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## ***In the era of slavery, the tale of a family's hard-won reunion***

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**VIT WAGNER**

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For a lot a farmers, February is a month to put up the feet, browse through seed and equipment catalogues and maybe enjoy a couple of weeks in Florida. Not so, for Bryan Prince of Kent County, who spends his spare time researching his ancestors and other slaves who fled the pre-Civil War U.S., eventually settling in south-western Ontario.

As the author of *I Came as a Stranger: The Underground Railroad* and a director of the Buxton National Historic Site and Museum south of Chatham, Ont., Prince has become accustomed to a February calendar filled with appearances and speaking engagements related to Black History Month.

Prince generally works in tandem with his wife, Shannon, who serves as curator of the North Buxton museum, which commemorates an early settlement of former slaves established in 1849. Shannon fleshes out her husband's Underground Railroad talks by acting out the parts of various historical figures.

"We are somewhere pretty much every day in February," Prince says.

The couple's dance card is particularly full this year, as they take to the road to promote a new title by Prince, *A Shadow on the Household: One Enslaved Family's Incredible Struggle for Freedom*. The itinerary includes an interview Tuesday at the Gladstone Hotel in conjunction with This Is Not a Reading Series, and a reading next Sunday at the Royal Ontario Museum.

"A lot of people take the view that black history has been forgotten and we should be required to remember it," Prince says. "My attitude is different. It's not that we *should* know about it. It's that there are so many incredible stories."

*A Shadow on the Household* is a case in point. It traces the harrowing history of the Weems family, slaves in mid-19th-century Maryland who were near to buying freedom when the death of their owner sparked a chain of events that resulted in the sale and dispersal of the family's seven children.

Prince's rigorously researched and carefully plotted account details how the family was reunited after a series of small victories and reversals. It sets their personal drama against the backdrop of the abolitionist movement. One thread concerns a daughter, Anna Maria Weems, who made her way to Dresden, Ont., disguised as a man.

In fitting together the pieces of the narrative, Prince was assisted by a friend in Washington, D.C., who helped search various archives. Also crucial were press accounts of the time, which treated the family's plight as something of a *cause célèbre*, particularly in Great Britain, where slavery had already been abolished.

"It's so difficult to get details about the lives of slave families," says Prince, whose interest in his own ancestral history was sparked by the landmark 1977 miniseries *Roots*.

"There were some slaves that wrote autobiographies," he says. "The Weems (family) didn't leave any writing of their own, but the abolitionist press got a hold of the story."

Prince's Canadian publisher, McClelland & Stewart, has arranged for U.S. distribution of *A Shadow on the Household* through Random House. As a result, this month's promotional tour will include a week of bookstore appearances and related events in Washington, D.C. Prince was in the U.S. capital four times to research his book, but this will be his first visit since Barack Obama's election as president.

"It moved me beyond what I expected it to," Prince says of last month's inauguration. "It hit me in a way I can't explain."

"The one other time I was overcome by emotion in that way was quite different but somehow related. I was visiting Georgia for the first time and I saw the Confederate flag. It stopped me dead in my tracks."

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