

Daily Lenten Devotional
Saturday, March 15, 2025
Written by Rev. Fred Garry

Every step of the way we walk the line
Your days are numbered, so are mine
Time is pilin' up, we struggle and we scrape
We're all boxed in, nowhere to escape

City's just a jungle, more games to play
Trapped in the heart of it, trying to get away
I was raised in the country, I been workin' in the town
I been in trouble ever since I set my suitcase down

Got nothing for you, I had nothing before
Don't even have anything for myself anymore
Sky full of fire, pain pourin' down
Nothing you can sell me, I'll see you around

All my powers of expression and thoughts so sublime
Could never do you justice in reason or rhyme
Only one thing I did wrong
Stayed in Mississippi a day too long

Bob Dylan, "Mississippi"

When you speak to people who have done a fair amount of genealogy work, they are sure to speak of surprises. Connections, places, events, both good and bad, emerge almost out of thin air. Once you get beyond your "living memory," the voices of the four current generations, it is as if we are uncovering lost treasure. Our life becomes an archeological site where we discover parts of ourselves we had never seen or known as a part of us.

This was profoundly true for me with Mississippi. Chickasaw, Mississippi that is.

Doing the genealogy of my paternal ancestors, I found a long stretch, a century of "Whitts," in the hill country just north of Houston and east of Oxford. They came from Alabama after the Civil War and remained for many generations.

My first foray to Chickasaw was a detour. Driving from New Orleans to New Jersey in the summer of 2021, if I turned North at Meridian, it would add only a few hours to the three-day drive. This was my first pilgrimage after discovering who my biological father was. I distinctly remember the feeling of being an intruder, an unwelcomed guest. I had a dread that only the illegitimate can know. With each mile after Meridian I had an overwhelming desire to turn back. This was foolish; what was I going to see?

And then I realized that Chickasaw was a county. It wasn't a place so much as land mass of 504 square miles. What I was really looking for was Buena Vista which is a non-descript stretch of farmland on Country Route 406. My lack of understanding was remedied by paying closer attention to the map, but it only worsened my sense of being an interloper.

When Google Maps said "you've arrived", I pulled over on the side of the road. Looking to the left there were a few houses, but nothing that wasn't built in the last thirty years. Looking to the right I spied some wrought iron. Sure enough, there was a cemetery. Walking around the fence I found the gate and entered. Taking the strategy of walking back and forth through each row my sense of folly increased. And then, just when I was ready to give up, there they were. Whitt after Whitt after Whitt. I had no idea who they were. They died long before I was born and I had only known my connection to them for a few years, but they were.

A year later, I would come armed with better information, with specific graves to find. Yet, the important step had been taken. I found a piece of myself, a missing piece. Mine was not the story of a long-lost brother reunited with family who embraced him with open arms. It was a rural cemetery on the side of a county route where I was probably the only visitor for quite some time.

Not long after that first visit I read Isabel Wilkerson's wonderful book, *Caste*. This is an amazing look at American history and the influence of race and station in culture. Finishing *Caste* I sat down to read her first book *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. This too is a fascinating book exploring the exodus of people from the south who traveled in great numbers to New York City, to Chicago, and to Los Angeles. She chronicles the lives of people who fled Jim Crow and looked for work in the major cities. Reading *The Warmth of Other Suns* I saw a whole different America, a restless, unbounded quality which I thought ended in the 19th century.

I will never forget opening *The Warmth of Other Suns* to the first page. I reads:

Leaving
This land is first and foremost
his handiwork.
It was he who brought order
out of primeval wilderness . . .
Wherever one looks in this land,
whatever one sees that is the work of man,
was erected by the toiling
straining bodies of blacks.
—David L. Cohn, *God shakes Creation*

They fly from the land that bore them.
—W.H. Stillwell

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Chickasaw County, Mississippi, late October 1937

Ida Mae Brandon Gladney

Ida Mae's story was her journey beyond Mississippi to Chicago. Three years later my grandfather, Van Don Whitt would do the same. Only he ventured to California. Although Ida Mae's flight was certainly different being black and a woman, theirs was a common story of people trying to escape poverty in the rural South. Both left while the depression was ravaging the country, both left hard scrabble lives for the possibility of a better life.

There is no monument or memorial for Ida Mae; Van Don Whitt does not even have a grave stone. They are not heroic. Indeed my grandfather will be remembered for cowardice. Yet, their memory, the place they keep in living memory is the museum we construct within us. Their lives, remembered, become a place to see history from a whole other place, the personal.

Whenever a statue is constructed to honor someone there is always the risk of scandal. Why this one? Why make so much of them? There is also the possibility that parts of their lives will come to life and call into question the propriety of honor. What Kierkegaard called the "scandal of the particular" is always a threat. Certainly in any genealogy work there is a chance you will uncover something you would rather not have known. There is always a chance we may owe more to memory than ever considered possible.





