

# THE LONGEST TRAIN HOME

*It was the Dawn of Hope.*

Slavery had become stylish, and I was an only child born into it. I remember the days when my parents were ill-treated and continually beaten. Sometimes they were starved; a tactic which forced them to work. Slave owners of the times often insisted on feeding the children the very best. However, their agenda was clear, it was preparation for use as a slave laborer.

The truth for those of us who endured was, *the worst life is a life unaccounted for or unspoken of* and there were many. Conditions were bad, diseases and other illnesses rampaged its way through the plantations killing young and old. Despite the torment, shame, and humiliation brought on by cruelty, the strongest of us survived. We were proud of our heritage, and the times, even though unbearable; we made do and tried to be happy. Many were religious in one way or another, and pleaded with God day after day to release us from a degrading

bondage. When it seemed as if all hope was gone, relief came unexpectedly in the form of a kindhearted man.

*On January 1, 1863*, in the name of fairness and freedom, risking his very own existence to spare those he had not known, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. He had shone a light on a vast darkness. I was barely five years old at the time and only hours after Lincoln's history making action, in the middle of the night during a heavy downpour Esther Chapman, my mother, gave birth to a baby boy in our isolated barrack along the south end of the plantation. He was born free. His name was Mathias.

"Esther, 'E is handsome." A fellow slave said.

"If they free we, 'E will be a free boy. Not like his pa and ma, thank the lord." My mother said looking up.

"And thank the President, 'E done free we." My father said with tears rolling down his face balling his fists trembling. News of freedom had spread.

The light given off by the small oil lamp in our one room shelter was dim, still a number of visitors-all slaves-had gathered

around to sing. Their voices remained relatively quiet, but rhythmic. The song was one of triumph and celebration.

It was a good day for my family who were freed days later, and went on to settle down in the slave town of Sheldon, Alabama. Life was hard, but Mathias and I along with our younger brother grew up humble and respectable. At the age of 16, Mathias was an impressionable young fellow. I remember him to be helpful and shy, he was also quite handsome. He sought work on the plantations around our home town and at sixteen was hired as a cotton picker in the same field our parents had worked. It had been sold to a wealthy southern woman named Wilhelmina. Segregation was part of daily life, but his boss being a female, was fair and unafraid of her own class.

In those days women were expected to be many a things-mothers, wives, even prostitutes, but never an owner, boss, or bread winner. She was indeed a beautiful southern woman from a well to do family a belle who took a liking to Mathias. The two soon struck up a friendship which at a glance seemed unhealthy, but what it was; was

true. Wilhelmina sometimes worked alongside the other harvesters, yes, believe it or not, She joined in their toil. Then, on certain unplanned days, very solemnly her and Mathias found themselves sitting on the veranda of her home, sipping tea and sharing stories of their past and what their futures held. For the most part, it was more about his future than hers. She was already at middle age, but he was young and full of vigor. Mathias became a very good friend to Wilhelmina and a flourishing trust grew between them. He confided in her things he would never dream of revealing to his own folks. He was a private person; proud too.

One summer day he had a strange twinkle in his eyes and a step which meant one thing, he was in love.

“Mathias, you all chirpy today.” Wilhelmina said to him as he giggled playfully.

“You won’t believe it Miss Wickersham, you just will not believe it!”

She stood still waiting for him to tell the big news.

“I saw the girl I going to marry! She looks like a magnolia flower.”

“You’re in love!” Wilhelmina gleefully responded.

“More than that, she loves me too!”

He rocked back on his heels pulling on his suspenders, filled with pride.

“What is her name if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Geraldine, the prettiest girl in the county; present company included.”

She could only feel happy at all of his giddiness, but somehow it all seemed too good.

“Want to come in and visit for a while?”

“Oh no, not today, Geraldine is waiting for me.”

“I see, well, come here and take these biscuits and 'lasses with you.”

“Are you sure?” He asked.

“Of course I am sure.” She said. He took the biscuits and turned to leave when her curiosity took over.

“When am I going to meet Geraldine?”

He stopped then turned around bending his head slightly.

“Miss Wickersham—I, you see...”

“Mathias?”

“Please Miss Wickersham you have to promise!”

“Promise what? You really haven’t told me anything.” She moves closer to him.

“Her last name is Crawford.” He said.

“You don’t mean the Crawford’s from Highland?”

“That’s her; pretty girl!”

“Mathias, she is fourteen and do you know who those people are? What they do to colored folks?”

“But she is pretty, and she loves me too.”

“Pretty ain’t got nothing to do with it when they catch and skin you alive! It’s too dangerous.”

“Please Miss Wickersham, promise you won’t tell, Please?”

He pleaded with Wilhelmina and while she had been reluctant to honor his request; understood his young love.

The two youngsters, with the help of Wilhelmina continued their secretive relationship until Mathias and Geraldine crossed the line. Geraldine was two years younger than Mathias and knew the dangers he faced at the hands of her father and the supremacist group he led. As it turned out, Geraldine attended a fine school, and would teach Mathias each time they met. Eventually, he learned to read and write. Their love in the meantime grew to oblivion. Yet, she refused to tell him the school she submitted to also taught hatred and racial separation. It was all planned; no fault of hers, just a way to induct young people into the supremacist groups. As I said, they crossed the line. Mathias and Geraldine experimented sexually which led to sexual intercourse. And if Mathias thought he had their secret meetings to worry about, he had no idea what was headed his way.

Geraldine was the Crawford's pride and joy. Her willingness to succumb to their way of thinking-however shallow rooted they were-brought a sense of contentment to their lives. Several weeks had passed after their last meeting and Mathias heard nothing from

Geraldine. He began to worry as the days went steadily by; there was only one thing to do.

Bravery was another suit my brother wore proudly yet foolishly. He waited until darkness crept in before heading out to Highland. The danger was mountainous, yet love was motivation enough. At 2:00am he found the house, and as he hid himself in the bushes expecting a relieving quietness, he was surprised to see a large bonfire. Around it were people clothed in white with their heads covered; they seemed to be at some kind of ritual. Mathias leaned forward for a clearer look then spotted Geraldine, she was on the sidelines. Forgetting he was hidden in the bushes he leaned in even more stumbling forward. The crash alerted nearby dogs. Their barking engulfed the once quiet night-they were loose and coming his way-following close behind was the group which once seemed peaceful around the fire. They were armed with rifles and rage, tearing off their hoods revealing their faces. Flashlights flickered on searching the darkness.



“Let us hunt boys!” Geraldine’s father shouted as they closed in on Mathis’ location. He had scrambled to his feet retreating back into the bushes when a gun shot rang out. The bullet blazed through the darkness missing him. Then more gunshots and bullets rained down.

“Kill the pig!” Someone shouted.

“Fresh meat. We gonna teach you boy!” Geraldine’s uncle added.

Mathias desperately rushed through the brush following the path back to Crawford looking back a few times. In the distance he heard the sound of Geraldine screaming for her father to stop, but her pleading was all in futility- they were on a mission.

Mathias arrived home at 4:00 am. He carefully sneaked into the house and to bed hoping the mob had retreated and was none the wiser. But he was wrong. A few minutes later the rolling of a horse and buggy came to a halt at our home. Mathias’ heart raced with uncertainty. He had risked his life to see Geraldine and this was the end of the line. Relentless banging on the door shook the entire household awake.

“Mathias! Open...”

My father opened the door as we all rushed out curiously.

“Miss Wickersham!” Mathias said.

“Mr. and Mrs. Chapman, please- we have problems headed this way!”

I saw fear in Mathias’ eyes that night, fear of vengeful humans.

“Miss Wickersham, what is you talk’in a bout?” My mother asked.

Wilhelmina turned to Mathias,

“Geraldine is pregnant. Her daddy and the mob are on their way to find you. Geraldine confessed the whole thing.” “Oh, Mathias!”

Our father held his head in shock while our mother fainted.

“Get her up! Hurry!” Wilhelmina said.

“What we go’in do? Lord, God in heaven, help my boy!” Our father began to pray aloud. Then Wilhelmina cuts his praying short.

“They came to my house searching for you Mathias. I sent them in the other direction to buy us some time. We need to get you away from here.”

“But, we ain’t got no money ma’am.” our father said sadly.

Mama came around slowly from fainting and was told what had to be done.

“We got no money, barely any food.”

“Never mind that- Mathias, get a grip ready! Mr. Chapman you need to come along with me. Hurry!”

“But, he is my boy.” Mama said hanging her head.

“He will be a dead one if Oliver Crawford and his mob get a hold of him!”

It was the worst hour we spent as a free family and Miss Wickersham was our savior. Mathias hugged all of us goodbye and held on to mama for what seemed like hours but in reality were merely minutes.

“I love you my son, everything will be fine—yea?”

“It’s going to be fine mama, I promise and will write every day.  
I am so sorry.”

He mainly choked on the words from crying. When the door was shut mama broke down bawling. She cried for weeks and we children did too. The horses pulled away with papa and Mathias hidden in the back of the Wagon. Wilhelmina hurried to her house where they all disembarked and headed inside.

“Here is money for a ticket.”

“What...why?”

“You cannot stay here Mathias. I warned you!” She said with motherly gentleness.

“My boy, take it. Better be alive than hunted and killed.”

“But papa!”

“Take it.” My father urged.

Mathias held the money for a while contemplating.

“But Geraldine...” he tried to rationalize.

“You will have to forget her.” Wilhelmina said with tears.

“How can I? I love her and she is having a baby.”

“The baby will not live Mathias, and Geraldine is a product of hate. The Crawford’s will not allow it.”

Wilhelmina was right and Mathias knew. The image of Geraldine was carved into his young mind. His heart was hers and hers his.

“Mr. Chapman,” Wilhelmina began, “Use my horse and wagon, get him to Augusta, Georgia. The train arrives in one day. Stay there and hide him as best you can until he boards. Don’t stop for anyone or anything just keep going till you get there.”

“Where is the train headed?”

“It goes south into Florida, Mathias. You stop at any station and don’t look back you hear me?” She cries tears of hurt.

“I am so sorry Miss Wickersham.”

“Don’t you think it’s time you call me Wilhelmina?” She smiles at his fragile face, “This will pass- I promise. Just live my boy, live, here take this,” She hands him more money, “When you get to Florida find a place to stay and work hard.”

“I cannot take this.” Mathias looks at her saddened, realizing what he had done.

“Take it, come on, time to go. Mr. Chapman the horses are all ready for you and don’t worry about your family I will look after them.”

“Thank you so much ma’am.”

“Go on. Take all the back roads, cut through the pass and into Birmingham, then head East. Stay off the main drag. Mathias -” She gave him a motherly kiss.

Miss Wilhelmina Wickersham became our hero. She saved my brother and also our family. The Crawford mob did come and with Geraldine in tow. To teach her a lesson on hate her father gave a live demonstration. Our house was set on fire, fortunately we all escaped with our lives. We lost everything. Thankfully, Wilhelmina helped us back on our feet, but there was a missing link; Mathias.

Papa arrived back from Augusta heartbroken. In his hand was the other half of Mathias’ train stub. I kept it as a symbol of hope for us all. Those hopes became bleak diminishing more and more

each day. Weeks, months even years slowly ticked away and still, no word. We often wondered what might have happened to him, whether he made it to Florida or not. Every day we prayed for a sign; a letter even a report of some kind, but nothing. Then suddenly, one day my father filled with a flood of excitement came running to the house.

"Mathias! Mathias!" He kept shouting. We all begun to cry and jump for joy, Mathias had sent a telegram.

MXT344 ORIG FLORIDA UNITED STATES

Mr & Mrs Chapman 09 Bricken

Road. Sheldon, Alabama.

Dear Mama & Papa, I arrived in

Florida -(STOP)-Found work on the

railroad -(STOP)-I miss and love  
everyone -(STOP)-Tell Miss  
Wickersham thank you for me  
-(STOP)-Have you seen Geraldine? If  
you see her-Well, if you do, did she  
have the baby? I still love her so  
much -(STOP)-Will write soon  
-(STOP)-

MATHIAS CHAPMAN - 3:45PM

He sent another telegram three months later, this time it was much shorter. Mama was worried and decided to visit him. The week leading up to her departure she fell ill, so Papa made the trip instead. However, Mathias was nowhere to be found and all communication simply stopped. It was as if he no longer existed and yet we waited. We waited for so many more years. Mama and Papa died waiting and so did Miss Wickersham. Our younger brother Ethan passed on also.



Still hoping and waiting, I made the decision to move away from Sheldon, Alabama to Augusta the same year Ethan Passed. Before I did, a letter arrived dated May 12, 1893, from Mathias. From the looks of it, the envelope showed signs of major hardship, mostly smeared ink which had bled from the letter itself. The only parts remaining intact was him saying, "*On my way home in a few weeks no matter what Geraldine's father says, I am going to marry her.*" He also said, "*I love Emily and Ethan too. Tell Miss W cke sham she will see her soon.*" The only other legible part was his signature. "*Mathias Chapman*".

He was coming home, that is what he said, but Mathias' destiny had always been one of an uncertain life ushered in by the *Dawn of Hope*. On a cold rainy night he arrived into the world and sometimes those cold nights comfort me. I often read his telegrams and his letter knowing he would come, and when I hear the trains running steadily through the south my eyes grow teary. The sounds do linger- maybe, just maybe, with a sliver of hope I am not the only one left and Mathias is on his way home.