

## Audio Underground Railroad story told at IC

By ESTHER CAMPI

*Journal Staff*

ITHACA — It will take Ithaca College's Gordon Webb, an assistant professor of television and radio, all day to set up enough speakers to create a "surround-sound" experience in Ithaca College's Park Hall Auditorium.

But when an audience gathers there at 7:30 Friday night, high-tech Dolby 5.1 audio technology in the 21st century will be used to tell a story from the 19<sup>th</sup>.

"Steal-Away," an audio docudrama about the Underground Railroad, is free and open to the public.

The 20-minute presentation is a fictional account of Jacob, a slave-traveling north to freedom before the Civil War. African drum rhythms, spirituals, historical quotations and narrated sequences of Jacob writing letters to his mother will be heard.

"It's kind of an attempt to present the historical story in a dramatic context," Webb said.

Webb has been working on the audio presentation since May with a \$3,000 grant from the Roy H. Park School of Communications. More than 40 students, community members, Hangar Theatre actors and musicians have contributed.

The docudrama's theme song, "Steal-Away," from the spiritual, was recorded by seven members of Ithaca's Calvary Baptist Church Choir, and the Rev. Daris Dixon-Clark has a speaking part.

Stephanie McClain, the choir's director, said when Webb approached her about music, "That was the first one that came to my mind."

Webb said the song is one that slaves sang in the field to send a message to each other about plans for escape.

Webb said the Jacob character is based on historical documents, including the 1871 book "The Underground Railroad," by black author William Still.

Still spent years in the 1800's collecting letters, diaries and other documents from escaped slaves, Webb said.

Webb, 55, said that when he began searching for a topic to explore with cutting-edge sound technology, "I knew it had to be a very powerful, emotional, serious topic."

Other such audio history productions have focused on topics such as the Salem Witch Trials or the Holocaust, he said.

By the end of the project, however, Webb, who is white, said his eyes were opened to the realities of "the Black experience and racism and oppression."

Said Webb: "I ended up at the end of it, thinking, 'Boy, this is really a story that has to be told.'"

Tompkins County Historian Carol Kammen, who lectures on local history at Cornell University, said 117 is the figure normally cited to quantify how many fugitive slaves passed through Ithaca, or came and stayed.

But there's no real way to verify that, she said, because after 1850, aiding an escaped slave was a federal crime.

"Nobody kept records," she said. "If they did, they burned them."

Kammen said the St. James A.M.E. Zion Church, 116 Cleveland Ave., is often cited as a stop on the Underground Railroad. What is definite is that the black community here sheltered some runaways, and that Harriet Tubman sent a handful here, she said.

But Ithaca was not a main route, Kammen noted.

Instead, many blacks on their way to Canada would pass through Elmira, where escaped slave John Jones was funded by abolitionists.

In 1930, Kammen said, historical markers sprung up in Tompkins County claiming to mark spots on the Underground Railroad. "There was abolitionist sentiment in Ithaca and Tompkins County," she said. "But there also were a lot of people who were afraid of breaking the law."

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### Presentation

- **What:** "Steal-Away," an audio docudrama about the Underground Railroad
- **When:** 7:30 p.m. Friday, Nov. 9
- **Where:** Ithaca College's Park Hall Auditorium
- **Admission:** Free and open to the public.