



Jacki Lyden, *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio | 2006

Covert, Michigan: A History in Black and White

On the Midwestern frontier in the 1860s, the settlers of Covert, Michigan, lived as peers, friends and sometimes even kin. What makes the story unusual is that they were both black and white.

The graveyard is eloquent testimony to their remarkable lives. There are hardscrabble pioneers and a lumberman whose tombstone has been cast from a tree trunk. The cemetery is one of very few in the country where black and white Civil War veterans lie together.



Historian Anna-Lisa Cox visits the cemetery in Covert, where gravestones help tell the town's story of racial harmony over generations.
Kate Davidson, NPR

It's the sense of shared fate that attracted historian Anna-Lisa Cox to Covert. For more than a decade, she traced the tales of the town's pioneers. Earlier this year, she published a book on the subject.

The Roods — Mayflower descendants — came to Covert in the 1860s. So did the Pompeys, who were farmers and black soldiers.

“And they’re actually about as close in the graveyard as they were in life,” Cox says.

Covert was not one of the abolitionist colonies established in the Midwest at the time, following an anti-slavery philosophy. Nor was it a free African-American settlement protected by the Quakers. It wasn't a utopian social experiment. It was, quite simply, tough frontier, and somehow it was a place where individuals laid the foundation for a culture of trust in one another.

And it endured.



Ernestine Carter Taitt has visited family in Covert since Christmastime 1926. *Kate Davidson, NPR*

Five generations on, descendants of Covert's pioneer African-American families still recall what it took for their forebears to get there. From 1830 to 1850, more than 30,000 blacks walked out of the South in search of a new life on the Midwestern frontier.

Oral tales, passed down from one generation to the next, tell the story of what it was like to be a black person making a dangerous journey to the North.



“That story has been in the family all of my life, how the family left Snow Township,” remembers Ernestine Carter Taitt, who is 80 now. “And it was called Snow Township because the sand was so white. Snow Township, Green County, North Carolina. They were leaving the South.”

Taitt is the direct descendant of Covert’s pioneering black families, the Conners and Tylers. They were freemen in the South, but they weren’t truly free. They traveled in stealth. Fear was a constant.

Taitt says her ancestors reached the Kentucky side of the Ohio River only to be approached by three white men who offered to guide the families across under cover of darkness.

One man came back ahead of the others and warned them that the others intended to take them “back to slavery.”

The families had already lost one of their party — an aunt seized by a group of white men after she lost her free papers.

But they prayed, Taitt says, and “were led to follow that one man.”

According to the family’s oral history, the families crossed the river. As they drew closer to the opposite shore, they saw black people waiting on the Ohio side. The Conners and the Tylers knelt and kissed the ground, on free land at last.

Freedom from slavery did not mean the end of discrimination.

Throughout the Midwest — in Michigan, as well as other states — there were Black Codes: laws on the books designed to keep African Americans out.

Before entering these states, black settlers could be forced to pay exorbitant fees or prove their freedom to a judge. In Indiana, even black Civil War vets were prohibited from returning home if they did not follow the letter of the law.



Members of the Tyler family, circa 1895. The Tylers were one of Covert's three pioneering African-American families. Ernestine Carter Taitt is a Tyler descendant.
Collection of Ernestine Carter Taitt

Yet not long after the Conners arrived in Covert Township, one man made a difference.

Integrating the One-Room School

A white official named Adolphus Sherburn called at the Conners’ farm to take a school census record for the state capital in Lansing. His job was to write down the names of all



children eligible to attend school. By law, black children were not eligible to be taught with whites. But as the historian Cox notes, Aldophus Sherburn quietly made a radical choice: He entered the black children’s names without mentioning their race.

“Without saying in parenthesis after their name, ‘black,’” Cox explains. “Making it very clear to that family that those children were seen as equals.”

Fear remained – the fear that when the children did attend school with whites, someone might object. Neighbors. The law.

“One-room schoolhouses were so much about physical intimacy,” Cox says. “You had a bunch of schoolchildren of all different ages, who would have to share a slate, sit next to each other on a wooden bench, be leaning up against each other, touching each other, sharing a book, reading aloud to each other.

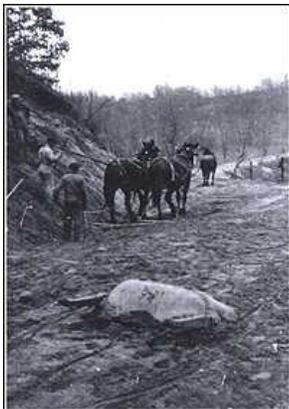


A scene from a Covert classroom, circa 1950. Covert's schools were integrated – illegally – in the 1860s and they stayed integrated. *Covert Historical Museum*

“And the white families who lived in that area and whose uncles and brothers and fathers sat on the school board knew this,” Cox says. “They knew this when this decision was being made, that a decision to integrate Covert school was a decision to live in intimacy with African Americans.”

So through omission and subterfuge, the Covert schools were integrated. In other ways, Covert was like any frontier town: young. The majority of the population was younger than 21. It was a place attractive to itinerants, like those who worked in the logging camps.

But life was incredibly hard. In other words, it was exactly the kind of frontier town that easily turned ugly toward blacks. Only in Covert, that didn’t happen.



A Covert road-building crew, circa 1900. When Dawson Pompey was elected highway overseer in 1868 – defying laws against blacks holding such an office – he might have managed an operation much like this, supervising white men. Anna Lisa-Cox says road-building methods in Covert changed little between 1868 and 1900. *Covert Historical Museum*

Elected to Serve

One spring, as the ice thawed and the roads muddied, another remarkable thing occurred. In April 1868, farmer Dawson Pompey, nearly 70 – reputed to be the son of a slave and her master – set off to make history.

For reasons only he may have known, Pompey decided to run for public office.



He wanted to be a highway overseer in the Covert Township, where roads were raw and hacked through the forest.

It was illegal for a black man to vote in Michigan, much less stand for office. But in Covert, dozens of white men elected Dawson Pompey an overseer.

“If you’d been a traveler through the Covert area in 1869, on horseback through this frontier community, you could have come across this astounding sight of a black man overseeing the hard labor of white men in his district to build roads,” Cox says.

Dawson Pompey wasn’t the only one elected in Covert Township. Through the years there were black highway overseers, black election inspectors, black township board members, a constable, a drain commissioner and in 1875, the first black justice of the peace elected in the state of Michigan.

These were still white men making the voting choices. Blacks never dominated Covert. They were, at most, 8 percent to 10 percent of the population.

A Slur and a Lesson

Friendships grew on the frontier, though it wasn’t always easy.

Sandra Lundie, who is white and the great-granddaughter of a man named Chapin Reynolds, tells a story about Reynolds’ friendship with Douglas Pompey:

“And he visited my great grandfather when he was painting his house,” Lundie says. “And he said, ‘Oh, Mr. Reynolds, your house looks so nice painting it.’ And my great grandfather said, ‘It shines like a nigger’s heel.’”

The terrible racial slur was in those days a common phrase, uttered with little thought by a gentleman, a teacher and a man who realized he had gravely insulted his black friend.

Sandra Lundie says her great grandfather never forgot it: “After that he was so embarrassed, he said he apologized many times. And I think that was a lesson and he told my mother about it, and the rest of his family.”



Sandra Lundie is the great-granddaughter of a man named Chapin Reynolds, who befriended one of Covert’s black families... and whose confessional story about his shame at uttering a racial slur has resonated through the generations.

Jacki Lyden, NPR



Braving Turbulent Times

Across the Midwest in the early 1890s, a wave of lynchings was taking place. From 1889 to 1894, as many as 700 black men and women were lynched in America. In 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that separate-but-equal treatment was constitutional, effectively clearing the way for segregation to become the law of the land and formalizing a racist, bitter status quo which haunts the United States to this day.

Yet in Covert, friendships survived. The wives of Mr. Reynolds and Mr. Pompey were still writing to each other a quarter-century later.

Sandra Lundie has kept a postcard written to her great-grandmother:

“Dear friend, sorry to hear you are so poorly,” it reads. “Hope as warm weather comes it will find you well and happy. Douglas has been very poorly all February and March so far. “I would like to see you. Your old friend, Catherine Pompey.”

By now, the pioneers of interracial friendship in Covert were passing on, but the culture of those friendships survived. Ernestine Taitt, who is Douglas Pompey’s great-granddaughter, would see it when she visited Covert during the summers as a child in the 1920s and 1930s.

Source: <https://www.npr.org/2006/12/24/6670689/covert-michigan-a-history-in-black-and-white>



A photograph of a school dance in the 1950s offers more evidence of how the people of Covert socialized together at a time when most of the rest of the nation was racially divided.
Covert Historical Museum



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A History in Black and White (Audio Transcript)

JACKI LYDEN, host: From NPR News, this is ALL THINGS CONSIDERED. I'm Jacki Lyden. Before we start, an important advisory. This piece contains a racial epithet.

And now a journey for a midwinter's night to a small town on the Midwestern frontier in the 1860s, a place that attempted a radical equality. The settlers of Covert, Michigan were both white and black, or Negro in the language of the time. Just after the Civil War, they lived as peers, as friends, and sometimes even as kin.

The tenacious winter wind that blows off the Great Lakes here whips the shoreline ice like cake frosting. Over in the cemetery, the winds batter the flagpole and erode and soften the names on the gravestones of those who lie here.

The graveyard is eloquent testimony to their remarkable lives. There are hardscrabble pioneers and a lumberman whose tombstone has been cast from a tree trunk. This cemetery is one of a very few in the country where black and white Civil War vets lie together. [Soundbite of footsteps]

Ms. ANNA-LISA COX (Historian): Here's Douglas Pompey. These are some of the pioneer African-American families here. We have Douglas and Catherine Pompey. Angela...

LYDEN (narration): It's the sense of shared fate that attracted historian Anna-Lisa Cox. For over a decade, she traced the tales of the Covert's pioneers. This year, she published a book.

LYDEN (on location): And he's born 1835 and dies...

Ms. COX: 1926.

LYDEN: 1926. So we're standing here in the Covert cemetery and it's really quite a beautiful small town cemetery. These people are buried beneath towering spruce. Black and white are buried together?

Ms. COX: Yes. Absolutely. So you see the Pompeys here. And then right there, that's the Rood family.

LYDEN: The Roods - Mayflower descendants - came to Covert in the 1860s. So did the Pompeys, who were farmers and black soldiers.

Ms. COX: And they're actually about as close in the graveyard as they were in life.



LYDEN: To explain that, for just a moment consider what Covert was not. It wasn't one of the abolitionist colonies established in the Midwest at the time following the anti-slavery philosophy. Nor was it a free African-American settlement protected by the Quakers. It wasn't a utopian social experiment. It was a tough frontier, and somehow a place where individuals laid the foundation for a culture of trust in each other. And it endured.

Five generations on, descendants of Covert's pioneer African-American families still recall what it took for their forebears to get there. Between 1830 and 1850, more than 30,000 African-Americans walked out of the South in search of a new life on the Midwestern frontier.

Oral tales, passed down from one generation to the next, tell the story of what it was like to be a black person making a perilous journey north.

Ms. ERNESTINE CARTER TAITT: That story has been in the family all of my life, how the family left Snow Township. And it was called Snow Township because the sand was so white. Snow Township, Green County, North Carolina. They were leaving the South.

LYDEN: Ernestine Carter Taitt is 80 now. She is the direct descendant of Covert's pioneering black families, the Conners and the Tylers. Although they were free men in the South, they weren't truly free. They traveled in stealth. Fear was a constant.

Ms. Taitt tells the tale in which her ancestors reached the Kentucky side of the Ohio River only to be approached by three white men who offered to guide the families across later, under cover of darkness.

As the black travelers waited for the white men to return, something happened to fill them with dread.

Ms. TAITT: One came back by himself and said, Wait for me. Not them, because they're going to take you back to slavery.

LYDEN: The black families had already lost one of their party, an aunt seized by a group of white men after she lost her free papers.

Ms. TAITT: And this story has pierced the whole family for years. We could just imagine them not knowing what to do. But they were religious people, and they prayed. And they prayed and they were led to follow that one man.

LYDEN: In the darkness, the guide ushered them onto a boat. Silence, he told them. Not a sound.



Ms. TAITT: And when they neared the other side, they could see a group of black people standing, waiting for them. When the boat landed and they got off of the boat, the people applauded, clapped their hands for joy. There was some more black people out of slavery. The Connors and the Tylers knelt down and kissed the ground. They were on free land at last.

LYDEN: But freedom from slavery did not mean the end of discrimination.

Throughout the Midwest - in Michigan, as well as other states - there were black codes, laws on the books designed to keep African-Americans out. Before settling in these states, blacks could be forced to pay exorbitant fees or prove their freedom to a judge. In Indiana, even black Civil War vets were prohibited from returning home if they did not follow the letter of the law.

And yet not long after the Connors arrived in Covert Township, they had a visitor. A white official named Adolphus Sherburn called at the Connors farm to take a school census record for the state capital in Lansing. His job was to write down the names of all children eligible to attend school. By law, black children were not eligible to be taught with whites. But, Anna-Lisa Cox notes, Adolphus Sherburn quietly made a radical choice; he entered the black children's names without mentioning their race.

Ms. COX: Without saying in parenthesis after their name, black, making it very clear to that family that those children were seen as equals.

LYDEN: As brave as that was, the Connors would have had to send the kids off to school and hope that the sheriff didn't arrive and the kids weren't arrested, right?

Ms. COX: Or worse yet, on the frontier, send their children out and hope that that night nobody burned their cabin down. Or nobody came at them with a gun or their children.

One room schoolhouses were so much about physical intimacy. You had a bunch of children of all different ages who would have to share a slate, sit next to each other on a wooden bench. They'd be leaning up against each other, touching each other, sharing a book, reading aloud to each other.

And the white families who lived in that area knew this, that a decision to integrate Covert school was a decision to live in intimacy with African-Americans.

LYDEN: So through omission and subterfuge, the Covert schools were integrated. In other ways, Covert was like any frontier town - young, the majority under 21, attractive to itinerants, like those who worked in its logging camps. Life was incredibly hard. In other words, it was exactly the kind of frontier town that easily turned on blacks. Only in Covert, that didn't happen.



One spring, as the ice thawed and the roads muddied, a remarkable thing occurred. There was an election.

We're in Packard Hall, once the town's meeting hall, now a museum. Author and historian Anna-Lisa Cox is our guide.

Ms. COX: So here we're looking at the voting records for the township and it's here that I started finding some interesting stuff. 1868.

LYDEN: In April of 1868, farmer Dawson Pompey, nearly 70, reputed to be the son of a slave and her master, set off to make history.

For reasons only he may have known, he decided to run for public office. He wanted to be a highway overseer in the Covert Township, where roads were raw and hacked through the forest.

Now, it was illegal for a black man to vote in Michigan, much less stand for office. Near Detroit, not very long before, a man just one-sixteenth black was arrested for merely attempting to vote. But in Covert, dozens of white men raised their hands in the air - or perhaps, raised their voices - to elect Dawson Pompey a highway overseer. Yet there would be no black suffrage in Michigan for two more years.

Ms. COX: This was not only just illegal, this was audacious. I mean, it's astounding. I actually remember sitting up here in Packard Hall reading this and I started crying. I couldn't believe it.

LYDEN: And the people he would have overseen would have been white, of course.

Ms. COX: Yes, they would have been. In fact, if you'd been a traveler through the Covert area in 1869 on horseback, through this frontier community, you could have come upon this astounding sight of a black man overseeing the hard labor of white men in his district to build roads.

LYDEN: And Dawson Pompey wasn't the only one elected in Covert Township. Through the years, there were black highway overseers, black election inspectors, black township board members, a constable, a drain commissioner and in 1875, the first black justice of the peace elected in the state of Michigan.

But blacks never dominated Covert. They were, at most, eight percent to 10 percent of the population.

Perhaps it was the rural passage of the seasons, the stark winds and losses of rural life, but friendships grew on the frontier, though it wasn't always easy.



We spoke with Sandra Lundie, who is white and the great-granddaughter of a man named Chapin Reynolds. There's a story in her family about Reynolds's friendship with Douglas Pompey, one of the black Pompey family.

Ms. SANDRA LUNDIE (Resident): Of course it was in the horse and buggy days, and the Pompeys would come and visit.

LYDEN: Douglas Pompey happened by the Reynolds home one day. This story occurs in about 1890.

Ms. LUNDIE: And he visited my great grandfather when he was painting his house. And he said, Oh, Mr. Reynolds, your house looks so nice. And my great grandfather said, It shines like a nigger's heel.

LYDEN: It shines like a nigger's heel. A terrible racial slur, but we repeat it here because in those days it was a common phrase, uttered without thinking by a gentleman, a teacher, who realized he had gravely insulted his black friend. And never forgot it.

Ms. LUNDIE: After that he was so embarrassed, he said - he apologized many times. And I think that was a lesson and he told my mother about it, and the rest of his family.

LYDEN: Does it say something to you about the warmth that existed between these families?

Ms. LUNDIE: Yes. I think that, you know, they accepted all of their neighbors.

LYDEN: Across the color - what we would sometimes be referring to back then as the color barrier.

Ms. LUNDIE: Yes. But there wasn't a barrier then. I don't think they really thought of it as two different races. They were friends and neighbors. And I really believe that.

LYDEN: By contrast, across the Midwest at the very same time, the early 1890s, a wave of lynchings and huntings of African-Americans was taking place. Between 1889 and 1894, as many as 700 black men and women were lynched in America. In 1896, the Supreme Court ruled in Plessy v. Ferguson that separate but equal was constitutional, clearing the way for segregation to become the law of the land and formalizing a racist, bitter status quo which haunts the U.S. to this day. Back in Covert, though, the friendship between the families survived. The wives of Mr. Reynolds and Mr. Pompey were still writing to each other a quarter-century later.

Sandra Lundie pulls out a postcard written to her great-grandmother.



Ms. LUNDIE: “Dear friend, sorry to hear you are so poorly. Hope as warm weather comes it will find you well and happy. Douglas has been very poorly all February and March so far.”

LYDEN: By now, the pioneers of interracial friendship in Covert were passing on.

Ms. LUNDIE: “I would like to see you. Your old friend, Catherine Pompey.”

LYDEN: But the culture of those friendships survived. Ernestine Taitt, who is Douglas Pompey's great-granddaughter, would see it when she visited Covert during the summers as a child in the 1920s and 1930s.

Ms. TAITT: My mother and my aunt would always say, we have to go see Liza and Jane. They were white girls. They were my mother's playmates. As little girls, they walked piece way home with each other. That meant when you got a piece of the way home, the other would turn and go back.

LYDEN: Autographed books from Covert's school attest to the warm exchanges between black and white students. Class pictures of students on down through the decades show an integrated population.

The school superintendent of Covert today is a direct descendant of both white and black pioneer families. Her father was school superintendent before her.

Next year, Covert High School is hoping to teach Anna-Lisa Cox's book, *A Stronger Kinship*, to make sure everyone knows the story of Covert's distinctive past.

Ms. COX: What I believe Covert shows is that it is a choice. Because if Covert could occur where people did treat each other as equals and as friends through the decisions that they made, the sorrow of Covert is that it proves that communities that did not act that way were that way because of people's choices.

LYDEN: But in Covert, a white European immigrant chose to dig ditches for a black highway overseer. An African-American man chose to trust the community enough to send his children to school. A white man chose to apologize to his black neighbor.

Without question, Covert is proud of its diversity today. It's still a small town, about 3,000, with a new wave of Hispanic immigration from Chicago. But many in town were unaware of just how deeply rooted the tradition of tolerance was.

For some descendants, though, it's precious. Ernestine Taitt lost a son this year.



Ms. TAITT: The funeral was not your ordinary funeral. It was not religious at all. It was an African funeral. Poured libations for the elders.

LYDEN: I see.

Ms. TAITT: Called elders' names out.

LYDEN: Like Dawson Pompey?

Ms. TAITT: Yes. I called his name. We all called the different Pompeys and the different Tylers and the different Connors's names. So I was very proud.

LYDEN: And even though Ms. Taitt lives in Chicago, she buried her son in Covert. Ernestine Carter Taitt can tell you exactly how many miles it is from the front door of her bungalow on Chicago's South Side to Covert - 107 miles.

The morning after her son's funeral service, a procession wound its way up along the southern shore of Lake Michigan and stopped at the Covert cemetery.

Ernestine Taitt could see family members waiting on that sacred ground - a reminder, perhaps, of their flight from the South and their finding, in the deep woods of the frontier, a home.

Anna-Lisa Cox's book is called A Stronger Kinship: One Town's Extraordinary Story of Hope and Faith. Our piece on Covert was produced by Kate Davidson and recorded by Argin Hutchins. For more about the story and to see pictures of Covert, Michigan, then and now, please go to our Web site, NPR.org. Copyright © 2006 NPR. All rights reserved.