

'Old Hickory's' slaves

Was Jackson a vicious person or just a product of his time?

By Carl Byker

AFTER HIS pastor came under attack last week and before his historic speech on Tuesday, Barack Obama put his finger on the crux of the issue: "We've got a tragic history when it comes to race in this country," he said. "We've got a lot of pent-up anger and bitterness and misunderstanding."

Recently, I spent most of a year in one of the places where such emotions have created the "racial stalemate" that Obama spoke of Tuesday. I was in Tennessee making a PBS biography of President Andrew Jackson, and while we were filming at the Hermitage, Jackson's home and plantation outside Nashville, I discovered that the exhibits were being updated. One thing being changed was how slavery was discussed.

For decades, the 200,000 school kids, retirees and vacationing families who visit the Hermitage each year have been told that Jackson was a "good slave owner." The historical justification for this description was that Jackson did not sadistically abuse his slaves or sell their children.

But today, there's little support among historians for any "good slave owner" designation. In Jackson's case, the fact is that he owned more than 140 human beings. And as historian Bobby Lovett of Tennessee State University puts it: "To enslave another human being, you can't be a good person. You have to be a pretty tough, vicious, mean person to hold another person or another 140 people in slavery for all of their lives."

And so, in 2007, the Hermitage began focusing on how brutal and hopeless the lives of the slaves who lived there were, instead of on how "good"

their master was. And that's when things started to get ugly.

For years, Dave McArdle loved dressing up as Andrew Jackson, and visitors to the Hermitage delighted in McArdle's folksy way of bringing "Old Hickory" to life. McArdle is also the spitting image of Jackson, and we cast him as Jackson in our film. But just after we finished shooting, startling news arrived: McArdle had resigned from the job he loved — the job for which he was seemingly born — because he refused to work for an organization that made Jackson look bad because he owned slaves.

Soon after, we found out that McArdle held something close to the majority view in Tennessee. Our PBS biography of Jackson, which shared the Hermitage's new approach to slavery, has been attacked by white Tennesseans at screenings, in letters to newspapers and e-mails to PBS stations. One viewer wrote: "I am outraged at the way you and professor Bobby Lovett, who appears in your show, portray Jackson's ownership of slaves as 'evil.' That kind of thinking is what I call 'present-ism,' applying the standards of today to Americans who lived in the past."

And there it is. Bitterness and misunderstanding. A racial stalemate. Lovett is black, and I'll hazard a guess that most black Americans would consider his statement that it takes a "vicious, mean person" to enslave another person for their entire life pretty obvious.

But it's not so obvious to many white Americans. Even the lead academic advisor to our film, Daniel Feller of the University of Tennessee, doesn't think it's fair to see all slaveholders as "vicious, mean" people. "Slavery needs to be addressed, but with a certain humility," Feller says, "because to me, the true understanding of history comes at that point where you stop looking at people in the past and saying, 'Look at what those bad people did. I wouldn't have done that,' and start saying, 'Well,

under those circumstances, maybe I would have.'"

That's a worthwhile point to make — that most people throughout history can't just be categorized as good or evil; for the most part, they're just trying to get by as best they can with the hand they've been dealt.

And you can see why this argument appeals to some white Americans. After all, they don't think it's fair to have our nation's great accomplishments besmirched by a flood of re-crimeinations over something that was a common practice 150 years ago. But it's also no surprise that the same argument infuriates blacks. After all, slavery and the 100 years of segregation that followed were truly horrible, and why can't white America just stop with the excuses?

Given how deep the misunderstanding is, maybe our big problem is not that we don't talk about race enough but that we never talk about it in ways that will bridge the divide.

Perhaps white Americans should ask themselves: "What would it have been like to work 365 days a year from sunrise to midnight, with no hope of a better life? And to see my children living exactly the same nightmare." And perhaps black Americans ought to ask themselves: "If I were a white Southerner before the Civil War, would I have owned slaves if it meant a better life for my family? And would that have made me irredeemably evil?"

Throughout our history, Americans have been too angry and bitter to have this kind of honest, thoughtful national conversation. But I think it's time for us to get past our anger — and not just because Obama says we should. After years of making historical documentaries, I'm convinced that the most important thing about coming to grips with our past is that it enables us to figure out who we want to be in the future.

CARL BYKER is the producer of "Andrew Jackson: Good, Evil and the Presidency."

2/08 LA Times