

The Doswells of Blackstone

A few years before the Civil War three Doswells came to Nottoway County, two brothers, Freeman and Archer, and a sister. Both men were skilled carpenters, masons and blacksmiths, but rather than work for someone else they bought 350 acres on Rt 604 near St. Marks and began to build.

Morgan Doswell, 71, a grandson of Freeman, who built his retirement home overlooking the land where the Doswells planted their roots, said with pride that “no Doswells were ever slaves”

The family hasn't been able to trace their roots beyond Freeman, but when you stand under the giant oak that dominates the land it doesn't seem to matter. At best Morgan could only say that “Pa” Freeman's mother was an Indian and that the family lived near Meherrin.

Freeman Doswell II, 72, Morgan's brother, pulled at the iron hook bedded deep in the side of the old tree like a harpoon, testing its strength. Nearby was a large hole left from the ideo house. Over the years Pa Freeman's children have tried unsuccessfully to fill the hole up with junk. But a free man left large tracks, they found out.

The third generation of Doswells to work this land, Freeman retired as custodian from the Nottoway Public Schools and built his own house nearby. Building a house or a church was nothing for a Doswell, nor was working long hard hours in the field all day. He brought out the “cradle” he used in his father's field to cut wheat and proudly showed the scar on his hand he got while building the restaurant for his uncle in town.

The Doswells still talk about Pa Freeman and their grandmother, Mary, who they call Big Mamma, as if they were still standing under their shade. Big Mamma lifted until 1924 and “when she said do something she meant it!” Freeman said with a laugh, which indicated he could still feel what happened if you didn't.

Although Pa Freeman had twelve children, only two sons stayed in Nottoway. One son named Cosby went to Blackstone; another named William (called W.C.) stayed on his father's land, splitting the family tree into two branches—for each raised eight and 15 children respectively.

Two other sons, Andrew and Marquist, opened a restaurant in Blackstone near Epes Supply Co., but they soon moved to New York and started families there.

Cosby began making tobacco barrels for three warehouses in Blackstone about 1898, hiring as many as 12 men and traveling as far as Hopewell. Then he built Doswell's Restaurant and pool parlor on West Broad Street, which later became Brown's Café. (Today Franklin Yancey is building there.) Cosby could always feel the strong hands of his father pushing him and the deep words guiding him: Don't depend on another man for what you can do yourself.

So Cosby built houses, relying on the carpenter's skills he learned from his father, and bought property, relying on the strictness he learned from his mother to collect the rent. (rest of story is lost. Sorry)



Raised Eight, Built Fifteen

Standing in front of the house on Center Street where seven of her father's eight children were born, Mrs. Olivia Doswell Williams still owns many of the 15 houses her father Cosby Doswell built, making him one of Blackstone's largest property owners.



Still Standing Strong

The old house on Route 604 where 15 of William Doswell's children were born is full of memories. Morgan (left) and Freeman, grandchildren of Freeman (Pa) Doswell have become the caretakers of the family's history for fourth generation Doswells, who return from the cities on holidays.



"THE CRADLE"



Freeman Doswell, a free man