

The buildup to a coming battle continues. Richard Bryan prepares for the coming confrontation with the Lake Bistineau contingent made up of mostly Union ex-convicts, turned soldiers turned deserters, turned outlaws.

The Tryst: Book Two of Conveyance

By Jeff Babb Willis

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THE TRYST

Book 2 of

Conveyance



JEFF BABB WILLIS

with C.K. Gurin

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This novel is fact-based fiction, passed down through the years to the author by elderly members of the author's own family. Stories were painstakingly verified with multiple family members privy to the same information; and further verified by area genealogists.

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CONVEYANCE – PRELUDE

The Reconstruction Years – 1865 - 1877

On April 9, 1865, the South surrendered, and Northern forces occupied the southern states, which were then reorganized into a part of the Union. Kentucky, New Jersey, and Delaware were states in which slavery remained legal.

On April 15th less than a week after the Confederate surrender, Lincoln was assassinated. Vice President Andrew Johnson assumed the presidency, bringing some of his personally owned slaves to the White House with him.

President Johnson quickly reneged on Lincoln's approval of forty acres and the loan of an army mule to heads of household among the newly freed slaves in South Carolina. Johnson returned ownership of land upon which forty thousand freedmen had already settled, to wealthy plantation owners, former slaveholders, from whom the land had been captured and confiscated during the war.

It took eight more months before the 13th Amendment to the Constitution was legally ratified on December 6,

1865, and with it, slavery was legally abolished across the entire United States of America.

Close on the heels of the newly occupying Northern forces came strangers, some genuinely interested in helping recently freed slaves. Most of the ex-slaves could neither read nor write, and they struggled, as they tried to acclimate themselves to their new reality.

Others came South as well. A wave of profiteers, who cloaked themselves under the guise of helping former slaves, instead held personal financial gain and obtaining control of state and local governments, as their ultimate goal.

The profiteers came to be known as “Carpetbaggers” a disparaging reference to their vulture-like arrival during times of extreme stress and deprivation. Carpetbaggers, viewed as lowlifes who thrived on people’s misfortune, were frequently identifiable by their one-handled luggage, a compact, soft-sided bag typically constructed of cheap flowered carpet material.

Resentment ran high in the South. Citizens were being threatened, taken advantage of, and bullied by members of the occupying army, many of whom had

previously been recruited from Northern jails. And nobody was doing anything about it.

Peace was a thing of the past. In this new reality, it no longer mattered if you had argued against secession. You were branded a traitor, based simply upon where you happened to live when the war began.

Richard Bryan of Mt. Lebanon, Louisiana, whose story follows, was an influential citizen. Upon the passing of his well-off parents in Georgia, he and his siblings had each inherited a share of their parents' property and their forty-one servants. Opposed to selling the slaves and breaking up families to convert his share of the inheritance to cash, Bryan had traded his siblings for four thousand in gold plus the married couples and their children, who then packed up and moved with him to Louisiana. Bryan spoke of them respectfully as "the people."

Bryan, a consummate idealist, had a forward-looking outlook. Slavery had been an anachronism. Years before the war, he had offered emancipation to everyone on his plantation, hired a teacher, deeded land, shared profits, and encouraged entrepreneurs.

The Civil War devastated the South, but the war never reached his home. When Union occupiers finally arrived in Mt. Lebanon, they were astounded to find Bryan's experiment fully implemented. Former slaves could not only “read, write, and cipher,” they were landowners, homes had been built, they were engaged in a trade, some were even bilingual.

Pressure was being brought to bear on the South's most influential citizens by those seeking to advance a specific political agenda. If residents who had been identified as “influencers” agreed to join the political party which aggressively sought control of the newly conquered South, they would be offered favored treatment. Failure to acquiesce would not be viewed favorably.

Those who made what was viewed as a bargain with the devil were roundly cursed as “Scalawags” by their neighbors. Across the entire South, it could be said that scalawags were despised even more vehemently than the opportunistic carpetbaggers.

Richard Bryan, although he had chosen to emancipate and educate the people on his own many years before, and had deliberately kept quiet about it, was exactly what politicians were looking for to further their

agenda. But Bryan wasn't interested in being used for propaganda. Nor was he of a mind to allow the stunningly beautiful orphaned mixed race teenage daughter of his son's late governess and a wealthy New Orleans businessman, to be taken advantage of by one of the most famous Reconstruction era scalawags of all.

After the Confederate surrender, Richard Bryan, his extended family, their hired hands, the people, and a wounded Yankee deserter his young sons had stumbled upon in the woods and brought home with them, found themselves at the mercy of a corrupt Governor, political hacks, petty tyrants, and remorseless convicts in military uniform.

Not just rustlers but occupying troops would frequently raid farms. Often they'd steal entire harvests. If you resisted the men in uniform, they might hang you and burn your place down out of spite. There was no legal recourse against the government.

Food became scarce, hard money even more so. "Injun Grass" as it was known to those who smoked it, grew wild on their land. It was good quality, so they'd periodically harvest it and offer little poke bags of marijuana for sale to visitors who were passing through

on the stagecoach. Occasionally they'd even sell some to soldiers. Every penny counted.

They tightened their belts, quietly bartered for weapons, secretly manufactured ammunition, and killed in self-defense when they were faced with no other choice.

Their joint goal was survival.

Some of them would make it.

What transpired across the South might today be equated to legal, as well as militarized police brutality by occupying forces.

The experience of all, regardless of color, who lived through this traumatic and tumultuous time in history, burned itself deeply into America's collective psyche.

Conveyance

Book 2 - The Tryst

Where we are in the story...

Jayhawkers, Bushwhackers, and Outlaws.

13-year-old Frank Bryan could barely believe the events that had occurred during the prior 72 hours. Without question, they had been lucky. He now fully understood his father's thinking regarding the procurement of weapons and his decision to arm the people.

Four men, shabbily dressed in what looked like remnants of Union uniforms and homespun, had attacked the house at night while most of the plantation's men were away; they had not yet returned from driving a herd of cattle to market.

When the invaders breached the house, 14-year-old Will had grabbed his Springfield and attempted to cock it, but one of the men was too quick. He hit Will hard in the face with a dirty, balled-up fist. The boy had fallen to the floor, unconscious, blood gushing from his nose and mouth. His younger brother Frank fired his own Springfield at the attacker at point-blank range, hitting him squarely in the chest. From behind him,

Frank heard a double round of Springfield fire and, upon turning, realized that it had been Amos and Joseph who fired on two of the men. Behind them was Avery, who held his Springfield on the last man standing.

When the smoke cleared, two men were dead; the one with the leg wound was securely locked in a room in the barn; the fourth was going to be taken to jail.

Frank's father and the men who had accompanied him on the cattle drive had themselves been ambushed on their way home.

"There were twelve of them, seven of us," Richard Bryan told his family. "They jumped us. Harley managed to dust one of them with his double barrel before he took a round through the neck."

The boy's father had himself been shot, having taken a bullet through his hand. Luis was gut shot, and his survival was questionable. Billy had been nicked in the ear, missing death by a whisper. Doc Egan said Luis had been hit in the kidney, which might be survivable, but he worried the bullet had been left to fester for far too many hours.

All twelve of the attackers had been disposed of.

TRYST:

Middle English (trist), originally referred to a designated hunting station.

Conveyance

Book Two – The Tryst

Chapter One

The following morning, we began the trek to Sparta. It was an arduous endeavor.

Three mule-drawn wagons carrying collectively close to eight-hundred pounds of cotton were followed by a fourth wagon containing Harley Williams' remains. Daddy would have liked more efficiency in the transfer. However, the corpse was beginning to decompose. He realized that waiting for more cotton to be picked simply wasn't practical.

Otis Williams was grateful for the escort. He carried better than \$2000 in gold and greenbacks; his share of the cattle proceeds, plus the monies taken from the dead attackers. His small farm was almost one mile west of Sparta. Deputy Robert Love had offered to escort Otis and Viceroy to their farm. Daddy had subsequently volunteered to join them, taking George, Nathaniel, and Joseph with him. Will and I wanted to join the procession, but Daddy had refused. Upon conclusion of

our business in Sparta, we would return to Mt. Lebanon with Amos.

Viceroy looked positively regal astride the black stallion Daddy had gifted to him. He took the lead proudly, demonstrating his superior horsemanship.

We had spent the better part of the afternoon planning the short trip. By loading as much picked cotton as possible, and covering the sacked bolls with additional burlap, it made it possible to compress it to a more manageable bulk. The gin would remove the seeds before bailing the cotton tightly.

When we arrived in Sparta, we noted that the small town of 300 had practically doubled in size due to the traffic near the town's new cotton gin. Daddy had spoken briefly regarding the purchase of a gin for Mt. Lebanon. But, like the sawmill concept, it remained an idea.

We arrived at half past eleven that morning. By sundown, 788 pounds of cotton had been ginned, baled, and sold for the bargain price of \$5.88 per pound. Daddy was given a draft in the amount of \$4633, drawn on the Louisiana National Bank of New Orleans.

The Tryst

Initially, he was reluctant. A check for nearly five thousand dollars might ultimately “not be worth the paper it was written on!” This was the boisterous claim most often heard from those selling their cotton. Deputy Love assured Daddy that the buyer of the cotton, Excelsior Cotton and Hay Press Company of New York, was legitimate.

“They’re payin’ a dollar or so less than what it’s worth, but you’re sellin’ it here; not makin’ a trip to Shreveport, Coushatta Chute, or somewheres else down river,” Love had argued. He admitted to selling better than 500 pounds of his own cotton to Excelsior.

Daddy had slight misgivings about Otis’ decision to take his newly acquired wealth back to his small farm. The question became, “where” he would store it. Otis didn’t seem overly concerned, admitting that “Pa never trusted no bank, no how!” We hoped that he knew what he was doing.

That the cotton was worth more than \$5.88 per pound was beyond question. But his recent experience with the cattle had obviously weighed in on Daddy’s thinking. He and Amos estimated there to still be six to seven hundred pounds of cotton still not sold or even harvested.

It was after sundown when Amos, Will, and I returned to the plantation. We were astounded to learn that a dozen members of 68th USCT had arrived, with a white commanding officer, a “Captain Swanson,” not two hours after our morning departure.

Without explanation, Swanson had ordered two wagonloads of newly picked cotton, estimated to weigh nearly 400 pounds, confiscated. Roscoe had protested and had been shot. Fortunately, it was a shoulder wound. Aunt Ester had removed the slug within the hour.

“Dem bastahds gwyne sell dis cotton at dat same gin we wuz at dis mourin’! Jes you watch!” Amos spat angrily.

I could tell that Mama was unhappy that Daddy had chosen to accompany Otis to his farm, instead of returning immediately to Mt. Lebanon. Billy had been at Hector and Luis’ cabin when the incident occurred. Upon learning of it, he wanted to take Hector and several people and pursue Swanson and his men.

“No Billy.” Mama comforted. “At best, we would get our cotton back. But how many might not survive? It is not worth it.”

The Tryst

Luis was in great pain but was stubbornly hanging on. He seemed cheered by Miss Mayeaux's willingness to read to him. Some wild honey had come into the confectionery on trade the previous day. She was happily watching him devour it with gusto on Aunt Lizzie's hot, buttered biscuits.

Upon arrival, we learned that Lem had made it out of bed and had attempted to saddle the horse that he had ridden in on. But he was simply not up to it, collapsing not twenty-five paces from the door of his sickroom.

Uncle Elijah had ushered him back to bed, scolding him, "You is not fidin' ta leave jes yet, Missah Lem. You done lost lots of blood 'n yo body jes not up fuh it!"

Later that evening, I heard Amos talking quietly to Mama. He was clearly agitated.

"Miss Mary," he spoke slowly. "We's got mebbe foh hundred, foh hundred-fifty pounds lef' of cotton dat hadn't been picked. But iffen we fast, we kin pick it all next day 'o so's!"

“Dem soldier’s gwine ta be back when dey learns how much dat New York company’ll pay ‘em fo dis cotton! I know dat whut Mistah Richard’d do!” he added.

“When it’s not cattle, hogs or cornmeal, it’s cotton!” Mama wailed. “I declare we have more to fear from the Yankees and their thieving, occupying army than any “Lems or Rafes” we might come across!”

The next day Amos managed to fill up another wagon, estimating an additional 225-250 pounds of snow-white cotton bolls. He proposed taking the wagon to Sparta the following morning. Mama was almost convinced. Then, in midafternoon, Daddy, George, Nathaniel, and Joseph arrived with a warning.

“Soldiers stopped us on our return, just a mile north of here.” Daddy recounted, as he entered the house and made a beeline to the wash basin. “They inquired about our empty wagons, asking where the proceeds had been deposited.”

“What, pray tell did you say, Mr. Bryan?” Mama’s gaze was grim.

“I told him the truth.” Daddy laughed, drying his hands, and reaching for his saddlebag. Producing the bank draft, he handed it to Mama.

“You told him that you had a large bank draft from the Louisiana National Bank of New Orleans?” Mama wasn’t amused.

“That I did!”

“And they merely allowed you to pass?” Mama was as confused as I was!

“A bank draft made out to me, from Excelsior Cotton and Hay Press Company?” Daddy seemed a little annoyed that his wife was having a difficult time understanding the actual significance.

“Why did they let you pass, Daddy? Will asked.

“For one, they would be required to produce identification if they indeed were foolish enough to produce the draft at the bank.” Daddy explained. “Not to mention the fact that the remitter is a legitimate New York establishment. There would be a lot of explaining to do. Too much, I might add, for a low echelon thief of this magnitude!”

Daddy accepted Merriam's glass of cool tea and returned to the front porch. Taking a seat in a rocker he grimaced. "My hand is constantly reminding me that I was in a gunfight only a fortnight prior! It is good that we buried Harley early this morning. I grieve for Otis. But he is of solid stock."

"What about the rest of the cotton?" I asked.

"A good question, Franklin." Daddy applauded. "And one that has merited continuous cogitation! There are no easy solutions, unfortunately. We now have Yankee commandeering parties to the north, making sure that no potential cotton seller to the South takes advantage of the affable proximity of our new Sparta gin.

"To the east, as we have so sadly learned as of late, we have scoundrels, bushwhackers, jayhawkers, bummers, ruffians, Union soldiers and others masquerading as Union soldiers, all lusting for the valuable fruits of our labor!

"Thus, I am tempted to believe that our best course of action may be Coushatta Chute." Daddy concluded.

"Coushatta Chute?" Mama was stunned. "Richard, that is close to forty miles! With that kind of load, you could

be looking at least two, or more likely nearly three days travel.”

“True.” Daddy agreed. “I realize that the roads are hardly passable at certain times of the year. But this is October. And if there was ever an optimum time to use them, it’s now. And, I might add, there may be more limited company on those roads!”

“Yessuh, dey may be, but hit a long ways!” Amos had joined us on the porch and accepted a glass of tea from Merriam. “We done picked ‘nother wagonload o’ cotton and dey moh out daih. But I los’ mebbe mah best pickah in Roscoe. Dey mebbe two-three hundred mo’ poun’s cotton yet to be picked. But we’s ‘fraid mo Yankees show up like befoh ‘n take de res’!”

“These limitations notwithstanding,” Daddy rationalized. “there is a gin at Coushatta Chute. From what I understand, they are paying a superior price, as compared to the gin in Sparta. Additionally, it would be possible to subsequently board a packet to New Orleans, which, thanks to the nature of our transaction of yesterday, has now become an imperative.”

Mama frowned. “I don’t like this idea, Mr. Bryan. You’ll recall we read that the packet Kentucky went

down just this last June. They reported that it hit a snag. You know as well as I do that those partially submerged logs are always a problem in the Red River. The Shreveport Times reported 288 people were killed, including several children. And you would embark upon this dangerous route? This is, of course, under the assumption that you even make it to Coushatta Chute? I will tell you again that I do not like this option, Richard!" Mama added, almost tearfully.

"There is no doubt that it is dangerous, Mrs. Bryan." Daddy defended. "But I might add that our remaining options appear even less advantageous. That draft that you reviewed represents the earnings of everyone who has picked cotton on this plantation. There is more still to be produced. And, I might add, we have only yesterday suffered another horrific loss. I continuously asked myself, "How much will it take to make them happy? How much will it take to convince them to leave us alone?" And, I have found no answer to my prolonged questioning of this matter."

"Mistah Bob Love think you oughta staht a big sto hyar!" Amos shared.

"A store?" Mama smiled. "Amos, I have attempted to convince Mr. Bryan of such for years."

“Yes, Mrs. Bryan, you have. And, as you know, several of our neighbors have harbored similar aspirations. None have been overly successful. Today, we have one effort that has since become a furniture store. Another, officially a ‘drug store,’ is little more than a dispensary for the opium-conjured ‘tonic’ so embraced by many of the Mt. Lebanon ladies approaching middle age,” Daddy commented wryly. “As witnessed, I have somewhat acquiesced in the way of our small stage house confectionery. Even that proved fallible. We witnessed our Yankee friends and their inclination to engage in confiscation exercises.”

“Yes, but our little store sells mostly used items taken in on trade along with Aunt Naomi’s sweets.” Mama agreed.

“You did observe what happened when we were selling corn meal” Daddy reminded.

“True, the soldiers couldn’t wait to take it.” Mama acknowledged ruefully. “And we now know better than to stock meat or cornmeal. They’ll simply steal it again. But I am talking about clothing, turpentine, tallow, nails, lace, licorice, and even, God forbid, chewing tobacco and snuff. I am speaking of the kinds of merchandise generally seen at a country store!”

“The extension of credit nearly always accompanies the instigation of a store.” Daddy mournfully reminded her. “As you may recall, Mrs. Bryan, there were those who expressed indignation when we refused to accept their Louisiana notes for our products! And true, that issue is no longer in existence. But the universal expectation of the storekeeper’s willingness to render credit remains. If anything, the demand has increased! I would be more inclined to commence with a sawmill or even a cotton gin. I must also confess that the thought of selling Luther’s recipe and some of the other “fruits” of fermentation, even his so-called “Injun Grass” has crossed my mind.”

“And you even have Luther, who strikes me as sufficiently entrepreneurial, to serve as your manager!” Mama had evidently given the matter much thought. “After all, he does possess a college education. Needless to say, he is also one of the most industrious people that I have encountered!”

“Dat mebbe true, Missy Mary.” Amos said quietly. “But I dunno iffen de white folkes gwyne like a man ‘o color runnin’ dis hyar stoh! Mebbe work dah. Mebbe do a lot. But iffen he de manager, sum ‘o de mean ones make trouble!”

“I tend to agree with both of you.” Daddy offered. “Luther is one of the most industrious people around. But we have numerous angry people, who are targeting their impotent enmity at the Yankees upon our colored population instead. These are not the better parts of our society, mind you. They are those who are threatened by the world the Yankees apparently aspire to force upon us.”

“And what is that world, Richard?” Mama challenged.

“A world of suffrage, education and literacy.” Daddy pointed out. “We have practiced these principles for a decade on this plantation. But we have made it a point to remain in the shadows, allowing time for educational enlightenment to eventually make things right throughout the rest of our world, which I have no doubt that it ultimately will. We don’t know how long that will take, of course. But it’s a given that some are incapable of making allowances for what I warrant will be a natural progression.”

“He right, Missy Mary.” Amos’s eyes were sharp. “De freedom cum in little bites ‘n swallows. Not gulps! African folkses take dey time, like gettin’ ta know a stray dog! You nevah move fast. You touches ‘im slowly; let ‘im smell yo hand. He cum aroun’!”

“What we are seeing this day, Mrs. Bryan,” Daddy had assumed the role of a teacher, “are “black codes” where Southern laws are being revised to give lip service to emancipation while deliberately restricting its intent. This will undoubtedly result in conflict. Society is rearing its head, confronting the Yankees. Either the Yankees will retaliate, or they will back down. Sadly, I predict the former!

“The Yankees are ignorant of our ways. Yet they are pugnacious. They also fail to grasp the fact that Black-White relations are better than most think. Instead, they are influenced by other Northerners who have read something or known someone who had ventured South at some time in the past and had drawn their own conclusions.”

“And that conclusion would be what, Richard?” Mama was persistent.

“For the most part, Mrs. Bryan, they appear to believe it unfortunate that we cannot correct our fallacies of the past! Their opinion is that we are simply incapable of bringing the issue to successful closure, and only through the Yankees’ enlightened guidance can we return to societal sophistication, or what they consider “humanity.”

“Excuse me? Are you saying they think that we are less than human?” Mama’s eyes widened and her jaw dropped. She was mystified.

Daddy nodded. “They would never put it into such words, of course, and I am definitely not speaking of the majority. It is pretty much confined to a fragment of the North, perhaps less than 20%. I dare say most of them reside in the northeast where, as our friend Michael Hahn correctly pointed out, they enjoy comfortable and considerable ties to manufacturing, banking, and railroad interests.”

Mama sighed. “Can they be trusted, Richard?”

“Some most definitely can, Mrs. Bryan.” Daddy suddenly became animated. “But the objective is to locate these more fair-minded ones. What complicates matters is that many of these ‘fair-minded’ Yankees have suffered losses in the war. They are essentially good souls, have good hearts. But they grieve the way that Otis grieves over the untimely and unexpected demise of his father.”

“And you are thinking that you might engage with some of these ‘fair-minded’ ones at Coushatta Chute and New Orleans?” Mama asked doubtfully.

“Coushatta Chute isn’t much more than a “Chute” from Lake Bistineau to the River. Yet, once we make it to that cotton gin, half of our battle will be won! The Red River is no longer ‘one giant raft’! Not since Henry Shreve accomplished his goal of clearing it. This may indeed be the future of northwest Louisiana travel!” Daddy concluded excitedly.

“I think we kin have de res’ o’ dat cotton picked by sundown tomorry.” Amos predicted.

“Which would allow for our departure the following morning?” Daddy was thinking out loud.

“Richard Bryan! I do not want you to leave us again!” Mama’s voice had an edge to it. “I have waited in agony while you were tending business. Is there nobody who could handle some of it in your stead?”

“How, my dear?” Daddy’s voice was equally sharp. “People have labored long and hard, and are owed for their efforts. This plantation is starving for consumer items. We have perhaps another three thousand dollars in cotton still to be marketed. We have discussed the alternatives and, sadly, there are none forthcoming that present an advantageous alternative.”

“Who would you take this time, Richard? Billy? You would, no doubt, encounter Union soldiers. Perhaps he might be identified! We also have, if you haven’t forgotten, a man convalescing in the barn who attempted to rob this plantation.” Mama’s voice had become surprisingly shrill.

“I shall give the matter more thought.” Daddy signaled for the discussion’s conclusion. “I do want to talk to the young man in the barn.”

Will had been quietly drinking in every word of the discussion from the rocking chair that he occupied. Looking at Daddy he asked. “Are we going to turn him in tomorrow?”

I also spoke up. “Daddy why did you tell them that there were six men and one of them escaped?” I had been constantly pondering the question of “why” Daddy had slightly reconstructed the event.

“Boys,” Daddy began slowly. “Your Mother and I have talked about the young man in the barn. You are correct Franklin, in your comparison to Billy. Had we taken Billy at face value, we would have concluded that “hanging” would be the most logical remedy for his

transgression. I must admit that I considered turning him in to the Yankees. But, as you know, I did not.

“There was a reason. It is simply this: We currently live in a complicated, upside-down world. A lot of good men have done deeds that would contradict their previous standards. Is it fair that we judge them? Is it right that we condemn them? And if so, on whose authority are we to condemn them?”

“Are you saying that Lem might be another Billy?” Will asked innocently.

“There can never be but one Billy McFain!” Daddy laughed. “But like Billy, he has experienced some life-changing events, assuming, of course, that he is telling the truth. He could be like that other jayhawker, lying to save his skin. I might also note that his friend who went to Shreveport with the Pinkerton man is slated to be hung the day after tomorrow. Bob Love told me as much while we were in Sparta.”

An hour later, we were dining on turnip greens, purple hull peas, Irish potatoes, fried chicken, and cornbread. I couldn't remember being hungrier! The pecan pie that Aunt Naomi had made earlier in the day was especially delicious.

Following coffee, Daddy excused himself and sauntered out to the barn. Lem was finishing up his supper. Seeing Daddy's stoic face, he stiffened.

"I understand that you attempted to make a break for it yesterday." Daddy's expression was unchanged. "Uncle Elijah tells me that you fainted before you could mount your horse!"

"Yessir!" Lem replied truthfully.

"You noted that I said, 'your horse.' That might come as a surprise to think that a thief would settle for an inferior mount when there were at least a dozen superior ones in the same barn." Daddy's reasoning was a mixture of subtlety and baiting. "What was on your mind Brooks?"

"I didn't mean yore family no harm." Lem face reflected one of a caged animal. "I jes wanted to git outa here in one piece. I ain't interested in being taken to Shreveport to be hanged!"

"Well, unfortunately that is the fate of your friend Rafe, which I believe, was his name." Daddy said flatly. "He is to be hung day after tomorrow."

I saw that Mama had silently joined us. I looked at Daddy as he unconsciously massaged his injured hand. “Mr. Brooks, Lem, I heard your story. And, against my better judgment, I am inclined to believe you.” I noted that Billy had entered the barn and situated himself at the end of the bed. “This is Billy, by the way.” Daddy could tell that Lem was increasingly nervous.

“Whut you uns gonna do with me?” Lem asked hesitantly.

“Well, by rights, we should simply string you up right here on these grounds.” Daddy’s face remained unchanged. “And it would be a reasonable event if we merely turned you over to Deputy Love. What do you think, Billy?”

“This is one of them coyotes who broke into the house when we wuz gone?” Billy casually adjusted the angle of his slouch hat.

“It is.”

“Well, I’d be inclined to give him the same treatment as we did to that other jayhawker who pistol-whipped Aunt Rosa, wouldn’t you?” I could tell that Billy had already made up his mind.

“Well Billy,” Mama’s voice was penetrating. “It is quite fortuitous that you were not your own personal judge and jury!”

“Yessum, I see whut your sayin’!” Billy concurred. “Or I think I do!”

“I was there that night, Billy!” I barged into the conversation. “Lem tried to talk the others into leavin’. Then Joseph shot him.”

“Billy encountered similar misfortunes on his farm.” Daddy filled in. “Your story sounds amazingly comparable to his. In retrospect, being impressed into the Yankee army at gunpoint isn’t exactly too far removed from being rescued by a deserter turned jayhawker!”

“I don’t think I understand.” Lem’s face was white with fear.

“I think Mr. Bryan is asking you if you might like to stay on and work here on this plantation.” Mama cut to the chase.

“Work?” Lem’s face was blank in utter disbelief. “What about the hangin’?”

“Ain’t gonna be no hangin’, iffen you stay on!” Billy completed the scenario. “We ain’t got no loyalty to nobody ‘cept fer them livin’ on this plantation! You work hard and be loyal and Mr. Bryan’ll give you a home; a fresh start like he give me. You cross ’im and do any harm to this family and I’ll personally kill you!”

“Well said, Billy!” Daddy complimented him. “How well do you handle a six-shooter, Lem?”

“Tolerable.” I could not stop grinning in noting Lem’s face relax, undoubtedly shocked by his sudden good fortune.

“Good!” Daddy concluded. “Because I expect you to be able to ride the day after tomorrow. We will discuss your wages at that time. Right now, I want you to relax and get some sleep.”

“Yessir!” Lem was exuberant.

“And you’d better not fuck up!” Billy made certain that Mama had left the room before he issued his barely audible warning to the surprised Lem.

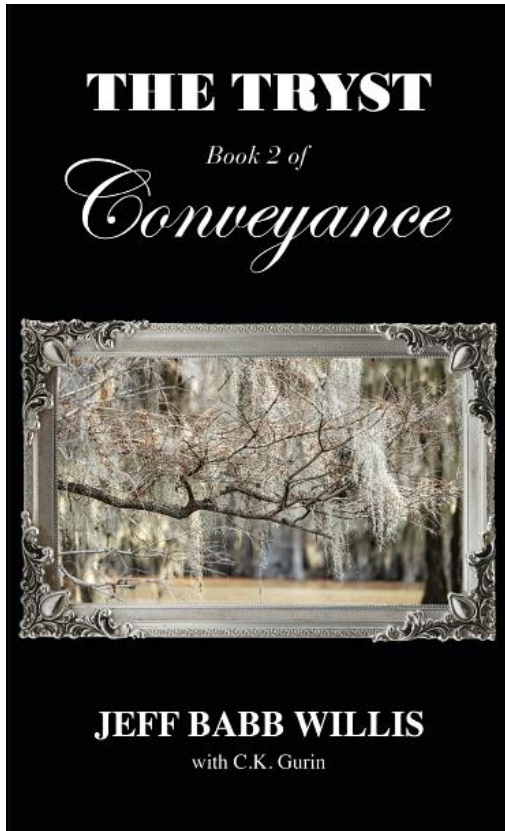
**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:
JEFF WILLIS**



Jeff Willis was born in El Dorado, Arkansas and attended Louisiana State University. He graduated in 1979 with a double major in Journalism and History. He worked in Broadcast Television for 20 years before switching to Banking/Financial Services in 1999. Willis published topical, "E" is for English in 2010.

In 2022 he completed the multi-part, thousand-plus page historical novel “Conveyance”, a riveting five book series following the true adventures of a Louisiana family which emancipated, educated, and deeded land to their slaves, a full five years before the Civil War. The family interacted, and had personal dealings with a number of historically notable people. They also found themselves forced, for the sake of personal survival, to kill or be killed, and to keep secrets. The first four books transpire during the Reconstruction era while the fifth book, “Aftermath” provides the results, along with a truly stunning conclusion, some twenty years later. The historical saga is scheduled to be evaluated by LSU Press.

Jeff Willis has lived in eight different southern states and enjoyed some of the south's finest cities, including, but not limited to, Asheville, North Carolina, Atlanta, Fayetteville, Arkansas, Lexington, Kentucky, Miami and Nashville. He has traveled extensively in Europe, Russia, including Siberia, and Alaska, and is conversant in Spanish and Russian.



The buildup to a coming battle continues. Richard Bryan prepares for the coming confrontation with the Lake Bistineau contingent made up of mostly Union ex-convicts, turned soldiers turned deserters, turned outlaws.

The Tryst: Book Two of Conveyance

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