

*In 1856, five years before the Civil War, Richard Bryan freed his slaves, educated them, deeded land, and shared profits. At war's end, Yankees wanted to use his success to promote their own agenda. He refused, and they turned on him.*

## **The Lull: Book Three of Conveyance**

By Jeff Babb Willis, with C.K. Willis

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# THE LULL

*Book 3 of*

# *Conveyance*



**JEFF BABB WILLIS**

with C.K. Gurin

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NOTE: 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 15<sup>th</sup> 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 13<sup>th</sup> 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-handed 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.

**Where we are in the story...**

**DEFENDING AGAINST**

**Jayhawkers, Bushwhackers, & Outlaws.**

Rather than risk a feared government confiscation of the plantation's newly matured cotton crop, nearly 800 pounds of it was hurriedly loaded onto two wagons and taken to the new cotton gin in Sparta. As an additional precaution, rather than risk armed robbery of the proceeds should he accept cash or gold, Richard Bryan chose to receive a bank draft, payable directly to him, for close to five thousand dollars. Concerned about remaining absent from his family's homestead longer than absolutely necessary, he also resolved to make a future trip to New Orleans, where he planned to open an account with the same bank on which the draft was drawn.

As feared, there was indeed a robbery attempt on the return trip, but since the bank draft was worthless to a bearer without proof of identity, Richard Bryan and his men were allowed to pass. To their dismay, upon their return home, it was learned that a dozen men dressed as Union soldiers had already paid the homestead a visit. The soldiers, under the command of a man who had identified himself as Captain Swanson, had confiscated roughly \$2,000 worth of the remaining

cotton crop and wounded Roscoe, the farm's best picker.

The soldiers would undoubtedly plan to return for the remainder of the valuable cotton. Richard Bryan knew he'd have to move fast to get the remaining cotton crop to market before that happened. But since Union soldiers, many believed to be imposters, were swarming the road between Mt. Lebanon and Sparta, it would be dangerous to attempt a return to the cotton gin there.

The alternative would be to attempt an equally risky 53-mile trip to a gin in Shreveport or go south via Coushatta Chute en route to New Orleans.

To Bryan's unmitigated disgust, yet another contingent of Union soldiers arrived at the plantation at the same time he had arrived. He declined to temper his outrage when addressing the leader of the current group, General William S. Mudgett.

But the general promptly disavowed all knowledge of Captain Swanson. "There have been reports of men, mostly deserters masquerading as Union officers, preying on farms and typically confiscating produce, including cotton yields, in the name of the United States military," Mudgett told him.

In an attempt to make amends, General Mudgett graciously agreed to provide a six-man military escort

## *The Lull*

to accompany Bryan's final load of cotton to Shreveport, which escort would be under the leadership of Lieutenant Oliver Briggs.

Thus, Richard Bryan was able to sell his remaining cotton at top price and, on his return trip, purchase desperately needed supplies valued at about a thousand dollars for the plantation's people.

Tragically, on the north side of Lake Bistineau, the small caravan was ambushed by Union Soldiers, led by the same "Captain Swanson" who had orchestrated the earlier theft of cotton from the plantation.

Lieutenant Briggs and Richard Bryan were both badly wounded. In all, the brutal ambush claimed eight lives, including four of the six Union soldiers who had been assigned to guard Richard Bryan and his men. The surviving attackers were driven off, and a large portion of the proceeds from the previously stolen cotton was recovered by Bryan's men.

The concern next turned to a growing ensemble of Union deserters, Jayhawkers, and outlaws who were now camped at Lake Bistineau, which was scarcely 15 miles from the homestead.

Knowing that these men, many of whom were former convicts, posed a threat to innocent lives as well as the plantation itself, Bryan began a concerted effort to

acquire firearms, ammunition, and manpower.

He then employed Sparta “tinker” Cecil Taylor whose job it became to repair a large cache of weapons and manufacture munitions. The people of the plantation worked together to construct a tryst (the term for a hunting station) in an attempt to forestall a surprise attack from the marauding soldiers by cleverly drawing the dangerous invaders into a trap.

The people of the plantation remained determined to work together, and fight to the death, if necessary, to save their home.

# Conveyance

## Book Three - The Lull

### Chapter One

Corporal Slats and Lem gingerly eased the wounded man from the back of the wagon. His bloody and bedraggled body resembled a dirty clump of rags lying beneath the soiled remains of a Union uniform.

“He still alive?” Will called, bounding down the stairs.

“Barely!” Slats advised.

“Take him inside and set him down on the floor,” Daddy ordered. “Will, please retrieve Aunt Ester. Frank, please advise Chantilly to hurry and bring us some old quilts to lay him on.”

Minutes later, the wounded man was lying on two faded quilts that Chantilly had carefully spread on the hall’s hardwood floor and resting fitfully. Mama looked critically at the man, his shallow breathing somewhat unnerving. “Doesn’t appear particularly comfortable,” she exclaimed, looking at Daddy who was entering the house.

“I didn’t think that he would make it this far.” Daddy admitted. “We found him at what was the rustler’s camp. Evidently his companions left him behind.”

“Well, he certainly is filthy!” Mama made a face. “We shall need to clean him up.”

“If he doesn’t expire, we may be able to obtain formative information from him regarding the identity and intent of his former compatriots,” Daddy suggested.

“Whehr de huht man?” It was Aunt Ester, who followed Will to the front hallway. Gradually unbuttoning his tattered blouse, she winced. “He need a bath, dat’s fo shoh! Lemme see, hyer. Uh-oh. Dat’s not good. It look like he done tuk a minié ball trew da side, but...Ah think it went trew ‘im; all de way. Dat good anyways!”

Daddy had talked to us about the damage minié-balls could do. He used the French pronunciation, mee-nyay. The muzzle-loading ammunition was used by both Confederate as well as Union forces. Invented by a French army officer, Claude-Etienne Minié for whom it was named. As he spoke, Daddy had held a short, fat, cylindrical bullet about an inch in length with a series of three cylindrical ridges, positioned toward the bottom end. There was a hollow base, he explained, which contained an iron plug with lead skirting that expanded when fired. The soft lead would expand

within the rifle barrel, then flatten out or splinter when it struck its unfortunate target. It was designed to do maximum damage to a human body, a vicious and horrifically deadly bullet, which shattered bones and ripped tissue.

Signaling Chantilly to bring water, Aunt Ester unwound the crudely applied bandages. They were caked with dried blood. The man moaned. “Ah sees ‘notha minié ball, ah believe still in daih. See it?” Aunt Ester pointed to a purple and black indentation near the top of the right shoulder.

“Can you extract it, Aunt Ester?” Mama quizzed.

“Yessum.” The old woman retorted. “Ah need sum ‘o Lutha’s recipe. Chanti, hand me sum clean rags. We git it out!”

With an expert hand, Aunt Ester skillfully located and removed the minié ball. “Got it!” she exulted. “All’s of it! Now les’ wash dis poh soul ‘n git ‘im somewehrs bettah dan de flo! Dat is iffen you wants ‘im ta be wit us tomorry!”

“Do you think he’ll live?” I asked.

“Dat up ta de lawd, chile!” Aunt Ester answered, shaking her head.



“Place him over in the corner.” Daddy motioned to Billy, who had returned carrying an unused camp cot. “I want a guard near him tonight. You can never anticipate how rapidly one might recover!”

“Ah, Mistah Richard, dis man ain’t gwyne nowheres!” Aunt Ester predicted. “He done los a lotta blood. I doen know how he done made it on dat bumpy wagon fo fifteen mile like he done!”

“Perhaps we should render our prayers for his immediate safety and survival.” Mama’s comment was uncharacteristically idealistic.

“I ain’t prayin’ fer no varmit!” Billy scoffed.

“We done found sum broke rifles ‘n sich over thar at the lake.” Lem mentioned. “Hit’s still on the wagon. I reckon ah need take em into the barn.”

“Well, Mr. Bryan, I have been nearly overcome with anxiety this day.” Mama said tartly. “Now you have returned with a near-dead adversary and some broken rifles to show for it! I trust your excursion proved beneficial!”

“It will prove most beneficial, if our injured guest survives; and provides us with pertinent information regarding the whereabouts of his accomplices.” Daddy defended.

“Well it appears that you shall have some long overdue assistance” Mama quickly related Deputy Love’s visit and promise of a posse.

“Thank the good Lord!” Daddy exhaled. “I had hoped that his assertion might yield fruitful results!”

“I believe he said that Mr. Lewis and Mr. Mayfield were among the party.” Mama related. “And perhaps even Mr. Smith.”

“Felix’s too old for such antics.” Daddy mused. “I don’t know about Mayfield. “Dog” Smith? Now, there is a gentleman with whom I would not relish confrontation! From what I have gathered, Mrs. Bryan, he’s on a personal mission to “cleanse” the parish of former Northern ex-convicts, posing as ex-Union soldiers.”

I had met Mr. Smith. I remembered his sitting abreast his tall black stallion, his angry, snarling face spewing tobacco juice between profane gestures. “Daddy, is it true that “Dog” Smith killed a dozen Yankees by himself at the battle of Mansfield?” I asked.

“I am not certain, Frank.” Daddy professed. “But, I know that he has no love for any Yankee. Their Cavalry burned his farmhouse and killed his Aunt and Uncle. I think it was accidental but they were apparently in that farmhouse when it was fired. Those dear people; and I had met them, God rest their souls, raised Smith from

the time when he was orphaned as a boy. Now, he seeks revenge!”

“Dear God! Cannot this endless killing cease!” Mama exclaimed.

“That has always been my aspiration,” Daddy said sadly. “It is like a festering wound. You see it scab over, appearing to heal, and then somehow the scab is removed, again revealing the painful wound that we continue to endure.”

The following morning over a bountiful breakfast of scrambled eggs, hominy, country ham, slab bacon, and biscuits, we were interrupted first by dogs barking and, shortly afterward, a loud knocking on the front door. It was Gus Coleman who had arrived with somber news.

Ushering Coleman into the dining room, Daddy motioned to Merriam to bring an additional plate while introducing him to Guy, Lem, Bucky, and Slats. Gratefully accepting a hot cup of coffee, Coleman related. “William Key died last night. I understand he went quietly, in his sleep.”

“When will funeral proceedings commence?” Daddy asked with little emotion.

“Tomorrow, I ‘spect.” Coleman forked his eggs.

I had last seen Mr. Key on my birthday, the previous August. He was a kindly man, who went out of his way to call people he knew by their Christian name. He seemed to have a knack for remembering names Mama had once mentioned.

“He was a good man.” Daddy acknowledged. “How is his family holding up?”

“They’re all takin’ in stride.” Coleman was buttering his second biscuit. “I think they said that he was sixty-six years old.”

“At least he lived to be an old man,” Daddy said ruefully. “That has no longer been a given during these recent, should we say, turbulent years.”

“Who’s the stranger bunked down in y’all’s front hallway?” Coleman inquired.

“One of those lakefront rustlers, you no doubt have heard about, Gus.” Daddy acknowledged. “I know that Deputy Love said that he relayed the information to Isaac last month.” Daddy referenced Gus’s father.

“So y’all got one of ‘em, did ya?” Gus’ eyes showed interest as he forked a large slice of country ham. “I was thinkin’ that it was all a big rumor. Over in Brush Valley, we hear a lot of rumors. But, this ’un was the real thing.”

“You bet your ass it’s the real thing!” Billy, who had been quiet, spoke up.

Looking at Billy skeptically, Gus’ eyes narrowed. “You’re that guy from up ‘round Evansville way, if memory serves me correctly.”

“Gus,” Daddy explained. “we have lived in fear of these lakefront ruffians for months. You may have heard of the altercation several months ago on a return from Shreveport. Four Union soldiers were killed and their Lieutenant Briggs was badly wounded.

“Corporal Slats here, witnessed the entire donnybrook; as a Union Cavalryman. Upon his discharge, he opted to come to Mt. Lebanon permanently where we were fortunate enough to accommodate him.

“Private Buckwalter accompanied him. Lem is originally from the Nations. He fought under General Pike. You may have heard about Lieutenant Lebeau, who is originally from Thibodaux. He served in Virginia, initially under General Beauregard and later under General Early.”

“Sounds like you’ve been buildin’ your own little army here, Mr. Bryan.” Coleman was clearly impressed. “Them Mexicans still with you?”

“They most certainly are,” Mama interjected, motioning Merriam for a second cup of coffee. “They

spent the New Year at Coushatta Chute. Hector has taken a fancy to a Sabine girl; I believe her name is Carmen. We are anticipating wedding bells to be imminent.”

“Well, I’m not too happy ‘bout my baby sister, if you hadn’t already heard!” Gus pushed his plate back and signaled for more coffee. Noting the puzzled look in everyone’s eyes, he continued. “Yessir, Adele seems to have taken a liking to that carpetbagger, Twitchell.”

“You’re serious, Gus?” Daddy’s eyes showed sincere amazement.

“God’s truth!” I could tell that Gus was embarrassed by the revelation. “I tried to talk some sense into her yesterdee, but she...well, you know Adele!”

“Isn’t she moving to Sparta to teach music at the school?” Mama asked.

“Yessum. And, unfortunately, stayin’ at the same hotel that Twitchell’s residin’” I could feel the pain in Coleman’s voice. “They’ve been takin’ their meals together. I heard about it from Johnny Scanland jus’ las night!”

“Scanland’s been sweet on your sister for quite some time, from what I gathered.” Mama was motioning to Merriam to begin clearing the table. “Merriam, please tell Aunt Lizzie that her hominy was heavenly!”

“It shore wuz!” Lem seconded.

The men gradually arose from the table and sauntered into the hallway. I had noticed that the stranger had awakened. Daddy pulled up a chair and peered into his half-opened eyes. “Close one, Corporal!” he acknowledged the two stripes on the man’s tattered blouse.

Coleman looked down at the injured man. “Y’all brought this one from that Lake Bistineau camp?”

Guy had been listening to the dialogue, apparently enjoying the discussion centered around Adele Coleman. With a twinkle in his eye he soothed. “Well Gus, jes be glad dat she’s aliahve. We do take dat foh granted sometiahme.”

“Where am I?” The stranger on the camp bed inquired, adjusting to the morning light. “Who are you folks?”

“I will be asking the questions,” Daddy said firmly. “Starting with your name, son.”

“Denny.” The man seemed to be groping through a thick mist. “Denny Hargrave.”

“And where might you hail from, Denny?” Daddy’s tone was without emotion.

“Kansas. Near LeCompton. How’d I git here?” he asked weakly. The man had a now familiar Midwestern accent.

“We brung you, how’d you think you got here!” Billy’s voice was caustic.

“Hold on, Billy.” Daddy consoled. “Let us see what Denny has to say. LeCompton? I have heard that name. Oh yes! The LeCompton constitution! That is where those citizens who proposed Kansas joining the Union as a slave state drew up their constitution. And, what might you be doing in north Louisiana, Denny?”

“When I was discharged, I was working my way homeward.” The wounded stranger replied.

“From where?” Daddy asked.

“South of here. I’d been in a military hospital for months.” Denny replied. “I was wounded at the battle of Mansfield.”

“That’s bullshit, Mr. Bryan.” Billy accused.

“No it ain’t!” Denny countered with a puzzled frown. “Look at my right thigh and left forearm. I was shot twicet!”

“You were discharged, after spending months convalescing in an army hospital?” Daddy’s tone



showed mild disbelief. “What were you doing on the lake? You are certainly aware that that contingent is quite disagreeable! We have skirmished with them for months. We have killed and captured men from it. Tell me, sir! Why were you with them and why did we find you wounded?”

“I tolt you!” Denny gasped.

“Well, I should think that you are famished from your experience. Merriam will feed you and we will discuss your event further.” Daddy dismissed.

Accompanying Gus Coleman to the front porch, Daddy continued. “So, they are burying Will Key tomorrow. At the church, I presume.”

The weather was warmer this morning, the usual pattern after a cold wave. “Yessir, I do believe.” Coleman answered.

“Well, you are certainly welcome to spend the night, Gus.” Daddy extended a thoughtful invitation. “We might then attend the funeral together. Are your parents planning on attending?”

“Father probably will. And, of course, Adele will be there. Likely, we’ll see that damned carpetbagger in her company!” Gus answered quietly.

I hoped that she did attend. I always was drawn to her presence! I could not believe that she had taken an interest in Captain Twitchell. Historically, I had never liked Gus Coleman very much. Now, I felt sorry for him and hoped that he might take Daddy up on his invitation.

“Your invitation is greatly appreciated.” Coleman added. “But, I think I’d better get back to the hotel.”

“Understood.” Daddy grimaced. “I might want to keep an eye on that Twitchell character too, if it were my sister. You know Gus, I don’t think Twitchell is a bad man! But there was something “flinty” about his personality. I picked up on it immediately when he visited us.”

“That’s what they said about John Pemberton.” Coleman referenced the coldly unrepentant, Pennsylvania-born Confederate general, who had surrendered Vicksburg.

Watching Coleman make his way to his waiting horse and depart, I looked up at Daddy. “What would a girl like Adele ever see in a man like Twitchell?”

Smiling, Daddy placed his hand on my shoulder. “You can never tell what goes through a woman’s mind, Frank. Sometimes, I asked the same thing about your mother, wondering what she saw in me.

“But that’s easy!” I stammered. “You’re... you’re just the best!”

“Your confidence is most gratifying, son! But always remember! There is never an easy answer to what a woman might prefer in a man. I have not been afforded much time with Adele. But, from what I have gathered, she is a strong-willed, very opinionated young woman. Captain Twitchell may ultimately get more than he bargains for!”

“Well, she’s awful pretty!” I pouted. “Why, I’d...”

“I have noted how you looked upon her, son.” Daddy’s assurance made me feel like a man. “And she is quite comely. But, there are many aspects that one must assess in choosing a partner. I am certain that we shall have this conversation repeatedly in the coming years.”

Making my way out to the barn, I joined Will and George who, with Cecil Taylor, were inspecting the broken rifles. I couldn’t help but smile at the seriousness of Cecil’s face. He seemed to be happiest when asked to fix anything.

“Yessir, these here rifles is broke! But, I reckon I kin git ‘em workin’ agin!” he said confidently. “We got sum missin’ pieces. But, I think I kin come up with somethin’ that’ll work!”

In all, there were five Springfield rifle muskets, two repeaters and a .50 caliber Hawkins. I knew that if repaired, the eight guns would be worth well more than three hundred dollars. Daddy had often toyed with the idea of selling firearms to farms in need of a weapon.

Returning to the house, I saw that the stranger had finished his breakfast. Aunt Ester was checking his wounds thoroughly. Her face showed that she was pleased with signs that he would experience a positive recovery.

“I doen want you ta move none, Mistah Denny.” She ordered. “’O I’s gwyne take a bresh to ya! You is awful lucky!”

“Did you check his thigh and forearm, Aunt Ester?” Daddy asked. “He said that he had been wounded there.”

“Nosuh, but ah check now.” Carefully inspecting the alleged wounds, she nodded. “Sho did git hit daih, Mistah Richard. Luk like mebbe a year ‘o two befoh.”

Taking a chair next to the injured man’s bedside Daddy’s lips were tight. “It appears that you may have been telling the truth. So, you were wounded in the Battle of Mansfield, Corporal Hargrave.”

“Yessir.” Denny said wearily.

“Well, I shall allow you the opportunity to rest.” Daddy said gently. “We will take up the details of your adventure at a later moment.”

“Thank you, sir.” Denny replied, his voice barely above a whisper.

Turning to Will, Daddy ordered. “I want you to ask Joseph to ride for Dr. Egan. Not to impugn Aunt Ester, but it is obvious that Corporal Hargrave has lost a lot of blood. He was apparently wounded twice. There is always the danger of infection setting in.

“Not only might he provide valuable insights into the positions of our adversary. But, if he is indeed telling the truth, he should be afforded all the courtesies that one of our returning soldiers would expect if they were returning from the north.

“You both might mention to Billy, that I did not see any marks that indicated previous enshacklement. While this man may have been a bounty soldier or a deserter, he was not a convict granted pardon.” Daddy took his feet.

“What you think he was doing at the lake, Daddy?” Will asked.

“I don’t know, son.”

By mid-afternoon, Joseph had returned with Dr. Egan, who was accompanied by Mrs. Egan. Both would spend the night at the house and accompany our family to Mr. Key's funeral. Denny had slept most of the day, but was wide awake when Egan pressed his cold stethoscope to his chest.

"Who are you?" he asked pointedly.

"Now you take it easy, young man. You are lucky to still be with us!" the Doctor commanded. Egan quickly examined the most recent wounds. "Where is Aunt Ester?"

"I's right hyer, Doctah!" Aunt Ester had crept into the rear of the room unnoticed.

"Well, Aunt Ester, allow me to commend ye!" the Doctor's face glowed. "You have once again done a splendid job extractin' what I presume was a minié-ball."

"Yessuh, it wuz!" Aunt Ester's pride at successfully completing another operation was plainly evident.

"By some minor miracle, the first round passed through the side. It's truly amazin' that it didn't embed itself in a major organ. I have been doctorin' for goin' on thirty-five years. I've not seen such a case like it." Egan indicated the need to wash his hands. "The second round was in deep, but was extracted in a fashion that

only the steadiest of hands could have managed! Again, Aunt Ester, your healin' hand has prevailed, maybe savin' this man's life!"

"Will infection set in, Dr. Egan?" Daddy noted that the stranger had again dropped off to sleep.

"Too early to tell. The doctor was now drying his hands. "This man needs bed rest and a lot of it. He has lost a lot of blood. How did you say you came upon him, Mr. Bryan?"

"We located him at the rustler's abandoned camp." Daddy motioned for Dr. Egan to follow him into the parlor. "We are still uncertain as to how he arrived there, or why he was shot and left to die."

"Well, I'm sure that he'll tell you when he's able." Egan answered as he accepted a glass of Luther's recipe. Taking a healthy swallow of the moonshine, he continued. "Where, by the way, is Luther?"

"Out at his cabin." Daddy answered. "He had been keeping to himself this past few weeks. He is always somewhat melancholy this time of the year. I do believe that it returns painful memories from his past. I simply give him his space.

"Historically, this time of the year, when the weather is the coldest, is the time when he creates some of his most beautiful coats, leggings, and leather rugs. Often,

we hear him playing the piano at the church long after everyone has retired. Creativity is apparently his respite.”

“I do believe in earnest that Luther might be comforted by merely takin’ a wife.” Dr. Egan surmised. “He’s certainly young enough! And, from what I have seen, he is as industrious as any man that I have known.”

“Yes, he is that.” Daddy agreed. “Whether it’s making music, creating beautiful accessories from the skins of animals, milling corn, or distilling spirits, the man has quite a talent. To merely listen to him run his fingers across a piano keyboard is, in itself, a treat!”

“Your abode is indeed a place for healin’, Mr. Bryan.” Dr. Egan drained his tumbler and gestured for a refill. “Never have I seen such a collection of wounded souls gathered in one place. It is as if the smell of these pines lends solace!”

“It does that, I agree.” Daddy seemed lost in his thoughts. “When Mary’s father died in ’62, along with Amos’ little girl, Eloise, and nine other people, it took on quite a forlorn face. But we held together, helped each other deal with our grief, and emerged stronger.

“And they continue to come! I am sure that you know of Guy’s family tragedy. You may not be fully acquainted with Bucky. But, he is no stranger to



anguish! I can't help but wonder what may come from the lips of our newest guest!"

"Daddy, if Corporal Hargrave is from LeCompton, Kansas why was he fighting for the Union side?" Will's question broke the temporary spell. "Weren't those Kansans with the South?"

"An exceedingly profound question, William." Daddy applauded. "Truthfully, I was asking myself the same! I am not totally versed in that confrontation. I do know that there were many who supported the Kansas-Nebraska Act. As I did! And, of course, Senator Douglas did. It seemed to be the correct remedy at the time."

"Anything, to have averted a war." Dr. Egan was sipping his second glass of the recipe.

"Walter Shantz told me that President Buchanan even tried to buy Cuba from Spain." Daddy was warming to the subject. "The U.S. offered a hundred twenty million dollars for the island!"

"Was it that much?" Dr. Egan asked in amazement. "Why in God's name did not the Spaniards take such an offer?"

"I later confirmed the amount. It was indeed one hundred twenty million. Of course, it wasn't a certainty that Old Buck could have convinced Congress to

authorize such a prodigious price. We shall never truly know. There were people and politicians from the Northeastern states who embraced the idea. I guess they concluded that Cuba was far away, separated by water with a population that spoke a first language other than English.” Daddy continued.

“The South, or should I say, most of the Southern politicians, sought to annex the island. For different reasons, I might add. President Pierce attempted annexation in fifty-three.”

“But nothing came of it.” Dr. Egan took a long draw from his tumbler.

“The amazing aspect of the proposition was that Spain needed the money.” Daddy continued. “When I initially read of the proposal, I concluded that the only roadblock would be our Congress. Walter made a trip to Havana in 1858. He told me that there was growing unrest coming from many of the smaller landholders and what the Spanish referred to as “peasants.”

“The thinking was, if Cuba came into the Union, it would be a natural slave state. As you know, Doctor, there are large plantations that employ slave labor to this day. In short, Cuba has an agricultural system that is quite reminiscent of the Southern states.

“I was afforded the opportunity to visit the island in my younger days. It is a positively lovely place. Without

question, they would have posed significant competition to Louisiana with the sale of their sugar. But at that time, the President was more concerned with avoiding a war.” Daddy’s face showed a hint of regret.

“You actually visited Cuba?” I looked at Daddy.  
“When did you go?”

“It was a long time ago, son,” Daddy replied. “When I was a young man, attending college in Georgia, I and a couple of my classmates ventured to Savannah and took a steamer to Havana. It was obviously before I met your mother.”

“That is still only one state, assuming both Kansas and Nebraska had come in as free states.” Dr. Egan tallied.

“As I understand it, Texas would have split into two states. Thus, you have Cuba in addition to a second Texas, and your math works.” Daddy detailed.  
“Overall, it would have been preferable to the apocalyptic catastrophe that we have endured over the past four years.”

“Four years, eight months, and countin’!” Dr. Egan added.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:  
JEFF WILLIS**

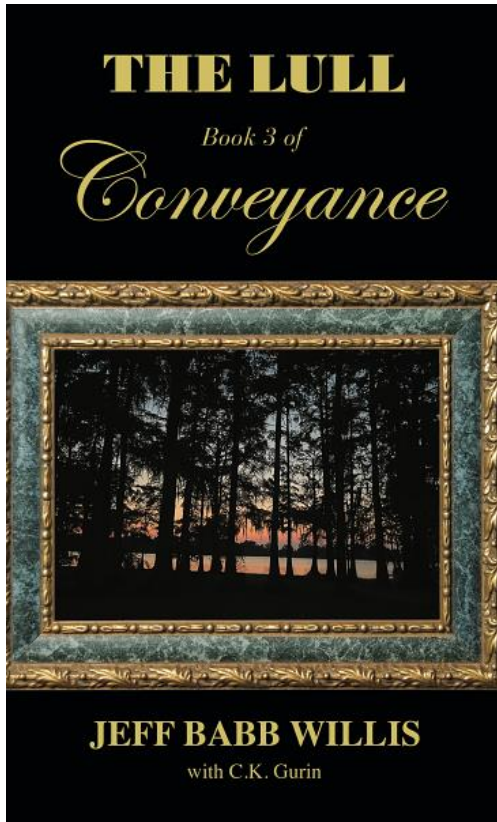


Jeff Willis was born in El Dorado, Arkansas and attended Louisiana State University. He graduated in 1979 with a double major in Journalism and History. He worked in Broadcast Television for 20 years before switching to Banking/Financial Services in 1999. Willis published topical, "E" is for English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



*In 1856, five years before the Civil War, Richard Bryan freed his slaves, educated them, deeded land, and shared profits. At war's end, Yankees wanted to use his success to promote their own agenda. He refused, and they turned on him.*

## **The Lull: Book Three of Conveyance**

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