

This article, by Bill Ellis, appeared in the February, 2010 issue of The Kentucky Monthly magazine in his *Past Tense/Present Tense* column.

The Emancipation Proclamation

January 1st is the 147th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. On that date in 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued a proclamation that is misunderstood to the present day. The victory at Antietam on September 5, 1862, allowed “The Greatest Kentuckian” as I have often called him, to issue an executive order freeing all slaves in territory in rebellion against the Union.

It sounded silly to many of his critics in the North as well as the Confederacy because the “freed slaves” were in southern-held territory. Wiser than his enemies, Lincoln once and for all declared that slavery was the central issue in the Civil War, not just the alleged right of a state to separate from the Union. Now Union forces were fighting directly to free slaves and slaves had even a better reason to escape from southern-held territory. Many black males joined the Union Army. Another prominent Kentuckian, but not the greatest, Jefferson Davis, denounced the Emancipation Proclamation as “the most execrable in the history of guilty man.”

As it turned out, Lincoln was on the right side of history and Davis was not. That is why Lincoln always appears so modern while Davis comes off now as a quaint relic in the increasingly distant past.

But this is old historical stuff that many people today believe is irrelevant in the day of the Ipod, Wii, Facebook, etc. Really!

The chances are that some time recently, as you were eating at a restaurant, driving by a farm, walking down the street, pulling into a shopping mall, or enjoying a trip in a foreign county, you saw a modern day slave. This person did not have a ball and chain around his or her feet, but was a slave just as much as those depicted in Uncle Tom’s Cabin.

No country in the world sanctions slavery by law, yet it exists nearly everywhere. In 2005 it was estimated that between 14,000 to 17,000 people were brought into the United States each year as part of a human trafficking market. These individuals come from a variety of third world as well as developed nations. In 2007 the CIA estimated that worldwide, the value of this market in human misery is worth about \$32 billion. If that seems to be an unbelievable figure, be reminded that at one time before the Civil War, slavery was the linchpin of American enterprise in this country.

Most modern slaves are forced to work in abominable conditions in mines, agriculture, and manufacturing. Many of the 27 million [estimates vary] slaves in the world are children, the same ages as your children and grandchildren. We use the fruits of their labor everyday, shipped in by our trading partners in China, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa. Perhaps those fireworks you bought for last year’s 4th of July celebration were made by a child slave in China. Perhaps the diamond in the ring you gave your significant other was mined by a slave in Sierra Leone. Perhaps that chocolate you enjoy

was produced from cacao beans picked by a child enslaved in the Ivory Coast. By one estimate, up to 10 percent of farm workers in America are slaves.

It happens right here. University of Kentucky Professor TK Logan, in a study published in 2007, found 69 documented cases in Kentucky of human trafficking, which is defined as “labor or services obtained through force, fraud, or coercion.” “This is likely just the surface of the amount of human trafficking in Kentucky,” she said. “Individuals in these situations are often deprived of basic living needs such as adequate food, access to health care, access to their families including their children, and safety.” Often times it is wage slavery in which a person can never pay off a huge debt incurred to get into the United States.

This is a problem that is not going to go away with pious platitudes by politicians, preachers, and pundits. Those of us who call ourselves Christians should be especially appalled that many young women and children are brought into the United States for the illegal sex “industry.” Violence is almost always connected with modern slavery.

There are people and groups completely dedicated to the task of ending this crime here in America and elsewhere. The “Children of the Night” organization works to help children from 11 to 17 who have been victimized as prostitutes in California. At the national level, the Department of State, beginning early in the Bush administration, has redoubled its efforts to fight the problem of slavery. Both national laws as well as a statute passed by the Kentucky General Assembly have been passed in the most recent decade to modernize the fight against slavery. The State Department publishes an annual “Trafficking in Persons Report” that you can access on the internet. Google “Modern Slavery” and dozens of websites pop up if you want more information.

Kevin Bales, the author of two books on modern slavery, is president of “Free the Slaves” in this country, sums up the problem with a chilling analysis. Human trafficking “is not just stealing someone’s labor, it is the theft of an entire life.”

“Anti-Slavery International” founded in England in 1839, the world’s oldest human rights advocate, is still at work.

In Kentucky, the “Lexington Human Trafficking Task Force” and other groups are working to stop this crime.

There is plenty of blame to go around for what most Americans think is a dead issue. In a 2008 article African American journalist Clarence Page bemoaned the fact that it is the Arab world that remains the purveyors of African slavery much as it did hundreds of years ago. Page chided an Al-Qaida leader to “denounce the traffic in black African slaves that Arabs continue to conduct in the Sudan and the Persian Gulf States.”

“The more things change, the more they remain the same.”