

Ethel Mae Morgan: An African-American Biography
Wabaunsee County, Kansas
1898-1989



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Introduction

Ethel Morgan, a woman well-known for her participation in the Beecher Bible & Rifle Church, has given the oral history of many African-American families in the Riley and Wabaunsee County area, yet her own story has not been preserved. She spent the latter part of her life preserving the memory of other African-Americans for historians. With all of her efforts to keep the stories of the African-American families of Wabaunsee and Riley County, Kansas, alive, the memory of one important individual has been overlooked. Ethel Morgan played an important role in keeping the memory of her disappeared community alive. Like many small, once thriving townships in Kansas, Wabaunsee Township met its fate. Without the cooperation of residents such as Ethel Morgan, the storied pasts of many of these disappeared communities would be forever forgotten. Ethel played a critical role in preserving the Wabaunsee Townships' memory for future generations. Ethel Morgan was a quilter, historian, mother, and much more. This paper will illuminate her life.

Parents and Early life

Ethel's grandfather on her maternal side, Sylvester Morrow, who was born into slavery in Kentucky, escaped his master and a future of enslavement. The development of slavery was based mostly on economics. This economic system thrived by the geographic area in which slaves could be most utilized. "Geographic factors of soils, topography and climate" were the most influential reasons for the need of extra labor in large farming operations.¹ Tobacco, rice, sugar, and cotton were the typical crops slaves in the south would have been responsible for yielding.² Tobacco was the primary

1 Emerson, F.V., "Geographic Influences in American Slavery Part I," *American Geographical Society* (1911), 14.

2 Ibid, 22.

crop that brought in the most income for most slave owners in Kentucky.³ “While the stronger slaves were hoeing and cultivating, the women and children could pick the worms from the plant. Tobacco

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was therefore especially suited to slave labor.”⁴ When Sylvester was just six years old, he began a journey to find the Union army after his mother, who was also a slave, told him to run away. She explained that if he was found, he should tell them “he was going to the market to buy meat for his master.”⁵ He eventually found the army, although it is uncertain if he played a role in the Civil War because of his young age. Sylvester returned to Kentucky after the war, but he would never see his mother again. When Ethel's mother, Cora Morrow, was four years old, her father Sylvester moved to Mission Creek Township in Kansas.⁶

The Underground Railroad (q. v.) was successfully operated in Wabaunsee County during the last few years of slavery. There were two stations in the county—one on Mission creek in the southeast and one at Wabaunsee near the northwest corner—and runaway negroes who arrived at Mission creek were taken in charge by a conductor, who took them to Wabaunsee, where they were placed in charge of another conductor to be taken to the next station, etc.⁷

It is likely that Sylvester chose Mission Creek because he had been there before when he initially escaped his master in Kentucky. According to Ethel Morgan's oral history about her mother, Cora Morrow was born in Louisville, Kentucky. Ethel's grandmother, on her maternal side, made the trip to Kansas City with Cora Morrow and her three siblings after being sent for by her husband Sylvester. The family was to meet up with some people whom the grandmother believed she was supposed to follow. As the people started to lead the family to a dark place away from the city lights, the grandmother soon realized could have been a danger to the whole family. The grandmother was a trusting person, but soon took into consideration that these people could have wanted to kill them and

3 Ibid, 23.

4 Emerson, F.V., “Geographic Influences in American Slavery Part I,” *American Geographical Society* (1911), 24.

5 Haymond, Pamela, “Age Does Not Slow Down Ethel Morgan,” *The Wamego Smoke Signal* (1982).

6 Haymond, Pamela, “Age Does Not Slow Down Ethel Morgan,” *The Wamego Smoke Signal* (1982).

7 Ward, Carolyn, “Wabaunsee County,” http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/archives/1912/w/wabaunsee_county.html, (July 2002).

had been leading them to a place to do just that.⁸ In a recorded interview with Ethel, she states that her grandmother's mother, Bell(e) Long, was white. Bell(e) came to Kansas to live with Ethel's

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grandparents in her later years and was buried in Kansas.⁹

At the age of 14, Cora's mother passed away and she went to work for John Thompson. Cora lived with the Thompson family until her marriage to Grant Pinchem in 1897 at the Congregational Church in Dover, Kansas. Grant Pinchem was born in Wakarusa, Kansas about ten miles south of Topeka. Grant met Cora while working for Mr. Enlow on his ranch. A researcher would surmise that Cora remained close to the Thompson family, as Mr. Thompson gave her away at her wedding.¹⁰ The newlyweds then began their family life on the Enlow Ranch. The Pinchems had two children, Ethel and a son, Charles. Charles was born in October of 1900, and died of red measles in April of 1903. Ethel Morgan was born on June 26th, 1898 at the Enlow Ranch three miles south of Wamego. She was the first child of Cora (Morrow) and Grant Pinchem. Her father managed the cattle and horse ranch, located three miles south of the Wabaunsee Township.¹¹

There is conflicting information about Ethel Morgan's maternal grandparents, because although the children have Sylvester Morrow's surname, there is no record the grandparents were married or lived together. Because Cora (Morrow) Pinchem moved in with the Thompson family when her mother died, it is assumed Sylvester Morrow was deceased at this time. The missing information found in the documentary research is miniscule compared to the information provided by oral histories about the ancestry of the Morrow family. This is likely to be the case with many African-American families because of slavery and lack of records.

When Ethel was a small child, she remembered a strange man who visited the Enlow Ranch.

8 Morgan, Ethel, "Interview with Ethel Morgan," 1985. *Wabaunsee County Historical Museum*.

9 Morgan, Ethel, "Interview with Ethel Morgan," 1985. *Wabaunsee County Historical Museum*.

10 Ibid.

11 Haymond, Pamela, "Age Does Not Slow Down Ethel Morgan," *The Wamego Smoke Signal* (1982).

The man asked to sleep at the ranch for the night in exchange for cleaning the stables.¹² Grant Pinchem's sister did not really trust the man, but not for any reason in particular. “The man was a good

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storyteller...”¹³ The man told the family his name was Frank James. One might know Frank by his infamous brother, Jesse James. He stayed the night and went on his way without stirring any trouble. The next day, the sheriff came to the ranch and told Mr. Pinchem to be on the lookout for Frank James. Her father did not tell the sheriff that Frank James had been there, for fear of being arrested himself.¹⁴



One of the only remaining foundational structures on the property where the Enlow Ranch was located near Old KS 99 and Lines Road.
Authors photograph, March 25, 2010

There is much information to be found on Ethel Morgan's life. The Pinchem family heritage

12 Morgan, Willard, “Interview by author, Manhattan, Kansas, November 2009”.

13 Morgan, Willard, “Interview by author, Manhattan, Kansas, November 2009”.

14 Ibid.

had a great opportunity to thrive in the state of Kansas, where African-Americans were free from slavery since the state's inception in 1861. However, the family would still endure discrimination and segregation in certain aspects of their lives.

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Education

Ethel (Pinchem) and her parents lived on the Enlow Ranch until 1905. Ethel's education was very important to her parents, so she attended half of a year at a Wabaunsee school and finished the year at another school. Her parents moved off the Enlow Ranch so Ethel could receive a better education.¹⁵ Ethel speaks in a tape recorded interview from the late 1980's about an experience at Wamego High School where she was not allowed to take cooking or sewing classes. The teacher did not think white and black students should be working at tables or baking together. She was the only black student who wanted to take these classes. Although Wamego was not typically a segregated town, this example shows that racial discrimination did exist. Ethel's son, Willard, had his own troubles when he made it to high school. He recalls never feeling treated any differently than the white children until he was in high school. He was a football player at Manhattan High School when the team boarded a bus for a game and he was not permitted to get on the bus. Ethel and Willard's stories are examples of discrimination in the state of Kansas. Although Kansas was a free state from its inception, segregation and discrimination were obviously practiced by many, including the education system, during this time period.¹⁶

Family Life

During Ethel's senior year at Wamego High School, she married Willard Morgan. They were married in 1919. Ethel had been working at the Wamego hospital. Soon after their marriage they

15 Morgan, Ethel, "Interview with Ethel Morgan," *Wabaunsee County Historical Museum*, (1985).

16 Morgan, Willard, "Interview by author, Manhattan, Kansas, November 2009".

started a family and she and her husband moved onto an eighty acre lot, owned by Mrs. Gilfoyle.¹⁷ The Morgans first had six girls: Vera, Bernice, Wilma, Darlene, Gladys, and Helen. Following the girls, they had three boys: Willard, James, and Robert. Before having the three boys, the Morgan family

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moved back to the Enlow Ranch, after the owners made them a good deal to come back. All but one of their children was born in a hospital. Willard, their first boy, was born in their house. In 1934, the Great Depression was advancing and Ethel was pregnant with their first boy. Ethel knew the family could not afford a hospital bill so she tried to stay very quiet while giving birth to him, as to not wake anyone. Her husband woke up and called a doctor. By the time the doctor got there, it was too late for him to do anything for them. Ethel jokes in the 1982 article, "Age Does Not Slow Down Ethel Morgan," "The lord, I tell you, is wonderful. That was our first boy and he only cost five dollars."¹⁸ Seven of their nine children graduated from high school. Her son, Bob Morgan, went on to college to play football. After college, Bob played professional football in Toronto, Montreal, and in the NFL with the Pittsburgh Steelers.¹⁹

Home Economics

Willard recalls that every Monday, his mother would bake twelve to fourteen loaves of bread and do all of the laundry. He remembers helping with the laundry by bringing in the water and taking it back outside when it was dirty. The girls would be expected to iron everything that was washed, including socks, washcloths, dishrags, potholders, pillowcases, and sheets. Willard laughs when he recounts this story; it did not make much sense to him to iron the washcloths because they would be placed in the dishwasher. But that was just the way things were, "You didn't question your parents. You

17 Haymond, Pamela "Age Does Not Slow Down Ethel Morgan," *The Wamego Smoke Signal* (1982).

18 Haymond, Pamela "Age Does Not Slow Down Ethel Morgan," *The Wamego Smoke Signal* (1982).

19 Morgan, Ethel, "Interview with Ethel Morgan," *Wabaunsee County Historical Museum* (1985).

just did what you were told.”²⁰ Willard also remembers his mother making dresses for the girls out of flour sacks. He recalls his mother bleaching them to get the dye out and then dyeing them different colors. Ethel also made the shirts the boys wore. Their clothes were always clean and neat. If there was a hole, it was patched very neatly. The family kept hogs, milk cows, horses, and chickens on the

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farm. They sold eggs and cream to help with the family finances. Willard also remembers his parents trading gas stamps for sugar stamps, during World War II, with a family friend who worked at Fort Riley. Each year they would butcher a total of three hogs for the family to eat. Like many families of the time, the Morgan family was very self-sufficient. They worked on their own vehicles, made their own clothing, and provided most of their own food supply. There was always dessert with lunch and dinner, and meat with every meal. Willard remembers that his mother loved to cook, “She canned everything she could think of. If it was edible, she canned it.” There was even a mention in the *Topeka Capital Journal* about KMBC in Kansas City having produced a half hour program about Ethel Morgan's canning.²¹ Willard also remembers that his mother never wore slacks and she wore skirts even while working in the garden.²²

The Morgan family's experiences during the Great Depression are typical of any family during the time. With most of their nine children living in the house, there were a lot of chores to be done. Ethel stayed at home to do the housework while her husband Willard went to work. Taking care of her family was a full-time job for Ethel, and in interviews conducted during her life, she seemed to revel in these activities. She very much enjoyed quilting, which is what many in the Wabaunsee County area will remember about her.

Quilting

20 Morgan, Willard, “Interview by author, Manhattan, Kansas, November 2009”.

21 “Wabaunsee Has It's Historic Beecher Bible,” *Topeka Capital Journal*, (1980).

22 Morgan, Willard, “Interview by author, Manhattan, Kansas, November 2009”.

Ethel had a definite talent for quilting. There are many newspaper articles about Ethel Morgan's quilts. Although Ethel did not start quilting until her later years, she had been sewing and patching clothing for her family for many years. Ethel's son, Willard, emphasized how neat the patches on their clothing

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were.²³ She must have truly enjoyed sewing to have taken so much care in sewing a patch on a pair of pants. The care she took also proves that she took great pride in her family. Quilting and gardening were Ethel's creative outlets. While being creative, these hobbies were also very practical. Ethel speaks of difficulties she and her husband had while raising their nine children. She explains how times were tough but also good. Many women of Ethel's time found solace in the art of quilting, as their ancestors had done:

“[The] art of enslaved African women of generations past, who found creative outlets in their daily work and alleviated the drudgery of plantation life by lovingly tending a garden or making a colorful quilt that harked back to an African textile tradition they had left behind...Subsequent generations of free African-American women continued to grapple with oppressive social conditions and thwarted their creativity.”²⁴

Willard Morgan recalls an article that featured his mother and Governor Docking. In the picture the Governor was receiving a quilt from Ethel Morgan. A group of quilters who meet regularly at the Wabaunsee County Historical Museum can recall many vivid memories of the time they shared with Ethel. Willard remembers that in her older years, Ethel kept her quilt frame set up in the living room. She would quilt all day and if she could not sleep at night, she would quilt until she was ready to go back to sleep.²⁵

Quilting was a hobby that Ethel didn't start until she was in her mid fifties. She sold her quilts to individuals all over the country. Many of her customers bought multiple quilts from her as gifts for

23 Morgan, Willard, “Interview by author, Manhattan, Kansas, November 2009”.

24 Farrington, Lisa, *Creating Their Own Image*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4.

25 Morgan, Willard, “Interview by author, Manhattan, Kansas, November 2009”.

their friends and family. Some purchased as many as twenty quilts from Ethel. “Morgan says she never lets her quilting stand in the way of her other activities. 'It's just my hobby. If I'm working on a quilt and somebody comes by and wants to go somewhere, I just go.'”²⁶ Ethel did a lot of traveling because her family was scattered all over the country; and she did not always have time to quilt. In her

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eighties, she started having trouble with her cataracts and had to have eye surgery, first on one eye and then on the other. Sometime after, she began having shoulder problems that limited the time she could spend quilting.



Ethel Morgan, 87, quilting at her Wabaunsee home.
The Manhattan Mercury, June 9th 1985

Community

26 Dorcey, Mike, “Quilting Stitches Ethel’s Life Together,” *The Manhattan Mercury* (1985).

Ethel and her family were well known in Wabaunsee County. Many local figures approached during this research remembered her and had stories to tell. Carol Cook set me on the path to find a painting of Ethel Morgan painted by a well known local artist, Maude Mitchell. The painting, known as “Contentment” or “The Bells,” features Ethel and some of her children sitting on their doorstep. This painting proves the close personal relationship between Maude Mitchell and Ethel Morgan.

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Maude Mitchell was the daughter of early Wabaunsee County pioneers, Captain William and Mary Mitchell. The family home, located at the present day junction of Highway 99 and Highway 18, was used in the Underground Railroad.²⁷ Runaway slaves were fed and allowed to rest in the attic of the Mitchell house. A ladder was kept in the attic for the runaways to climb up and placed back in the attic so that no one would know they were there.²⁸ Maude grew up in the Wabaunsee County area, but left in order to attend college in New York. She started teaching after college in Iowa and Wisconsin. In 1915, Maude's mother passed away and she returned to Wabaunsee County to care for the Mitchell Ranch.²⁹ The family was so important to Wabaunsee County history that near the old house there is a large flint hills formation named Mt. Mitchell with a monument placed at the top. Ethel and Maude became friends after her return to Kansas when Ethel was a teenager. Maude eventually turned the attic, where the runaway slaves were kept, into her studio. Ethel recounts how this room was so dear to Maude. Maude was known mostly for her paintings of the prairies and local figures. She was also known as a musician and songwriter. Ethel worked for Maude for twelve years and the two women became good friends in that time. Ethel helped Maude with Willing Workers, an organization for ladies of the church and both women were members of the Beecher Bible & Rifle Church.

27 Wamego Historical Society. *Maude Josephine Mitchell*. Wamego, Kansas, October (1989).

28 Morgan, Ethel, “Interview with Ethel Morgan,” 1985. *Wabaunsee County Historical Museum*.

29 Wamego Historical Society. *Maude Josephine Mitchell*. Wamego, Kansas, October (1989).

Beecher Bible & Rifle Church

The most prominent of memories found of Ethel Morgan in 2009 continues to be her involvement in the Beecher Bible and Rifle Church, located in the town of Wabaunsee, Kansas. Ethel became a member of the Congregational Church in 1934. When Ethel first started attending the church, she remembered the seating being segregated; men were separated from women by a partition

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that ran through the middle of the pews. Ethel Morgan and her husband, Willard, grew to love this church. When the church was in need of repairs, Ethel helped to raise the money and Willard used his hands to make some of the repairs. Ada and Don Whitten remember meeting Ethel Morgan in 1971, when they moved to Wabaunsee. Ethel invited them to church and today the Whittens continue to play an active role in the congregation.³⁰



The First Church of Christ in Wabaunsee, also known as Beecher Bible & Rifle Church.

30 Glover, Paula, "Beecher Church Counting On Its Storied Past," *The Manhattan Mercury*, (2009).

The church loved Ethel as much as she loved it. For her eightieth birthday, the congregation held a surprise party for her. There was a large celebration in front of the church with a potluck dinner and ice cream social. Ethel told the told *The Wamego Times* in 1978 that she even received a birthday

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card from President and Mrs. Carter.³¹ For Ethel, the church was so much more than a place to worship. The church not only brought her close to God, it also brought her closer to her community. Without the church, Ethel may not have had the opportunity to form the strong bonds she had with other members of the community. In a 1980, Ethel told the Topeka Capital-Journal that church attendance varies between seven and fifteen at Sunday service.³² As of November, 2009, the average has not changed much.

Preserving the History of Others

Ethel knew many families and individuals in Riley and Wabaunsee Counties. It seems that everyone knew her and still remembers her twenty years after her death. Ethel was a member of the Beecher Bible & Rifle Church and Willing Workers at Wabaunsee. The Willing Workers was a church ladies group that organized fund-raising events, such as ice-cream socials, to help the church pay the mortgage and the preachers.³³ Her quilting also allowed her to meet new people later in life. She was very personable and remembered aspects of the people she met throughout her life in great detail. Many historians came to Ethel in their quest to preserve the history of the African-American population that once existed in Wabaunsee County. Ethel must have felt it was important to keep the stories of these families of the past alive, as she went to great lengths to make sure it was documented. There is

31 "80 Years Young," *The Wamego Times*, (1978).

32 "Wabaunsee Has It's [sic] Historic Beecher Bible," *Topeka Capital Journal*, (1980).

33 "Obituaries: Ethel Morgan," *The Wamego Times*, (1989).

at least one audio recording, and several written accounts from Ethel, about the people she knew in the area. Although historians have been most interested in Ethel's accounts of African-American families, she did a wonderful job of preserving the history of the community as a whole. Like many other once thriving townships in Kansas, Wabaunsee Township is now considered a ghost town. In the written and oral accounts given by Ethel, she tells the stories of many of the families who lived in the Wabaunsee

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Township. Ethel felt it was important to preserve the memories of African-American families as well as white families of this disappeared community. Before Ethel's death, the Wabaunsee Township lost many of its families to other towns. Many of the homes Ethel remembered from her life in Wabaunsee were moved or destroyed.³⁴ Ethel witnessed businesses come and go and eventually there were no businesses left in Wabaunsee.

Conclusion

Ethel Morgan died July 10th, 1989, at the hospital in Westmoreland, Kansas.³⁵ Based on her obituary and the many people who helped make this biography possible, It seems that everyone in Wabaunsee County knew her and many in Riley County as well. Her quilting and dedication to the Beecher Bible & Rifle Church seem to be the things she is most remembered for. Yet, it seems keeping a small church alive and quilting well are not enough to keep memories of a person so vivid, even twenty years after their death. Ethel Morgan had to be a special person in her own right.

Perhaps the following quote shows the reason she has remained vibrant in so people's memories, "When you met Ethel Morgan, she was one of those loving people that you wanted to be around. She was a 'joyful' person. She quilted my quilt. I took my mother to meet her. My mom

34 Morgan, Ethel, "Interview with Ethel Morgan," *Wabaunsee County Historical Museum* (1985).

35 Ibid.

found her to be a 'joyful' person too. Very full of inner peace.”³⁶ Carol Cook recounts the view of Ethel's funeral at the Stewart Funeral Home in Wamego, Kansas.³⁷ She said it was a moment she wished she could have taken a picture of but she just kept it tightly in her memory. Ethel's family and friends lined up at the east door in beautiful, brightly colored hats. Her lively personality continues to shine to this day in the mind and hearts of those who knew her.



Ethel and Willard Morgan's headstone at Wabaunsee Township Cemetery
Author's photograph, March 20th, 2010

36 Foster, Benetta, “Benetta Foster, Personal Communication, Manhattan, Kansas,” (2009).

37 Cook, Carol, “Interview by author, Topeka, Kansas” (2009).

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