

Donation of the Month

Object: Blackburn Preaching Shirt
Catalog #: 1987.12.324
Donor: Estate of Vera E. Key



Can an inanimate object “witness” history? Of course, we like to think so at the Museum. While we can only guess at the history witnessed by this simple garment, its owner and his life make for an interesting story about the early days of Benton County, the role of religion in family and community, and the tumult of war.

It all started in 1811 when Catherine Brewer and Sylvanus Walker Blackburn were born. Some accounts give their places of birth as North Carolina and Georgia, respectively; others list Tennessee. Aged 16 and wishing to marry, the couple met opposition from Catherine’s parents who complained of her suitor’s poverty. Declaring they would “marry for love and work for riches,” in 1827 the sweethearts wed and went to live with Sylvanus’ father on his farm in Hickman County, Tennessee.

Wanting a farm of his own, Sylvanus left Tennessee to seek land in the newly established Arkansas Territory. In December 1832 he found a promising spot along the War Eagle creek and promptly claimed a 160-acre tract in the future Benton County. But he wasn’t the first white settler in the area. Isaac and Levi Sorne, bear-hunting brothers from Illinois, had arrived that spring, clearing land and raising six acres of corn. Sylvanus spent the winter felling trees and squaring off the massive logs needed to build a home.

He returned to Tennessee the next spring to help his wife, his parents, and his six brothers and sisters journey to Arkansas. Their chosen home site was in a remote, sparsely populated area. Everything the family needed for homesteading had to be brought with them, including, according to legend, a score of enslaved Africans (although it is unclear how the Blackburns, if they were poor, could afford this many slaves). It must have been a long, arduous journey—rafts had to be built to cross streams and roads had to be fashioned through the wilderness.

The family spent their first winter at War Eagle in tents and later in their partially built home. When they were older Catherine told her children how she spent sleepless nights with a shotgun across her lap, listening to the panthers scream and claw at the make-do doors and windows. By 1838, two years after

Arkansas achieved statehood, the Blackburns and their slaves had built a gristmill, sawmill, and a smithy along the banks of the War Eagle. In later years they added a cabinet shop, a general store, and a Masonic lodge, which was also used as a school. Other settlers joined them, and a small community was born.

The Blackburn's big, two-story house had a 24 x 28-foot central room where the Blackburn daughters slept, complete with four-poster beds and a large fireplace. Called the prayer room, it was the place where the family gathered when Sylvanus conducted his lengthy prayer and Bible services. The Reverend Sylvanus Blackburn was a staunch Freewill Baptist minister who had received "the call." It didn't matter the number of chores ahead, how wonderful the hot biscuits and fried ham smelled, or how tired everyone was, every morning and every evening spiritual guidance was sought and prayers of thanks were given.

Towards the back of the house was the "loom room" where the Blackburn ladies, and perhaps some of the family's slaves, made household linens, blankets, and cloth for clothing, including the coarsely woven cotton fabric for Sylvanus' preaching shirt. Although family history doesn't tell when the shirt was made and worn, its style and construction offers some clues. The garment was sewn together by hand, with small, neat stitches. Delicate, tiny pleats provide fullness at shoulder and wrist. A triangular underarm gusset allows for a range of movement in the arm. Stylistically the shirt is similar to men's shirts made in the 18th century and popular into the early 1800s.

Perhaps the shirt was made in Sylvanus' early adulthood, shortly after the style went out of favor. Perhaps Catherine only had a few shirt patterns at her disposal, and this style was one she knew how to make; after all, it could take a decade or more before fashion trends traveled to frontier Tennessee and Arkansas. Or perhaps Sylvanus preferred the old-fashioned, traditional style. Whichever the case, the shirt is in wonderful condition, attesting to its status as "Sunday best" and as a treasured Blackburn family heirloom. Miss Vera Key, Sylvanus' great-granddaughter and one of the Museum's founders, bequeathed the shirt to the Museum at her death in 1987.

Sylvanus and Catherine had a long life together filled with happiness and tragedy. They had nine children, many of whom married and had large families. Their farm and businesses were prosperous and the Blackburn name was well respected. In later years son James Alexander Cameron, known as J.A.C., married into another pioneering family, the Van Winkles, and became a noted area lumber baron and state senator.

By the middle of the 19th century, trouble was brewing in Northwest Arkansas. When he preached at camp meetings prior to the Civil War, Sylvanus is said to have sometimes encountered criticism for his unChristian bondage of human beings—his slaves. According to one story he was warned not to make a return visit to a certain community. Defiant, he strapped on a pair of pistols and preached there as promised.

When the War Between the States broke out, the Blackburn sons enlisted with the South. Bushwackers were alleged to have killed one son on a return visit home in 1863. Another died of wounds received at the Battle of Helena (Arkansas). During the war Sylvanus took his family and slaves to Texas, returning to War Eagle after the war with his family but not his slaves (although some stories say that several of the freedmen and women returned with the family). While the house had been spared the pillaging of war, the family found the grist mill had been burned by the Confederates to keep it from falling into Union hands. Slowly but surely, Sylvanus and Catherine began rebuilding their lives.

On March 13, 1890, Catherine died. Heartbroken, Sylvanus told his sons not to close their mother's grave. He began to pray that he might join her. Five days later, on March 18, Sylvanus died and was buried with his beloved Catherine. The home they made together still stands today next to the flowing War Eagle, opposite the grist mill reconstructed in 1973.

A cautionary note about the above information. It was gathered from a variety of sources which often contradicted one another or repeated inaccuracies. Sources include: Bryan McGinnis' article in the

Arkansas Gazette (October 17, 1954), Vera Key's article, "Arkansas Pioneers of 1832 War Eagle, Arkansas," in the *Benton County Pioneer* (September 1955); Virginia Abbott's article in the *Rogers Daily News* (April 29, 1971); Marilyn Larner Hicks' book, *The Van Winkle Family* (1990); and Gaye Bland's article in the *Rogers Hometown News* (October 4, 2000).