

Over Home: Rural African American Heritage at Lyles Station Consolidated School Museum

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In the late 19th century, over twenty African American farming communities existed in the state of Indiana. They were populated by formerly enslaved people and free persons of color who, post-Civil War, were looking to establish a sense of identity and place in a nation that offered both opportunity and hostility. These enclaves fostered the ideals of collective progress and rightful independence amongst inhabitants. They also provided safe havens from a world that engaged in constantly evolving tactics to subdue and oppress any effort made by these refugees of the state to reclaim their humanity. These communities operated in an incubatory manner, which contributed to the building of a cooperative, self-sustaining way of living.

Today, only one of these communities remains: Lyles Station, located in Patoka township, Gibson county, in Southwestern Indiana. With a settlement history that extends back to 1814, this location is emblematic of the enduring tradition of African American farming practice and culture (Figure 1). The community, as it is currently known, began with the donation of 6,000 acres of land by the wealthy African American farmer, Joshua Lyles. This allotment was offered as an invitation to the Southern rail line's installation of track through the community. The presence of the railroad offered many benefits, including expanded commercial enterprise and increased mobility. During this golden period, which ranged from the mid-1870s to the early 20th century, Lyles Station flourished.



Figure 1: Fields on the way to Black Bridge, Lyles Station, Indiana. 7/30/2018 (Sacha Jackson).

The 20th century heralded discouraging changes for Lyles Station and its denizens. Repeated catastrophic flooding and the allure of fruitful external opportunities had a deleterious effect. In the ensuing years, a gradual exodus took place, with the younger generations relocating to different locales across the nation. Yet, there were still those who chose to stay and work the land. These two paths never truly diverged, as those who left returned with the rhythms of the seasons to renew themselves in the midst of their people and their place.

There is now little left of the Lyles Station of the booming rail days. Hidden amongst the verdant scenery are crumbling foundations and empty spaces that once hummed with industry. At the nexus of this unincorporated township stands the last two sentinels of the house that Joshua Lyles built. On the corner of the road, noted as North 500 West, stands the Wayman AME Chapel (Figure 2). Its worn, white slats have seen better days and more people. It sits diagonally from a massive, looming silo, the noise of which reverberates through the lightly populated countryside. There is a spectral quality to this house of worship, something that hints at the ephemeral nature of both it and its viewer.

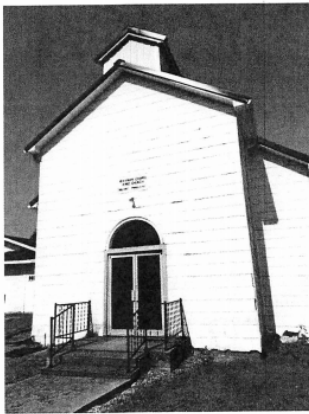


Figure 2: Face of Wayman Chapel A.M.E. Church, Lyles Station, Ind. 6/17/2018 (Sacha Jackson).

Adjacent to this quiet timekeeper is a vibrant two-story wood and brick building that keeps watch over ranch houses and patiently growing crops from its hillside perch (Figure 3). The Lyles Station Consolidated School and Museum is a beacon. Built between 1919 and 1922, this edifice operated as a school for the children of Lyles Station, with education beginning at kindergarten and extending to the 8th grade. Its doors closed in 1958 due to a dwindling population and the implementation of integrated schools. It lay fallow for several decades until, in 1997, a group of community descendants purchased the property. The building was in a state of near collapse when it was acquired. The purchasing collective, what is now known as the Lyles Station Historic Preservation Corporation, was intent on saving the structure and turning it into a place where the community's history would live on. Through grassroots fundraising and the financial intercession of Representative Julia Carson of Indiana's Seventh district, restoration was achieved in 2001 at a cost in excess of \$1,000,000.

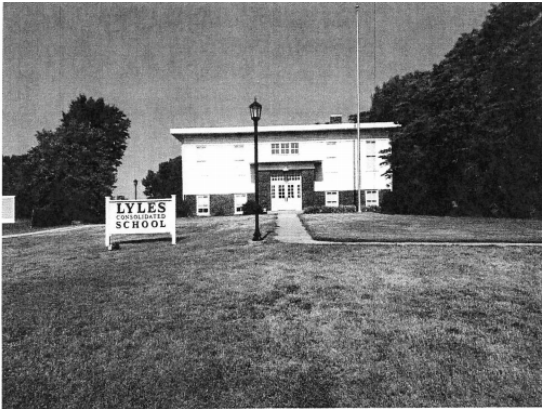


Figure 3: Lyles Station Consolidated School and Museum, Lyles Station, Ind. 6/17/2018 (Sacha Jackson).

In the mid-2010s, the site garnered the attention of the Smithsonian Institution. As a product of the Smithsonian's intensive involvement in exploration and cataloguing of their legacy, Lyles Station was included in the Power of Place Exhibition in the National Museum of African American Heritage and Culture (Interview with Stanley Madison, July 17, 2018). There is a powerful draw to this heritage site and to the stories of the African American farmers who have laid claim to this area (Figure 4). When considering the site and the surrounding community, it behooves the observer to recognize that Lyles Station is not a static place frozen in time, but a living entity that still survives under the communal concepts on which it was founded. The goal of this study is to illustrate the significance of the Lyles Station Consolidated School and Museum, as well as the township for which it is named, through the eyes of historic community members and descendants. Lyles Station is more than a heritage site, it is embodiment of the concepts of pride, farming, family and home that are the bedrock of this historic African American community.



Figure 4: Lyles at Harvest, Lyles Station, Ind. 6/17/2018 (Lyles Station Consolidated School and Museum).

The circumstances under which this locale was founded is colored by post-Civil War attitudes and practices. For African Americans, the reconstruction period yielded much less societal reconciliation than was hoped. Existing in a postcolonial limbo, the inhabitants of Lyles Station were forced to initiate a new way of life filled with insecurity and risk. Ghandi (2019) notes that the initial experience of the release of the yoke of colonial oppression is one of rebirth

and a renewed sense of personhood. The liberated attempt to fully embrace their new independence, one filled with a creative sense of personal redefinition (Ghandi 2019). Yet, there is a danger lurking in the victorious celebration of this newfound freedom, manifesting in the sublimated realms of unprocessed trauma that ties the formerly oppressed to the oppressor (Ghandi 2019). There is need for a sort of catharsis, a processing of these wounds that permits the persons of "other" status to reconcile a past that lacks continuity, which, in turn, gives the injured a chance to move forward with full comprehension of the condition in which they find themselves (Ghandi 2019). Homi Bhabha (as cited in Ghandi 2019) remarks that the act of remembering is dynamic -- fractured history coalesces for comprehension of the now. To discuss the nature of distinction between cultures, revision must be made to the relational state into which nascent narratives can be born (Bhabha 1994).

As a people without a land, the ancestral settlers of Lyles Station arrived with the intent of building one. From chattel slavery and forced dislocation, they established themselves in a new territory and forged a new identity. For over one hundred years, descendants have noted their bond to this location with none living able to remember a time before the "home place" existed. As a "rootless" people, this association with origin has lent itself to a form of quasi indigeneity for the descendants of Lyles Station. Harrison (2013) states that indigenous status is to be seen under a contextual perception. While the community of Lyles Station acknowledges that they are not the first inhabitants of the land, its status as a place of genesis resides deep in the subconscious of each descendant.

Planted as deep as the encompassing crops, the roots of the farming culture of Lyles Station snake back towards Africa. Bande (2007) notes the intense linkage between agriculture and the current and diaspora offspring of the mother continent. This long and proud tradition is not viewed the same with American eyes. Slavery and sharecropping are the most immediate reference points when addressing agriculture as it relates to African Americans. However, this consideration of forced labor as being the only African American contribution made to the growth and advancement of American farming and its practices is a great disservice (Bande 2013). This perception discounts the agricultural advancements made by not only noted innovators, such as George Washington Carver, but also those anonymous individuals who translated generational knowledge into yields for themselves and the farming industry.

This dearth of recognition concerning farming is symptomatic of a lack of African American representation within American consciousness. It is, of course, impossible to separate the American experience from African American history, as it underlines the majority view from the subaltern perspective (Ruffins 1992). It is with a calculated intent that the American master narrative proceeds, favoring a biased mythology in celebration of the achievements of one subset of the population at the price of another's violent suppression. To combat this myopic view, the African American cultural contribution must be recognized. This acknowledgement will assist in the reconfiguration of the American identity and redress the imbalance that beleaguers the relationship between majority culture and minority truths (Ruffin 2007). By complicating the narrative, the pervasive presence of European American cultural domination is thinned by the heavy interwoven undercurrent of African American influence (Fishkin 1995).

As location and identity are intimately linked, it is necessary to consider where Lyles Station is, or more accurately, is not. With fewer than 700 people living in the immediate community, there is a sense of removal from the outside world. The pace is meandering, a crawl that responds only to the needs of nature. Ching and Creed (1997) remind us that in these forgotten places exclusion occurs. Rural America is simultaneously romanticized and overlooked in a society that writes love songs to a fading way of life. In a country that has its beginnings linked to the concept of being a man apart in wide open spaces, rurality has become a monolith, a historical remnant out of place in a modern world (Ching and Creed 1997). This enforced ossification functions as a quarantine, leaving residents in a marginalized space. This leads to a retaliatory empowerment of rural peoples, who fight to retain their relevance.

The Lyles Station Consolidated School and Museum lies at the intersection of the racial, locational and historical factors that contributed to the founding and decline of this community. As a heritage site, it presents a narrative that deviates from canon to provide a link to a cultural inheritance that decries the erasure of its marginalized subjects and demands the recognition of their place collective American experience (Johnson 2015).

Methods

This study was conducted in the summer of 2018. Primary data collection was executed via interviews in two locations: Lyles Station, Indiana and Edwardsville, Illinois. The participants were three African American males, who were historic community members or descendants thereof, aged 87, 68 and 25-years-old. The interviews conducted were of a semi structured format, initiated by an interview guide with a range of questions as prescribed by H. Russell Bernard (2006). This method of interview was ideal to the situation, as due to the financial and time constraints of this project, there were no options for a viable follow up or repeated interviews.

All recorded interview data was transcribed verbatim. The raw data harvested was then assessed and refined using inductive and deductive coding. After which, the coded data was analyzed via thematic analysis. A coding table, containing time stamps, assigned code and category, and exemplar quotes, facilitated the process of uncovering the dominant themes within the data.

As this inquiry involved human subjects, all IRB protocols were implemented and followed. With the researcher being of undergraduate status, all data collection methods and other related research concerns were performed under the advisement of a faculty mentor. Each participant was notified of the intent of this project and was given consent forms, which were signed, dated and now stored in a secure location. All interviews were digitally recorded, and all recordings remain securely stored.

Participant observation was enacted during the course of this project, taking the form of a guided tour through the more remote regions of the community of Lyles Station. With the goal being complete immersion in the situation (Pelto and Pelto 1970), the destinations on this exploration were left up to the discretion of the native guide, who provided valuable information about previously unknown sites of interest, deceased community members and descriptions of how life worked in the community. Unstructured or informal interviews, an extension of

gathering of native experiential data, were used in the course of this study. This practice establishes trust and gives insight and access into the dynamics of participants' lives prior to formal interview (Bernard 2006).

Visual data was collected via smartphone. Ball and Smith (1992) and Stanczak (2007) state that the descriptive nature of ethnography demands the visual reinforcement of photography. 196 photos of people, locations and artifacts were taken over a series of three visits. Throughout the project's duration, field notes were taken to highlight and reinforce ideas and experiences. Wolfinger (2002) highlights the importance of field notes during analysis of seminal moments during the field work process.

Their Place. Our Place. The Home Place

One of the dominant themes within the data is pride. In discussing the theme of pride, there exists, for the community that remains, a sense of powerful connection with the past and the people who built Lyles Station for the community that remains. These two planes of existence seem to exist simultaneously for descended community members, as the latter pulls motivation and inspiration from the former. The historic generativity and self-reliance functions as a wellspring of power and hope. A romantic ferocity envelops past industry and is evidenced in descendants' attitudes. Community is paramount, and it is adept and capable. Introducing

Stanley Madison (Figure 5):

Because we became so independent in this 3-mile radius that we had no reason to go Outside not to Princeton, not to Mt. Carmel – to buy anything. We raised it all. We built it all. We developed it all. Right here. Home base. (Interview with Stanley Madison, 07/17/2018)

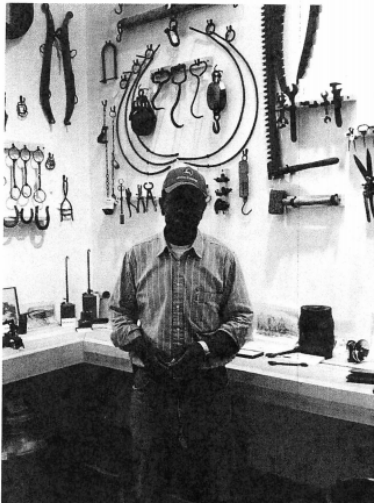


Figure 5: Stanley Madison, Lyles Station, Ind. 7/17/2018 (Sacha Jackson).

This prideful self-sufficiency, which is foundational for the descendants of Lyles Station, came from a knowledge that they were effectively on their own. External assistance would be

slow coming, if it came at all. Racist preconceptions concerning the nature of the African American work ethic disadvantaged them socially and economically. Shoulders were kept to the wheel. Half measures would not suffice for those with the deck stacked against them.

Our parents and grandparents instilled in our head that you're not going to get by sitting down like the other person. You've got to do a little more.... I had to prove myself, because [White people] wanted me to fail. Wanted me to take and go down to the McDonalds and go to work. 'Cause that's where we're supposed to be all the time. (Interview with Stanley Madison, 07/17/2018)

This “one-inch further” mentality is widespread in the African American community. Systemic oppression has forced their hands, demanding exemplary performance for meager rewards. The notion of a meritocratic evaluation, of work bringing worth and equity, is a long travelled road lined with poisoned hopes. It is a sick sort of irony that those now labeled feckless were, far too recently, worked to death. There is a dark humor in this knowledge, an ever-present undercurrent in the African American psyche.

This thread of pride is woven through concepts of legacy and ensuing loss. Lyles Station is filled with the phantoms of better days. For those initiated, each yawning, dusty lane holds the shadow of how things were and the people who made them possible. It is a wound that seeks salve and exposure. At 25 years old, community descendant and new site volunteer DeAnthony Jamerson (Figure 6), in trying to reconcile progress with fading memory, approaches Lyles Station with a tone of mournful reverence: “And that's why I'm like, the time is now. I can't let the ball drop and let these stories basically fade away, like the people of Lyles Station.” (Interview with DeAnthony Jamerson, 7/30/2018)



Figure 6: DeAnthony Jamerson, Lyles Station, Ind. 7/30/2018 (Sacha Jackson).

Those in the last generation born in Lyles Station are in their 80s and 90s. One by one they fall, taking with them echoes of forgotten places and faded faces. They are the last link to the high vibrancy that once filled and defined the community. Residual warmth and powerful memories radiate from them. A bank of embers, they cozy themselves and their recollections to those next in line. Remembrance is a form of reflection, and in that mirror, they find the best of themselves and home.

Another dominant theme is farming. With the working of land being profoundly tied to self-concept within this community, farming functions as an expression of identity and fortitude.

Life for the historic community of Lyles Station was not easy. Many residents were small hold farmers that functioned at a level just above subsistence. They relied on ingenuity and watchful preparation to augment their holdings. Robert Gooch (Figure 7), an 87-year-old historical community member evidenced these striving moments.

Well, yes. Made a livin', you know. Things were hard back there. If you had a dollar, you thought you had somethin'. You raised your meat and vegetables. You canned stuff. Most things you raised and put up in the summertime. And in the wintertime, that's what kept you goin'. (Interview with Robert Gooch, 8/1/2018)



Figure 7: Robert Gooch, Collinsville, 11. 11/11/2016 (Sacha Jackson).

For the people of Lyles Station, farming is more than away to make a living, it is a declaration of value of self and of production. They demand recognition of what has been accomplished and the circumstances that surrounded these victories. They want the public to know that it was and is African American hands that tilled and still till these fields. And as such, the dissemination of this knowledge lies at the foundation of the mission of the Lyles Station Consolidated School and Museum. “The key thing to this whole project here is to educate - our forefathers were just as prominent farmers as everybody else.” (Interview with Stanley Madison, 07/17/2018)

The next powerful theme in the data is family. The theme of family is expansive and inclusive for this small unincorporated community. Family is not just about blood. It pertains to the connections formed from over a century of interdependence of one homestead to the next. This reliance, augmented by marriages and enterprise, created a complex tapestry of relationality. These bonds were bolstered by supportive cooperative behavior between neighbors and kin. People came out to assist each other with harvests, canning and many other associated tasks, as well as lend support in good times and in bad. “If a guy - if a neighbor needs some help, you'd go help ‘em.”. (interview with Robert Gooch, 8/01/18)

The final dominant theme is the notion of home. Where food and family are found, one

cannot be far from home. Stanley Madison remarked: "I have been here at Lyles Station for my lifetime. I am 68 years old and been here total time at Lyles Station." (Interview, 6/18/18) This continuity has crystalized the importance of Lyles Station in his perceptions. Yet, those who have transitioned into and out of the community also express a sense of completion and longing related to Lyles Station. Robert Gooch, who spent many years in various places around the world and throughout country, waxed poetic about Lyles Station (Figure 8).

So, it's somethin' we all remember, us older folks that lived down through there. Even when we go back there, it's just home. It'll always be home to us, no matter where we live or where we go. I've been all around the world. Every lick of the way. From the Pacific, all across the Atlantic, back to the Pacific, and back to California. But that's still Home. Always be home. (Interview with Robert Gooch, 8/1/2018)



Figure 8: White river from Black Bridge, Lyles Station, Ind. 7/30/2018 (Sacha Jackson).

Telling Our Story: Challenges in the Heritage Sector

While the heart of Lyles Station beats ferociously, the realities of operation of the Lyles Station Consolidated School and Museum proves to be a task with hard edges that are laden with frustrations. Its link with the Smithsonian has failed to yield anticipated visitor traffic. The wage a daily battle to keep LSCSM up and running. "Our budget is \$59,000 dollars to be able to meet the commitment that we will have the lights on." (Interview with Stanley Madison, 07/17/2018) Their limited funding also extends to the after school and interactive historic classroom programs that serve many schools in the region. Those involved in LSCSM wish to expand the reach and scope of the site but, without the needed funding, grander forms of progress are at a standstill.

Those deeply involved with LSCSM are achingly aware of the need for involvement of knowledgeable new blood to assist in the maintenance and growth of the site. "All of this has grants that are there, but you have to have a staff of people to be able to keep that going on a yearly basis." (Interview with Stanley Madison, 6/18//2018) The irony of needing funding to hire people to search and apply for funding is tart.

But we have to have the finances. And we have to have the commitment from others that are grant writers and are able to mold and shape who we are. And we an't to it on the

sponge dollars that Stan struggles 'round here from day to day, (Interview with Stanley Madison, 07/17/2018)

For this small rural museum, the importance tied to matters of representation are paramount. This representation extends past the stories being told. It involves not only national recognition but, encompasses the status of this site within local and state legislatures and public access that inclusion and promotion from in these bodies provides. There is some confusion as to why there has been a lack of inclusivity for the Lyles Station Consolidated School and Museum, as pertains to matters of not being included as a recognized state historic site (Interview with Stanley Madison, 6/18/2018). This large issue is illustrated in the smaller touches that are vital to places that are off the beaten path.

I don't understand. I've been 20 years at this thing, and we are not recognized in the state of Indiana as a top star site. I don't understand that... We don't have signage on the road. I can't even get cars off the highway because there is no brown sign out here saying historic site. African American historic site -- four and a half miles to the west. (Interview with Stanley Madison, 07/17/2018)

Long years of self-advocacy and grassroots efforts to promote the Lyles Station Consolidated School and Museum have supported the site. However, the situation grows tighter and tighter. The consternation and disappointment with the lack of bolstered support from the state of Indiana weighs heavily on the director and volunteer staff of LSCSM. They have great pride in both who they are and where they are located. Their identity is deeply bound to the state of Indiana and their contribution to it and the United States as a whole.

Despite the current barriers to its progress, the impetus behind the mission of the Lyles Station School and Museum to educate continues to proliferate. However, they know the message behind their mission will not thrive remaining only in its immediate sphere of influence. They seek to expand their solid contacts in post-secondary education to encourage research and collaborative educational ventures.

We have to get the universities on board. {So} that they can come, and they can actually help set up some programs. We can work some very good educational programs through Lyles Station if we get the right parties on board to pull it together. (Interview with Stanley Madison, 6/18/2018)

The Lyles Station Consolidated School and Museum pushes forward, seeking to share the story of African Americans resolutely establishing their own identities, reclaiming their bond to the earth and generating a legacy that persists. In these times of divisive identity politics and fear, the Lyles Station Consolidated School and Museum enlivens the stories of women and men who encountered terror, hardship, and the unknown with their feet proudly planted in the loam.

Interpretation

Viewed through the lens of a postcolonial framework, it is evident that the historical community members and descendants of Lyles Station are still processing the ghosts of a varied and rich history, one which featured both hope and fear. Through the conduit that is the Lyles Station Consolidated School and Museum, they are brought face to face with who they are and whence they came. In light of this introspective retrospection, there is both joy and mourning for an existence that was never easy. There is symbiosis between place and identity that is immutable, which colors the purview of each related party, who, in turn, transfers this innate knowledge into the world. This also emboldens the desire for recognition of the truth that has been inherited. With no room left for supplication, the formerly muted voices of this community demand their contributions be heard and included in local, regional, and national narratives.

Lyles Station can be viewed as a sanctum, a place where both the earth and the ancestral spirit are renewed. Nearly ten generations from conception, it resonates as a place of origin and unity. A synthesis has occurred between this location and its inhabitants. The durability of the land has been absorbed into the culture and the character of community descendants. They planted crops and hopes in Lyles Station, fueling an audacious dream of independence. Lyles Station is where they created something that was entirely theirs. Lyles Station provided a haven to unpack the burdens of the past to focus on healing and intimate connections. Lyles Station is their oasis in the desert. Lyles Station is home.

Conclusion

The Lyles Station Consolidated School and Museum has a resurrection tale that is fit for film, one of those feel-good tissue clutchers that acts as a balm on the American psyche. It has followed a rocky path that reflects the conditions of its community. From teetering on the brink of extinction, the site has inspired a resurgence of interest, hope, and a yearning for collective understanding. In its current incarnation as a cultural lighthouse, it is still pursuing its original purpose - to teach. It instructs visitors about a way of life that has been continuous for over 100 years. It shares the story of faith in self-generation held by a community that chose to forge its own path. It illuminates the story of African Americans who chose a life that taught them how to grow and to give.

Yet, Lyles Station Consolidated School and Museum is more than an instructive storehouse of days past. As one of the last remaining buildings of a time now faded, it gives tangibility to abstract concepts of identity, home and community. In this edifice, one can find reminders of the emergence of a collection of people who operated as a unit. The thought and remembrance of those people still makes the heart ache. Flashes of recognition and connection spark and smolder upon encountering half-remembered silhouettes. This site reminds that there remain names, spoken in the country lanes, that resonate and evoke the strength of family.

Surrounding the Lyles Station Consolidated School are the thousands of acres of farmland on which the community was founded. On this land, one can still find proud brown faces whose knowledge reaches back through time, each long shadow striving to provide for the themselves, their families, and the markets. These are masters of patience - keepers of the long watch over what is left of the birthright of the descendants of this community. They don't balk, they just do. They persist because the land still speaks to them, as it did to their forefathers.

Every turn of the soil raises a cry, calling them back to themselves and their purpose.

They speak the name of Lyles Station loudly down there. When they spell you on the story of the community of Lyles Station, a flame ignites. These members and descendants are self-possessed. The actualized energy that comes from them is refined down to its purest form at the Lyles Station Consolidated School and Museum.

Unlike Robert Frost's suggestion of obligation - Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in -- Lyles Station offers a welcome out of inclusion and love. When in Lyles Station, one can sense the anchoring warmth that has endured in the community. Here is where you lay your burdens down. Here is where community members and descendants find peace. Here is home.

The Lyles Station Consolidated School and Museum is animated by all of these sentiments. It is a touchstone, a quietly respirating shrine to the past and future of the people who built it. The Lyles Station Consolidated School and Museum is a community rendered in wood and brick, a safe harbor for culture and care. To tour this building is to walk through the hearts of these rural African Americans and know the sandy soil that runs in their veins.

Interviews

Robert Gooch Recorded via digital audio by Sacha Jackson, August 1, 2018, Edwardsville, IL.
DeAnthony Jamerson Recorded via digital audio by Sacha Jackson, July 30, 2018, Lyles Station, IN.

Stanley Madison Recorded via digital audio by Sacha Jackson, July 17, 2018, Lyles Station, IN.

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