

Another Thread in the Ragged Weave

Every time I try to imagine the life of William Halbert, my mind runs mad with accusation and lament, then goes numb and silent. So I try again.

William Halbert, blue eyes, stout, fought in the Virginia Militia in the Waff Independence.1st Regiment, LightDragoons. For his service, Thomas Jefferson gave him 486 acres on Russell Creek in South Carolina.

He was a pious man, no doubt about it, and very much a man of means. A Couple of weeks after Abraham Lincoln's birth, March 5, 1809, "Knowing it's appointed for all men to die" he commended his soul to Almighty God, his body to the earth and "the world plantation whereon now I live, also my household full estate it has pleased God to blessed me with," he disposed to his beloved wife Elizabeth Hill Halbert, his children and grandchildren.

To Elizabeth "two hundred acres of land, including the plantation whereon now I live, 1 household furniture with all my stock of old ne-

groes and other stock of all kinds during her natural life of widowhood.”

Some of the negroes had names.

With his coming of age, son Joel got Sal and Mose. Enos got Reda. James got young negro Peter and others I gave or put in his possession.” Daughters Martha, Mary, and Lucinda got a couple of nameless negroes each with horses, saddles, and furniture.

God had apparently blessed William Halbert with quite a lot of Negroes to be bred alongside other stock for

three generations until Emancipation. Wealth, one hopes, generates wealth.

Let's flash forward a few generations. Best I can tell, my grandfather, Herbert Hill.

He was the great great, great, great grandson of Halbert's brother-in-law, the Reverend William Hill, also pious and having a plantation of its own, but Herbert was born to the zinc and copper mines of Magdalena, New Mexico, fathered my dad, Milford Lee Hill, and his little brother Tommy with my Scottish-American Granma, Lorena.

Lorena got wild and desperate with the Depression. Herbert was in and out of jail and prison, forging checks and such. The ultimate absentee Father.

Lorena told her kids that their dad was shot escaping from prison.

“Your children will never be accepted by either side of the family.” wrote Lorena to dad when he introduced Adelina -- my Mexican-American mom.

In fact, the six of us were easily accepted by my Latino kin.

Ordinary American Mongrels, or “coyotes” as we were called in New Mexico. White kids, who are nonetheless Mexicans who are obviously white.

Lorena got Jesus and multiply remarried

Lastly to Mr. Tidwell. Tidwell nursed her as Alzheimer's ate away at her brain. Rumor has it

(unsubstantiated)

That Tidwell was in the KKK.

Quite substantiated, he was a stone-cold racist.

Family. Familia.

A month before dad died of alcoholism, his final exchange with his mom was, "You have never understood me."

And indeed how could she.

He declared himself Alamogordo's first Buddhist at fourteen, was a self-taught intellectual, agreed to raise his children as Catholic. Was rather more compelled by Lao Tzu than Billy Graham. Praise be to his drunken Buddhist soul, he broke ranks and paid the price. Paying the price he left a spiritual legacy to his children more generous than that left for him.

To trace, the little bit, of the procession of the ancestors in my body. Have known my father's bitter despair, the raw truths he could never shake. How much we want our ancestors to be noble and to ennoble us with their greatness or failing that be decently anonymous rising in time and disappearing wave after wave. But the point is that each of us is an ancestor to the unborn, each a thread in the ragged weave.

And Herbert's vagrant, furtive mind, I knew the years I was homeless. Mercifully in jail only twice -- a lousy thief, a bad boy.

And William Halbert... I know him more intimately than I'll easily admit. My spiritual life these last thirty years has meant nothing at all if not the melting of interlarded layers of arrogance and rectitude and greed sanctified by Divine Right and the impulse to keep all of them under control -- my own demons or whoever else might disturb my complacency. We all recognize William Halbert, don't we? He's so damn loud on the daily news.

The amalgam of rectitude and arrogance with a dash of boas and shame and a shovelful of megalomania, let's call it the Halbert Effect. White male supremacy runs amok.

Apartheid in Rhodesia or slavery and Jim Crow in the US.

No need to name names.

We rely on the received clichés. Thanks for the worldly estate that it has pleased God to bless us with.

Half a billion people all over this world live on less than two dollars a day.

The plantation has become global.

We all know what (don't we?)

What will we leave those who survive us?

And their children?

Grandchildren?

By way of Postscript to this letter.

As write this 12,000 Somalis are being relocated in America,

120 to Edisto Island, where Halbert had a plantation.

Edisto was one of the Bantu beachheads in the United States the Gullah (from Angola) people keeping faith with the Ways of the Motherland these centuries to a measure exceedingly rare in North America

And the Somalis? Well, they are "heathens" from the south of that benighted country, bought and sold as slaves by the Muslim north. Dirt poor. Without English. Having never seen a refrigerator or an indoor bathroom. Unable to drive.

But, praise God, no longer slaves.