FREEBORN, FALSELY IMPRISONED

Largely forgotten, Allen Pinks' life story would make a movie — and that's before he was shot in downtown Lawrence.

The young black man had just wet his lips from the bucket at the Lawrence public well when the shot echoed off the raw-sawed clapboards of the shops and homes around him.

Allen Pinks yelped as a rifle round burned a groove though the kinks of his hair.

Hand over his gushing wound, he fell into the mud, waiting for the second shot. It did not come. A crowd quickly gathered. Pinks was dragged into a drugstore, his blood running over the floorboards.

A block away, John Dean, one of the Kansas town's many fervent abolitionists, was running the opposite way, panting with fear of capture after his shaky attempt at assassination.

A white anti-slavery fanatic trying to kill a black man in 1860, a year before the Civil War? It just seems wrong.

But it's only part of the true yet twisted tale of Allen Pinks — a biography that rings with local echoes of the Oscar-nominated film "12 Years a Slave" but has no parallel in American history.

The movie is based on a factual story of a free black man from New York lured to Washington, where he is thrown into the slave pens and shipped to Louisiana plantations. His later book described the shocking hardships he and other African-Americans suffered at the hands of cruel white owners and overseers.

Freeborn to Pennsylvania parents, Pinks, too, was arrested — twice — in Weston by men indifferent to his legal status who wanted him on the auction block.

As the reader will discern here, Pinks was hardly a hero of the black struggle, but then not everyone of color would be in the 1850s. Just as some free blacks owned slaves themselves, and a few in these parts rode with William Clarke Quantrill and his guerrillas, facts don't always fit the too-easy narrative of bitter bondage and blood-bought freedom remembered today.

If Pinks did the devil's work, his story sheds a bit of light into the dark corners of those times, so hazardous to many African-Americans in this region, the western edge of bondage. Relatively little is known about him, but it's much more than usually recorded about antebellum black folk, most of whom could not read or write.

Pinks first appears through the fogged glass of history in 1858 working on one of the paddle wheelers that strained their way past bars and snags to the more prosperous ports of Boonville, Lexington, Independence, Leav-

BY DARRYL LEVINGS ▮ ILLUSTRATIONS BY JACOB C. ROBINSON

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$200 Reward!

Ranaway from the sub-scriber, living in Saline county, on the 4th inst., two Negro men, named Jim and Jack---each aged about 25 years.



Jim

is dish-faced: has sore eyes and bad teeth; is of a light black or brown color; speaks quick, is about 5 feet 7 inches high; had on when last seen, blue cotton pants, white shirt, white fulled coat and new custom-made boots.

Jack

had on the same kind of clothing with shoes, has a very small foot, wears perhaps a No. 6 shoe, and has heavy tacks in the heels; is about the same height and color of Jim. They are doubtless aiming for K. T.

A reward of $100 each will be given if taken outside of the State, or $50 each if taken in the State, outside of Saline county.

G. D. WILLIAMS,

Spring Garden, P. O., Pettis county, Missouri.

Harrisonville, Mo.,.June 7th, 1860.

KANSAS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Although $200 was the set bounty, slave catchers could often wring more out of the owners in Missouri. They were not shy about taking their searches right into Lawrence, an abolitionist stronghold.

"Without a word, the trader put his hand into the poor man's pocket and pulled out a tin case, five or six inches long, opened it by removing the lid, took out the papers which proved that he was entitled to his freedom, read them, tore them up and threw them into the stove. And that man was driven off South that very night with a large gang of slaves."

JOHN DOY

enworth and St. Joseph.

Cooking or serving as a waiter on the boats wasn't bad money for a black man; certainly it was a better life than the hard, sweaty labor of the deckhand.

But, it being the Missouri-Kansas border where his odyssey brought him, the job led to more trouble than it was worth.

He fell into a bad crowd, perhaps the worst crowd there was.

The dangers of Lawrence

By the late 1850s, the question of whether Kansas would be a free or slave state had been settled. Abolitionists flocked in, tilting the state to freedom over the efforts of Missourians worried about their most expensive property wandering off.

So many escape routes presented themselves to runaways dodging the patrol and the hounds. To the north was Iowa and to the east was Illinois, both free, although populated with folks somewhat more indifferent than Eastern abolitionists to the plight of blacks, who they saw largely as unfair cheap competition on the frontier labor market.

To the west, now, was Kansas Territory, where some towns were known stops on the Underground Railroad to Canada. Lawrence, for many of escapees, was a terminus. But Kansas was still an unsafe place for African-Americans, even those freedmen from northern states looking for a place to settle.

The reason was a loose gang of thugs known as "border ruffians." Some were from Missouri, but most appear to have been emigrants from northern states.

Not picky, the ruffians would capture runaway slaves and take them home to their masters for the posted $200 bounty or more. Some, however, they "sold down the river," that is sent to Alabama, Mississippi or Louisiana, where conditions for slaves generally were more harsh.

The most notorious of the ruffians, except for one, was Jake Herd (or Hurd), here described by William Connelley, a Kansas historian prominent early last century:

"He was known in every town on the border as being 'sound on the goose,' a holy terror, violent, quick and deadly with the revolver, fearless and daring, and a man who would risk his life to capture a negro, either free or runaway."

The kidnapping problem was so bad that in January 1859, the blacks of Lawrence held a meeting in the courthouse to ask the white residents for adequate protection.

But the town simply wasn't safe, so many decided to shift to Iowa. Abolitionist John Doy agreed to take two wagonloads up to Oskaloosa, "eight men. three women, and two children," the former Englishman wrote in "The Thrilling Narrative of Dr. John Doy, of Kansas or, Slavery As It Is, Inside and Out," published in 1860.

He wrote that all had their free papers except two: Wilson Hays, from Cincinnati, and Charles Smith from Brownsville, Pa., both cooks at Eldridge House. John Brown had just conducted his last slave raid into Missouri, Doy wrote, and decided not to bring his fugitives on this trip as they had no papers and would endanger Doy's cargo if caught.

It made no matter. Twelve miles out of Lawrence, the party was stopped on the road by Herd and 20 other men pointing their rifles at the wagons and denouncing Doy and his son, Charles, for stealing slaves. The African-Americans, as well as the Doys, were hurried to the Rialto ferry across from Weston and ended up at Platte City in the county jail.

"A gloomy-looking log building, two stories high and about 24 feet square, with walls two feet thick," Doy said later. "We ... found ourselves entombed in a metallic coffin. The walls, floor and ceiling were all



of boiler-plate iron, without any other opening than the door, which was also of iron, grated with a hole about 12 inches from the floor, through which our food was passed in to us."

There they met Allen Pinks.

Herd is said to have beaten Smith and Hays to make them say they were runaways and even when they wouldn't, still fetched top dollar for them down in Independence. Ephraim Nute, a Lawrence abolitionist, wrote sadly in February that "the colored people, both free and slaves, have been shipped for the New Orleans market."

In Missouri, the two Doys were charged with abducting slaves and tried in St. Joseph in March. Charles was freed, but the jury was hung on his father. A second trial ended in the elder Doy's conviction and a five-year sentence.

Before he could be sent to the state penitentiary, however, his son and a number of Kansas friends broke him out of the St. Joseph lockup and returned him to Lawrence, where they proudly posed for a photographer.

With or without papers

The story goes that Pinks' freeman papers were tattered, and he left them in Independence with "a free colored wagon-builder." Landing at St. Joseph, he collected his pay and left his boat, deciding to go to Leavenworth, walking back south on the Missouri side.

Upon reaching the Rialto ferry, he could not prove he was free so was seized as a likely runaway. He asked that someone in Weston go to Independence and fetch his papers or write the Jackson County clerk's office, where he was registered. No one did.

Perhaps no one was particularly interested in seeing him freed. On the slave block in Platte City, Pinks was worth about $1,300, with some going to the county officials for Pinks' jail expenses and some to his captors.

Doy gave Pinks a chapter in his book: "He was quite a light colored mulatto, of about twenty years of age, born at Pittsburg (sic); his grandmother being a German woman, as he informed me."

Very bright, Doy recalled, "one of the funniest fellows I ever met with, and one who contributed greatly to our amusement, and to relieve the ennui of our long imprisonment in the iron box."

His book also recalled how, "Every slave when brought in, was ordered to strip naked, and was minutely examined for marks, which with the condition of the teeth and other details, were carefully noted by the trader in his memorandum book. Many facts connected with these examinations were too disgusting to mention.

"Very early one morning a yellow man was brought in, who said he had been kidnapped from Kansas in the night. As he stood weeping, the picture of despair, with his wrists handcuffed across each other, he said to the man who brought him ... 'I told you I was free; and I am, or ought to be, as free as you are. I've got my free papers in my pocket.'

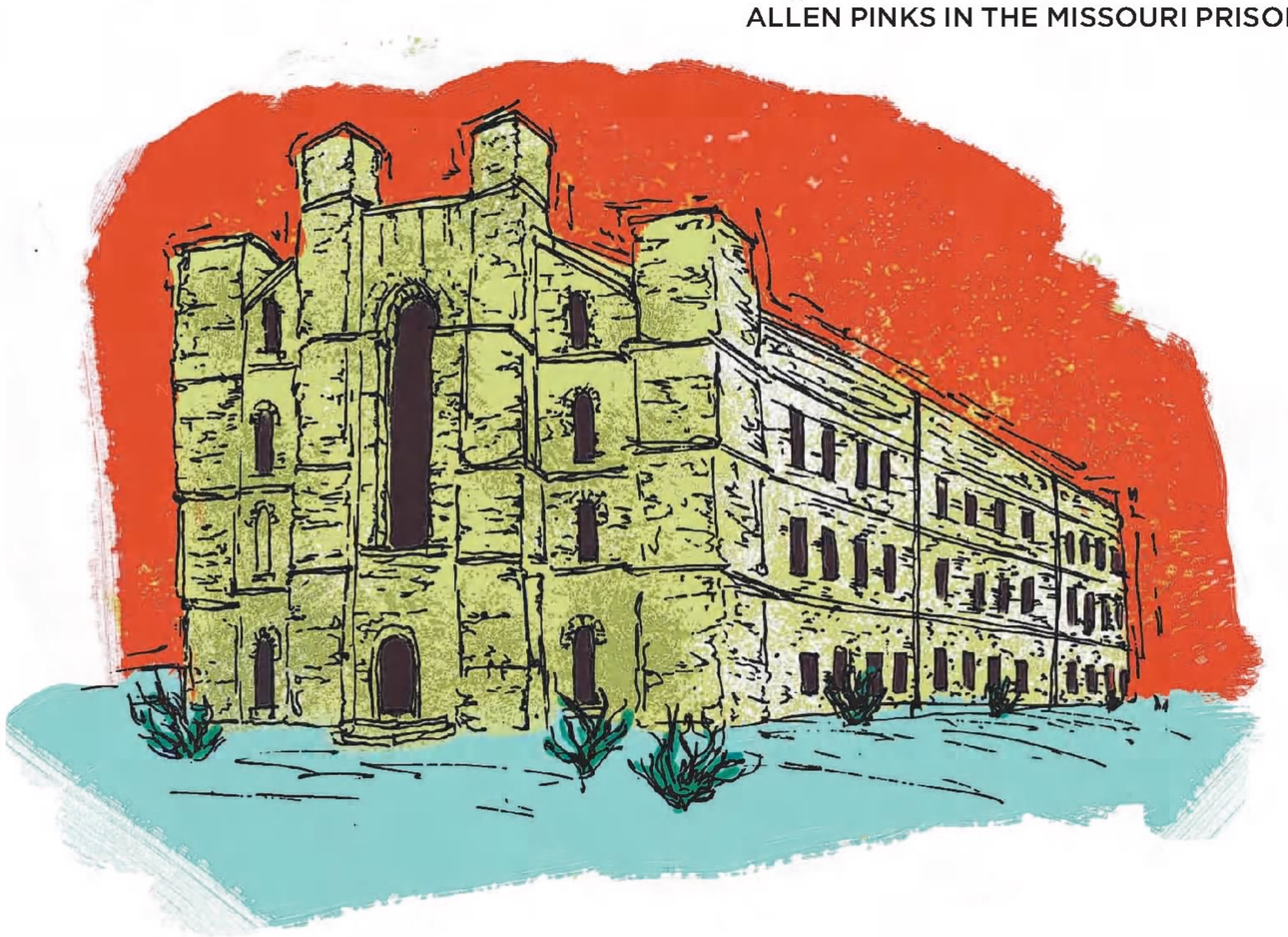
"Without a word, the trader put his hand into the poor man's pocket and pulled out a tin case, five or six inches long, opened it by removing the lid, took out the papers which proved that he was entitled to his freedom, read them, tore them up and threw them into the stove. And that man was driven off South that very night with a large gang of slaves."

As an imprisoned Kansan, Doy had every reason for his jaundiced view of Missourians. He recalled George Dorris, whom he depicted as one of several brutal slave dealers in Platte County as well as one of the local aristocracy. Dorris had his own slave pen south of town, a windowless heavy log structure with only a trapdoor for egress.

"At midnight Gen. Dorris, his son and assistant came to the jail and ordered the slaves to get ready to leave. As it was quite cold a pair of sox were drawn over the fists and wrists of the men, in place of mitten, they were then hand cuffed together in pairs and driven into the street, where they were formed in marching order behind the

"Judge Smart advised them to 'plead guilty,' which they did, and were immediately hurried off in the night to Jefferson City to escape said mob."

A LETTER TO THE MISSOURI GOVERNOR, REFERRING TO THE CONVICTION AND IMPRISONMENT OF ALLEN PINKS IN THE MISSOURI PRISON (BELOW).



wagons containing the women and the children — some of the former tied with rope when considered unruly."

"Oh, may God preserve me from ever again witnessing such a scene of suffering and anguish as always attend the departure of a slave coffle for the South!"

Twice captured

It's not clear why Pinks spent so many months in the Platte County lockup; perhaps the authorities hoped to amass a larger sum for reimbursement for his keep when he was finally sold.

Doy, who was held there more than two months himself, said Pinks had bided his time and won the trust of the jailer, who also enjoyed his humor. He was given the task of bringing wood and buckets of water to the jail. The jailer had remarked that Pinks was too lazy to run away.

This was aptly disproved one night when the prisoner did not return from the spring.

Sticking to the woods, Pinks made his way to the St. Joseph riverfront, he told Doy later. There the fugitive was hired by the captain of the Minnehaha, bound for St. Louis.

One can imagine his dismay when this vessel had business with Weston.

The scene played out again. Despite the protests of captain and crew, he was dragged away to the iron box by the triumphant jailer.

Months later, Pinks once again escaped. This time he was outside emptying his waste bucket, in which he had secreted an iron bar broken from his bed. He clobbered his shotgun-totting guard with it, ensuring the legally prescribed "well laid on" 39 stripes at the whipping post if he were captured.

But this time he did not mess with boats. He made it to the wide river and swam.

Doy wrote about Pinks' arrival at his front door early one morning in Lawrence.

"He was nearly naked, having nothing on but shirt and trousers, and those almost torn to pieces. ... He had traveled a bee line from Platte City, and having been in somewhat of a hurry, had not paid sufficient respect to the thorns and briars he met with."

Fresh free papers were sent for, but when they arrived in September of 1859, Pinks had become cynical.

"What good will they do me?" he reportedly told Doy. "Haven't we seen plenty of free papers torn up and burnt in Platte County jail?"



William Clarke Quantrill was slow to show his true identity or colors during much of his pre-Civil War period in east Kansas. As Charley Hart (without the mustache), he was sent to kill Allen Pinks, a black man living in Lawrence.

As Doy concluded: "And Pinks was right. A colored man's free papers are not worth one red cent to him in the border towns of Missouri."

Double games

In Lawrence, Pinks worked at the Johnson House and set up a barber shop.

It was about this time that Pinks got his scar at the town well in 1860.

Connelley said this was John Dean's second attempt on Pinks' life. Supposedly, the fanatical wagonmaker from Iowa hired Charley Hart and another fellow to murder the black barber. The Kansas historian surmised, though, that Hart probably intended instead to capture and sell Pinks. Why waste one perfectly sound black man?

In any event, Pinks allegedly saw them coming and escaped out a window.

A man named Harold Wheeler later said he was with Charley Hart the day Pinks was shot and, "It was evident to me that he had an interest in the affair. He pushed his way through the crowd at the drug-store (to where Pinks apparently was moved) and asked if he was dead."

About that Charley Hart. Those familiar with those troubled times will recognize the name as the Lawrence alias for William Clarke Quantrill.

This was before the war, when his ideology wasn't as clear as it would be three years later when he left Lawrence in ashes and scores of dead men in its streets.

At this point, according to the long-closed Lawrence Tribune, the Ohio-born Quantrill was "playing a dangerous double game, that of Abolitionist and Slave Liberator in Kansas, and that of an extreme Pro-Slavery man in Missouri, professing to slave-holders there that he was acting the part of a spy, detective and slave catcher in Kansas."

In December of that year — a few weeks after the election of Abraham Lincoln, when things began to warm up considerably on the border — Dean and the rest of the frontier finally figured out what side Quantrill was on.

The hot-headed Dean and three other abolitionists said they were going buffalo hunting. Instead, they slipped into Jackson County on a slave-and-horse-stealing foray at the Morgan Walker farm.

Quantrill/Hart, their guide, forewarned the Missourians and might have even blown away one of his fellow raiders when the shooting started. Only Dean escaped alive, showing up in Lawrence with a bullet in his foot.

So Dean had every reason to want Quantrill dead, but why had he earlier that year tried to kill Allen Pinks?

Pinks' enticements

The sordid answer revealed itself in January 1861, with Pinks' arrest in Jackson County for "enticing escape" of Missouri slaves.

So Pinks was a hero, trying to deliver blacks to liberty in Kansas? Hardly.

Truth is, Pinks was a Judas goat to his people. Wearing the sheepskin of the Kansas abolitionist and waving the promise of escape, the black man had been luring unsuspecting slaves away from their Missouri owners' farms, shops or homes into the waiting arms of ruffian allies.

Pinks was arrested with two white co-defendants identified as Thomas McGee and Henry McLothlin (or McLaughlin). Both were associates of Herd. McGee, in fact, was in the gang that had stopped Doy and taken those free blacks into Missouri the year before.

How many of the dismayed African-



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John Doy and his son met the humorous Allen Pinks when imprisoned with him in the iron box of the Platte County Jail. Kidnapped in Kansas by "border ruffians," Doy was convicted in St. Joseph of stealing slaves. But before the English-born doctor and friend of John Brown could be sent to the Missouri penitentiary, his abolitionist friends from Kansas sprung him. Here they pose proudly around Doy, seated center. No image of Pinks is known.

Americans found themselves "sold South"? How many others were hauled back to their unhappy owners who had paid hard cash for their return?

This was surely why Dean, the abolitionist, wanted Pinks dead.

Was Pinks in it for the money? He had told Doy he wanted to go to Mexico or Haiti. Or could he have been coerced, his life threatened by the ruffians? Likely we will never know.

Pinks and the others were sentenced in Jackson County Circuit Court to seven years in the state penitentiary at Jefferson City.

"We guess by the time they get out they will come to the conclusion to let the negro question alone," a newspaper noted with satisfaction.

Their case is well-documented in Harriet C. Frazier's 2004 history, "Runaway and Freed Missouri Slaves and Those Who Helped Them, 1763 to 1865." The author, however, appears not to have recognized the real motives of the three men.

If seven years seems harsh, remember that Florida, Alabama and South Carolina law prescribed hanging for stealing slaves.

Lynch mobs were the norm when abolitionists were caught in Missouri — one built gallows in Palmyra in case a foolish court acquitted or handed down light sentences.

In the case of Pinks and his co-defendants, Frazier refers to a letter to the governor that said the mob that had come across the river from Clay County to Independence was "threatening to tear down the jail, and hang said prisoners."

"Judge Smart advised them to 'plead guilty,' which they did, and were immediately hurried off in the night to Jefferson City to escape said mob."

Over the years before the Civil War, several dozen persons, a majority white, were imprisoned in Jefferson City for helping slaves. By Frazier's tally, several died in the foul prison, some with no explanation offered; one escaped; two black women were pardoned (there being no accommodations for them in the prison) on condition they leave and never return to the state.

Fifteen "slave stealers" were in their Jefferson City cells when the shooting began at Fort Sumter, Frazier says, nine of whom were pardoned by Lincoln, probably because they volunteered to serve in the Union Army. McGee and McLothlin were released this way.

Was such a deal offered to Pinks? Probably not. In the war's early days, the army did not take blacks. Pinks stayed behind bars with some real abolitionist/slave rescuers, one named Henry Hatcher, a white Canadian who'd been given an 18-year sentence for enticement.

The request for pardons for the rest fell on a deaf ear; the Missouri governor, though installed by pro-Union forces, found nothing wrong with slavery.

It was only in December of that year, after Lincoln had safely carried Missouri in the election, that Pinks, Hatcher and Isaac Johnson, another black slave snatcher, were pardoned and released. The next month, the Missouri General Assembly finally abolished slavery in the state.

His last cell

We know that Pinks went back to Kansas, which might not seem wise.

He disappeared from view until late April 1869, when — under the alias of George Thompson — he was arrested and charged in Leavenworth with shooting a prominent black citizen, Henry Clay Bruce, in the back at the gate to his home on Kiowa Street.

"An old musket — Harper's Ferry — cut down to resemble a horse pistol, was found in the yard," The Leavenworth Daily Commercial reported. Big bore, but just one shot.

At the time, Bruce was a struggling businessman (his liquor business burned down); later his younger brother, Blanche Bruce, would become a United States senator from Mississippi during Reconstruction and find patronage jobs in Washington for his kin. There Henry Bruce would write a book about race, class and his personal history. He declined to mention his near murder.

It was suggested Pinks was in the hire of a wealthy black man referred to as E. Dillard, said to be Bruce's brother-in-law. The Commercial called Dillard's saloon for black patrons a "hell-hole on the Levee."

Then, on the 29th of that month, according to the Commercial, Pinks was being walked, manacled to a lawman, back to the jail from the courtroom. No doubt the junction of Fifth and Delaware was filled with wagons and buggies, with women in long skirts doing their shopping.

At least three black gunmen materialized from the crowd and opened fire in broad daylight. Imagine the terror of Ed Montana, the constable attached to Pinks, who would have been jerking, grunting as the bullets smacked into him. The vigilantes were efficient enough; the lawman was unscathed.

Pinks was hustled bleeding to his cell, and three physicians were summoned. His wounds included another in the head, but the fatal one was probably the slug that went over the sixth rib.

"The poor wretch was in great pain, groaning and writhing terribly, his suffering tormenting him past expression," the paper reported. Pinks never admitted the shooting of Bruce before bleeding out.

Pinks was described as "powerfully built, with hair cut in the fighting fashion." The news stories noted that in his past, Pinks "had shared the dangers of 'Brown,' whose soul is popularly supposed to be performing a pilgrimage; he having aided that Radical saint in kidnapping slaves from their masters."

Only a Democratic paper would smirk at martyr John Brown. Nor was it any friend of African-Americans, suggesting they all be disarmed because of their ungovernable passions and incitement by Radical Republicans.

Some of the gunmen were arrested. One, a Jack Cunningham, was charged with Pinks' killing, but people wondered who had organized the assassination.

At one point, fingers might have pointed at William Matthews, a Leavenworth restaurant owner who had run a safe house for escaped slaves before the war. During it, he had been one the nation's first black men to wear the Union blue as an officer. A prominent leader of the African-American Republicans, Matthews was a Mason, as was Bruce.

Only Cunningham went to trial; the case moved to Lawrence. Upon the jury's verdict of not guilty in November, Matthews telegraphed the news, then the two quickly returned to Leavenworth.

Once they were home, the black community threw a party for Cunningham, the man who killed Allen Pinks.

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