

The Civil War tribulations of Martha Whitehead are retold in this sensitive account of her life. Growing up amid constant change and questioned loyalties the wisdom of her grandparents and the gentle love of a young man hold her world together. Written as a narrative, this biography is brought to life by its gripping story line and dialogue.

Miss Martha's Cross

by Roseann Thomas

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*Miss Martha's
Cross*



Roseann Thomas

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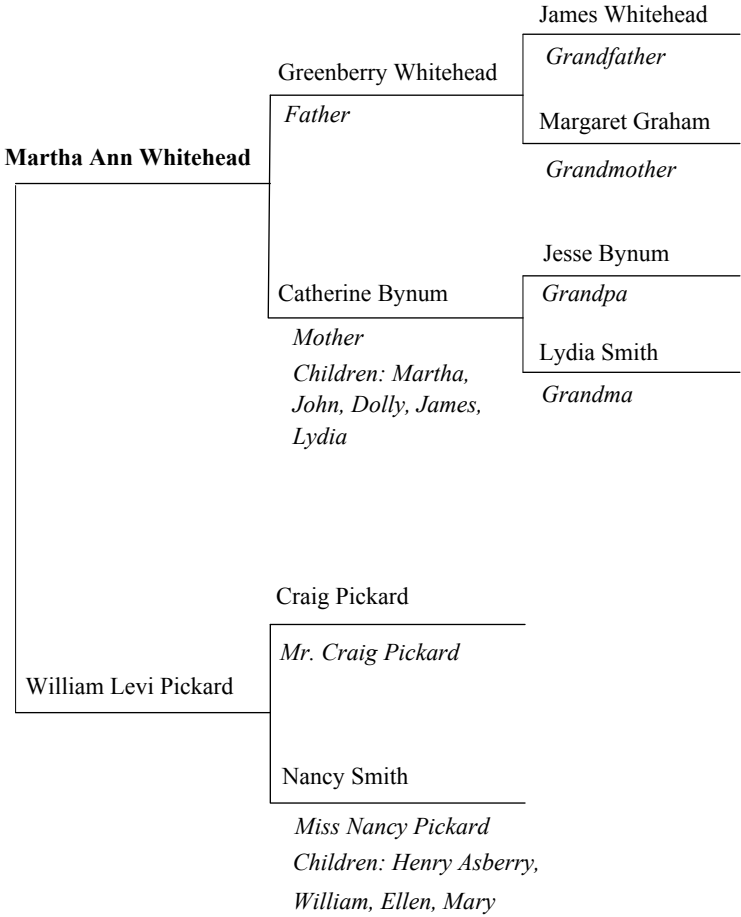
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Family Pedigree



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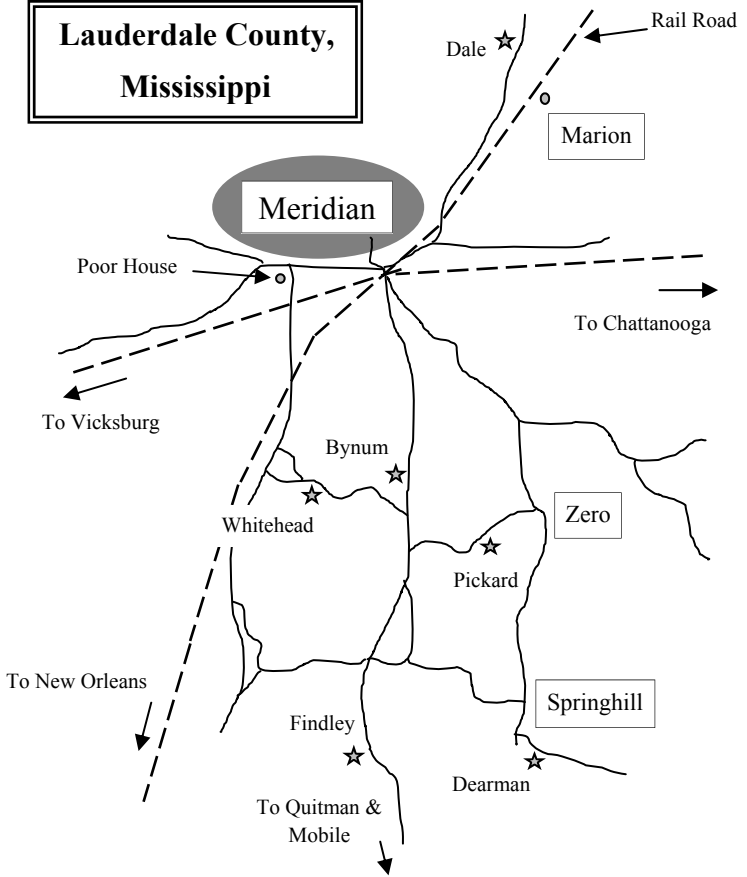


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PROLOGUE

~ SUMMER 1961 ~
STINSON CEMETERY

I squirmed back into the heat of the vinyl bench. My sticky legs stretched out, my feet wiggling in rebellion of Mississippi summers.

“It’s got to be off to the right.”

“What’ll we do there?”

“Just visit,” Mother replied. “Visit and remember.”

I had nothing to remember and Mother’s lack of visits to the cemetery in the last twenty years held no conviction that I’d find anything of worth. The next few miles dragged us down the hill, past a run down honky-tonk, the water works, and kudzu. The old Buick slowed at every entrance. Why didn’t we have air conditioning, my head screamed.

“Anne, this is it!” she cried at last, “Stinson Cemetery where my grandparents are buried”.

The low dirt road to the right was nearly concealed by branches laden with twisted vines and trash.

“And there’s the old fence,” she said excitedly.

I lumbered out of the car swinging the box Kodak with weariness.

“What’s so important about an old fence?”

“Everything.”

I followed her through crabgrass and pine needles to where she had stopped at a tall pointed tombstone. It read “William Levi Pickard CSA.”

“This is where your great-grandfather is buried,” Mother informed me. “See the CSA. He was in the Confederate States Army. And I believe his wife, Martha Ann, must be buried alongside him.”

There was no stone to mark the depression in the clay. Not a thing to show that she had even lived.

“He was a good man. I wish you could have known him.”

The way Mother looked I wished I had known him too.

“I stood right where we’re standing now the day he was brought here. I was ten then but I remember it as if it were yesterday. It was drizzling off and on. My dress was getting wet. I held on tight to my mama’s hand, and cried and cried. But that’s not what I remember most. Something happened that day that I’ll never forget.”

“What?”

“Well, down there around the bend in the road came a group of colored folks. Colored folks were what we called Blacks or African-Americans in my day. Most of them were singing, some were crying, all dressed up clean out of respect for my Grandpa Bill. They came and stood on the other side of that broken down wire fence.”

“Why didn’t they come and stand next to you?”

“That’s just what I asked my mama. ‘Why don’t they come over here? They loved Grandpa Bill, too.’ And she said, ‘Can’t. It ain’t allowed’.”

“That wasn’t right,” I said.

“No, that wasn’t right, but that’s just how it was.” Mother lifted my face between her hands and looked me in the eye. “Never forget what I’m going to tell you. Fences aren’t meant for people. Rich, poor, black, white, it doesn’t matter. There shouldn’t be any fences between people. Especially the kind you can’t see. And when you get older and the dark cloudy days seem to go on forever, right and wrong might seem to get all mixed up together. You’ve got to live by the light shining in you. You’ve got to live by what your heart’s telling you to do. Your heart knows what’s right. It’ll help you stand up to any trouble that comes your way. Live like my Grandpa Bill and Grandma Martha did. Live strong and tall like some

of the other folks that are buried here; like their parents, your ancestors. Come on back to the car now and I'll show you something that belonged to Grandma Martha."

I was only too glad to get back into the car. The afternoon heat had been exchanged for rain, but when Mother crawled behind the steering wheel and picked up a paper grocery bag, I wondered what I was about to be subjected to. To my surprise she handed me a broken relic. Papers and ribbons were poking out of an old dilapidated Bible whose cover was missing and edges burnt. Like me it had been dragged along.

"This Bible once belonged to your great-great-grandfather, Greenberry Whitehead. He was my Grandma Martha's father. Then when he died it passed to her."

"Do you remember her?"

"No, but all her memories and special keepsakes are here. They have a story to tell. Look, I'll show you."

She opened the book, holding its torn pages together with one hand, catching bits from falling with the other. Among the scriptures were pressed violets, yellowed newspaper clippings, bits of paper scribbled with recipes. Pieces of fabric, postcards, letters and baby curls were there. Yet it was a bookmark that caught my eye. A simple bookmark with the initials M.P. stitched in gold thread fell into my hand. I fingered it with awe and delight.

"Grandma Martha loved this bookmark I've been told. Pretty, isn't it?"

It was pretty. My great-grandma Martha must have thought so, too.

"Oh, and this must have been her favorite recipe for pie crusts," Mother cried. "See how it's been handled? Torn at the corners and spotted with butter. And here are some letters. And this must have been part of her journal."

Mother unfolded the brittle papers and the key to my understanding.

CHAPTER ONE

~WINTER 1863~
OFF TO WAR

The morning Father left for war no birds sang. No, not a one. Nor did the wind move in the trees, nor did the sun break through the clouds. All was still that day. Only the clang of our milker's bell swinging below her broad simple eyes held no fear. Our life was changing. I didn't know how much, rather I sensed that with each parting step that Father took, his path would alter mine.

He hadn't waited to be called up, recruited they called it, but had run up to Attalaville on the Yazoo River near Poplar Creek with a bunch of men to join up. Back they had come filled with high hopes and boasts of how they'd make short work of the boys in blue. Father had always been impetuous, heaven knows, but whatever clear headedness he did possess had been eclipsed with what Mother called "big talk".

For months every time folks got together it was, "When we gonna do something about those know-it-all Northerners? They don't understand the way things are done here." I never knew what people meant. Didn't everyone, everywhere wake up, work, love, eat, and go to sleep when the sun went down? Weren't we all God's creations except maybe for men who were so full of mischief and hate they couldn't see beyond themselves? Mother, who could see good in everyone, would tell me to hush such talk.

Whatever had been said, Father was walking down our red muddy road into the unknown. As he slipped from view all I could think of at fifteen was myself. I wondered what would I do without him? How much work would I have to do? How much time would be spent waiting for him to walk back into my life?

Mother wrapped her arm around my waist as if to affirm her strength and my security. "Baby's crying," she whispered.

Little James had been crying a good part of the morning. Like the rest of us he somehow knew his life was being turned upside down.

"I'll take him, Mother," I offered.

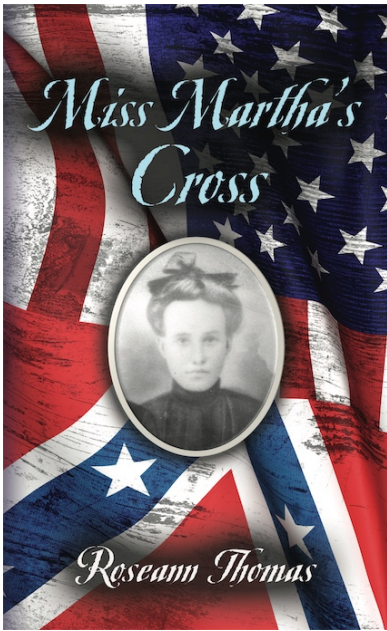
"I need to hold on to something just now. Get on with tending the chickens."

Her few words held layers of insight. Whatever her thoughts these past months, her straight, lean body had kept a steady pace to work through the dull ache of anticipation. My father, on the other hand, had danced that morning with the excitement only he could feel. Maybe it was because he was a red headed Irishman. I didn't know, but between the two of them they hoped for the best and feared the worst.

"Better get the cow milked too, Martha. She doesn't know there's a war on."

A war nobody should want, I thought. Men hunting each other down seemed inhuman somehow. Were our men forced into doing what they didn't want to do? I wondered if Mother felt the same.

It wasn't until the next afternoon that I regained a sense of normalcy. Busy with chores, I had less time for my thoughts. For my brother, John, however, coming to grips with Father's parting was another matter. Four years younger than I, he was caught between childhood and the awkward days of youth. He was both outgoing and impulsive; and like Father, could be entranced by a whim. They were both changeable as water. I was soon to find that change would become constant for us.



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