's Mountain, or Brown Mountain as it is called today. Leading from the wagon trail that ended at their cabin, they started building a burro trail to the summit.

Poor in earthly possessions, theirs was a simple life. They spent their time working in the little garden adjacent to their cabin, exploring the mountains and canyons, reading their books. Surely they had earned such peace and quiet after the tumultuous years.

Visitors were always welcomed. Not only friends and neighbors, but many a tourist to Pasadena made the trip to the mountain cabin to shake the hands of the sons of John Brown, the Liberator. The family was always sought at G.A.R. celebrations. Such was the esteem in which they were held that on one occasion Mr. and Mrs. Thompson, Owen and Jason Brown were seated in a carriage and pulled through the city streets by 50 Civil War veterans, all singing the John Brown hymn at the tops of their voices. Deeply religious, quiet and retiring, the Browns modestly accepted such homage but did nothing to promote it.

Owen Brown made at least one memorable visit, himself. An early resident recalls it vividly. One evening shortly after her arrival in Pasadena, she was alone in the kitchen of her family's ranch home located high on the mesa. Suddenly the door opened, and there stood a figure she will never forget—a tall, old man, with flowing white beard, hatless and coatless, carrying a staff almost as tall as himself. To her he looked like a biblical patriarch or the Old Man of the Mountain. Her startled exclamation brought her father to the room. He introduced her to Owen Brown, who announced that he had just dropped in to get acquainted with his new neighbors. During the last days of December, 1888, the brothers made trips into Pasadena to attend a gospel temperance meeting at the Tabernacle. It was a period of winter storms, and on one of the long, wet walks back to their cabin at night, Owen contracted a chill which developed into pneumonia. He died on January 8, the last survivor of the historic raid on Harper's Ferry. His funeral two days later was held at the Tabernacle where 2,000 people paid tribute to his memory. Six of his father's old friends bore the body to its grave.

He had wanted to be buried atop Brown Mountain, but through lack of funds the trail had never been completed, so he was laid to rest on a spur of that mountain called Little Round Top. Jason planted a red cedar beside it—one which he had brought from his old home in Ohio. In the years which followed, fires swept the mountains, destroying the tree as well as the cabin in which the men had lived. Jason remained in Pasadena for five more years. He helped build the Incline Railway on Echo Mountain, and collected wild animals for Professor Thaddeus Lowe's zoo of which he was curator. Then he returned to Ohio where he died in 1904.

For many years hikers made pilgrimages to the grave of Owen Brown on the summit of Little Round Top. To commemorate the seventy-fifth birthday of John Brown, in 1900, Negroes from Pasadena and Los Angeles gathered at the site for ceremonies. There have been a number of movements among local organizations to make the spot a national monument or memorial park, but so far they have been ineffectual.

Of recent years the lonely grave in the shadow of John Brown's Mountain is all but forgotten. But one doubts that Owen Brown would hold this against posterity, for his philosophy of life, like his father's, must have been: Do everything within one's power for one's fellow man. Ask nothing in return. His dying words bear this out. He said, "It is better to be in a place and suffer wrong—than to do wrong."