

# Best of WAGON TRACKS

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## **HIRAM YOUNG: BLACK ENTREPRENEUR ON THE SANTA FE TRAIL**

**by William P. O'Brien**

If one word describes the American West and its history, that word is diversity. It applies not only to its environment, but its people as well. Hiram Young, a free Afro-American wagon manufacturer involved in the Santa Fe trade, resided and worked in the region of the Missouri-Kansas border from 1850-1881. His life and career testify to the rich and vital ethnic diversity that made the American West a place of particularly new and exciting possibilities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Hiram Young's transition from slave to wealthy, free entrepreneur began in Tennessee about 1812; the exact date of his birth is unknown. He moved to Missouri as a slave and "purchased his freedom from George Young of Greene County, Missouri, in 1847." It was said that he earned his freedom and that of his wife Matilda by whittling and selling ox yokes.

Sometime between 1847 and 1850 Young and his wife moved to the Missouri border town of Liberty, seven miles north of the Trail outfitting center of Independence. He moved to Independence in 1850, plying the trade of carpenter. It proved to be a smart move. Independence, county seat of Jackson County, was the economic center of the Santa Fe trade on the western Missouri border. The 1,500 or so citizens of the town also catered to those emigrants traveling to Oregon and California.

Due to the lobbying efforts of attorney and geopolitician William Gilpin, Independence was designated a port of entry for the Santa Fe trade in the late 1840s. Interests in the town also controlled the first regular federal mail contracts to the far West, beginning with Waldo, Hall and Co. in 1850. In 1849 a corporation of citizens had established a mule-drawn railroad to one of the two river landings that served the town. The wagon manufacturing and transportation-related industries boomed in Independence and the surrounding area; eleven wagon and carriage makers were located in Jackson County in 1850.<sup>1</sup>

Little other than legend can be found regarding Young's life prior to his move to Independence in 1850. It was said that he purchased his wife's freedom before he purchased his own. Under the law of the day, any children born to the couple took the status of the mother. This manipulation of the legal system was not without precedent: slave Frank McWhorter of Pulaski County, Kentucky, purchased the freedom of his wife Lucy before securing his own for precisely that reason in 1817. Young may have used the existing legal framework to insure the free status of any children born to him and Matilda. The Youngs' entry in the 1850 census listed a six-month-old female child named Amanda. Matilda Young's status as a free woman might also have enabled her to assist her slave husband in his business dealings, although there is no evidence that this actually occurred.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1850 census Young was listed as a man with a specific trade; he was not listed as mulatto or Black. No listing of personal wealth was noted. By 1851, according to his own testimony, he had set himself up in the "manufactory of yokes and wagons—principally freight wagons for hauling govt freight across the plains." He identified his principal customers as government freight contractors.

Incredible financial success came to his business. By 1860 he was turning out thousands of ox yokes and between 800 and 900 wagons a year. He employed between 50 and 60 men at his shop on his 480-acre farm six miles east of Independence in the Little Blue Valley. In his shop in Independence Young employed approximately 20 men and maintained a substantial payroll. He owned a four-horsepower engine; few other businesses in Independence boasted such technology. Seven forges operated in the shop. Young stockpiled thousands of board feet of lumber at his wagon factory, along with 200 tons of iron, 5,000 pounds of charcoal, and 3,000 pounds of coal. The 1860 census officials noted 300 completed wagons and 6,000 yokes, the wagons being valued at \$48,000 and the yokes at \$13,500.

As a Black entrepreneur, Young proudly identified his products; he branded his wagons with "Hiram Young and Company" and added the initials of the purchaser. They were readily identifiable and generally known as "Hiram Young" wagons. Built for the Santa Fe trade, they were capable of hauling 6,000 pounds

and were built for oxen drayage with generally six teams of yoked oxen to a wagon. Wagon tongues were made only for oxen. The tire tread was about 2½ inches wide. Each wagon was fitted with provision boxes.<sup>3</sup>

Young's wagon factory was one of the largest industries in Jackson County in 1860. It was by far the largest such concern in Independence. His capital investment in the business was listed in the 1860 census as between \$30,000 and \$35,000. In addition, Young owned \$36,000 worth of real property, \$20,000 of person property, and three slaves of his own. Both white and Black men worked for Young, but the exact numbers and ratio are unknown. He boarded Irish immigrants in his home and employed them in his wagon shop. He contracted for additional slave labor from surrounding slave owners and had business dealings with some of the larger slave speculators in Jackson County. Hiram Young, free Afro-American businessman, was one of the most successful entrepreneurs in Independence in the decade prior to the Civil War.<sup>4</sup>

Young was one of the wealthiest men in Jackson County in 1860. According to James W. Gilbert's calculations, in his 1973 study of free Blacks in Missouri, Young was 56 times more wealthy than the average citizen of the county. Young described himself in a later court case as "a colored man of means." He advertised in the local papers, noting in bold type his trade as a "Manufacturer of Wagons, Ox Yokes and Bows." According to at least one of his advertisements, Young also supplied emigrants with needed items "at the shortest notice." He was well known and respected by those familiar with freighting in the West.<sup>5</sup>

Henry Inman made reference to Young in his 1897 reminiscences, commenting on his success and noted that "One of the largest manufacturers and most enterprising young men in Independence at that time was Hiram Young, a coloured man." Inman noted that, in addition to hundreds of wagons, Young made about 50,000 ox yokes a year and virtually monopolized that particular commodity. According to Inman, forward yokes sold for \$1.25 and wheel yokes for \$2.25 in the 1850s. James Thomas, a free Afro-American businessman of St. Louis, noted in his autobiography that Young employed both Black and white men and that "many would have like to have had a finger in his business, but all such he kept off from."<sup>6</sup>

Young might have been a unique curiosity had he been alone in his success in Jackson County, but he was not. He was more successful than most people in Jackson County in 1860, Black or white, but 15% of the 70 free Afro-Americans in the county had \$1,000 or more in that year. Although these figures do not begin to compare with Young's fabulous wealth, they show that the region was one in which free Blacks stood some chance of economic success. At present nothing more is known of this Afro-American community in Jackson County, its occupations or status in general.<sup>7</sup>

Somehow Young continued to prosper during the years of border warfare between Missouri and Kansas. Unable to read or write himself, he depended on William McCoy, a local politician and businessman, to act as his business agent. McCoy, originally from Chillicothe, Ohio, had migrated with his brothers to Independence in 1839. Upon the town's incorporation as a municipality separate from the county court in 1849, McCoy was its first mayor.<sup>8</sup>

Independence and Jackson County, originally settled by Scotch-Irish pioneers from Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia, comprised a hotbed of secessionist sentiment. In 1861, fearing for his life, Young fled with his family to Fort Leavenworth, where he continued his business. In 1868 he returned to Independence. The war had disrupted the economy and the establishment of rail service signaled the end of Trail commerce. Still, some wagon and yoke business was available.

Young found his farm and business sacked as a result of the war. Undaunted, he opened a planing mill at his old place of business. By 1880 Young had capitalized his new business at \$10,800. He had eight employees working an average of ten hours a day. He paid skilled laborers \$2.00 an hour and unskilled workers \$1.00. His business had an annual payroll of \$60,000. His shop contained six gangs of saws, five circular saws, one handsaw, a boiler, and a 12-horsepower engine. The shop also contained thousands of board feet of lumber. Census officials listed the total value of the business at \$14,000, and the total product value at \$12,000. Young did not maintain logging gangs, but he obtained the trees used in his lumber business locally.<sup>9</sup>

In 1879 Young began proceedings against the government of the United States for damages to his property as a result of the war in the amount of \$19,300. Later the claim was increased to \$22,100 and

included 40 head of beef cattle, valued at \$2,800, 37 wagons valued at \$9,250, and 7,000 bushels of corn valued at \$10,050. Those items were allegedly taken by U.S. troops stationed in the area during 1862 and 1863. Young died intestate in 1882, leaving an estate plagued by debt. The administrator of his estate, an ambitious attorney, Charles S. Crysler from Auburn, New York, worked the case with the legal firm of George A. and William B. King of Washington, D.C., for ten years, filing claims and supporting congressional bills for the relief of Young's heirs. In 1894 Crysler failed to post bond and the Independence public administrator James Seahorn took the case. Seahorn saw the petition through various committees and took additional testimony until 1907 when the Court of Claims found no merit in the case.<sup>10</sup>

Hiram Young was representative of the diversity of the American westward movement. He struggled out from under slavery, traveled west, and achieved financial security and human dignity. He took additional steps, proving for the education of his daughter in the liberal environments such as at Oberlin College. He achieved a belated middle-class status from the Independence community; upon his death he was buried in the white section of the local cemetery. He was accorded a sort of legendary status upon the renaming of the local Black school (originally named for Frederick Douglass) in his honor. As a personal testimony of the realization of western middle-class status, Young's daughter, Amanda Jane Young Brown, served as principal of Young School for a brief period.<sup>11</sup>

Through canny observation and raw courage, free Afro-Americans like Young availed themselves of their portion of the western American dream, rescuing in their individual ways what they could from the American nightmare of slavery. Their story and the stories of other ethnic groups confirms that rich and important diversity which makes up the real history of the American West, including the Santa Fe Trail. Only when the rightful place of those groups is acknowledged will we have a more accurate vision of the past of this important region and its true significance in the history and development of the United States.

#### NOTES

1. *Estate of Hiram Young, Deceased vs. The United States* (No. 7320 Cong.), National Archives, hereafter cited as *Young vs. U.S.*; Affidavit of Hiram Young, 1881, hereafter AHY 1881; *Population of the United States in 1850: Seventh Census* (Abstracted by Hattie E. Poppino, 1964), 140, hereafter *Seventh Census*; *Population of the United States in 1850: Seventh Census—Products of Industry, Jackson County, Missouri*, 95-101; Thomas L. Karnes, *William Gilpin: Western Nationalist* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970), 212-214; John D. Unruh, Jr., *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigration and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1860* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 80; Pearl Wilcox, *Jackson County Pioneers* (by the author, 1975), 279; Louise Barry, *The Beginning of the West: Annals of the Kansas Gateway to the American West, 1540-1854* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1972), 949; William Gilpin to Robert Walker, Sec. of the Treasury, Record Group 59, National Archives.
2. Wilcox, 177; Juliet E. K. Walker, *Free Frank: A Black Pioneer on the Antebellum Frontier* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 42; *Seventh Census*, 140.
3. *Young vs. U.S.*; Record Book Y, 106, Jackson County Recorder's Office; Josiah Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies*, ed. by Milo Milton Quaife (2d ed.; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), 22-23; William Barclay Napton, *Over the Santa Fe Trail in 1857* (1905; reprint, Santa Fe: Stagecoach Press, 1964), 12.
4. *Ibid.*; AHY 1881; *Population of the United States in 1860: Eighth Census* (Abstracted by Hattie E. Poppino, 1964), 76, 273; *Population of the United States in 1860: Eighth Census—Products of Industry, Jackson County Missouri: Independence Missouri*, 1; James W. Gilbert, "The Free Negro in Missouri, 1820-1861," (Master's thesis, University of Missouri at Kansas City, 1973), 89; Record Book Y, 106, 561, 567; Record Book X, 195, 401; Record Book W, 385; Record Book V, 103, 438, Jackson County Recorder's Office; *Young vs. U.S.*
5. Gilbert, 89; AHY 1881; Wilcox, 177-178.
6. Henry Inman, *The Old Santa Fe Trail* (1897; reprint, New York: Time-Life Books, 1983), 144; Loren Schweninger, ed., *From Tennessee Slave to Saint Louis Entrepreneur: The Autobiography of James Thomas* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984), 99.

7. John C. McCoy, "Early History of Sam'l C. Owens and James Aull," McCoy Collection, Jackson County Historical Society Archives, Independence, Missouri; *History of Jackson County, Missouri* (1881; reprint, Cape Girardeau, Missouri: Ramfere Press, 1966), 646; *Daily Evening Gazette*, n.p., April 27, 1861.
8. Wilcox, 165, 276.
9. AHY 1881; William P. O'Brien, "Hiram Young: The Free Black in Antebellum and Reconstruction Missouri, 1850-1880," Jackson County Historical Society Archives, Independence, Missouri; *Population of the United States in 1870: Ninth Census—Products of Industry, Jackson County, Missouri*; *Population of the United States in 1880: Tenth Census—Products of Industry, Jackson County, Missouri*.
10. *Young vs. U.S.*; *History of Jackson County, Missouri*, 871.
11. O'Brien, 13-17; Wilcox, 420.