**UNCLE FRANK DIAMOND**

Allen Nelson Peltier

It was a time when two copper pennies

bought a man a good cigar and

the roiling vapors of Stephen Keesling’s

steam tractor wafted over Rye Valley.

Whether it was hog killing, stump clearing,

barn building, saw milling or wheat threshing,

Big Frank Diamond greeted the dawn,

tools in hand, smoking his second pipe,

and ready to work. Tall, broad shouldered,

barrel-chested and cheerful whatever

was asked of him, the Black hired hand

the valley children called “Uncle Frank”

was a welcome addition to any

job at hand, and a

two-fisted eater at

the best farm house tables

in and around Sugar-Grove, Virginia.

There wasn’t a task,

feeding the threshing machine,

jamming logs against the

teeth of the whining saw blade,

tossing hay bales on a wagon,

or axing down a pine that

Uncle Frank didn’t do to a

rock-solid rhythm. That cadence,

pulse-slow and clock steady,

provided the accompaniment

to Frank Diamond’s hymn-singing.

When he sang, his full-voiced,

mahogany-tinged basso voice

soared above the clatter of the

machinery. Uncle Frank’s

“Shall We Gather at the River”

said more for salvation than

half the circuit riders in the

Epworth district.

In a matter of seconds,

every man on the crew began to

move to Uncle Frank’s rhythm, and

the hours seemed to slip away.

It was said Frank Diamond had enough songs

between his graying temples to

fell a forest, build a good-sized barn

or harvest a bountiful crop. The man

was a blessing.

In time, a matter of long decades, the

odorous chug of internal combustion engines

drowned out the breathy puff

of the steam tractors, and

along with it, the Frank Diamonds

of those charmed years.

Still, folks in their eighties

and beyond, say if one rises early on

a mist-shrouded dawn in the season

of the harvest moon; if the wind is right,

and the angel harps are in tune, one might

yet hear the sound of a strong, deep-lunged

voice singing a rhythmic “Amazing Grace”

up on Keesling Mountain