

UNsung HEROES

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Most people remembered in history were heroes or villains. They were usually leaders, warriors, or the wealthy, and most were heroes. Almost all were famous or infamous during their lives. I expect all of us could find historic persons in our ancestry if we searched hard enough. We all would like to say one of our ancestors was a ruler, or great warrior, or other famous person. We sometimes engrave deeds upon tombstones. We put plaques at the graves of soldiers.

Heroes are also persons to be admired for achievements and noble qualities, but many such persons are never famous. They live their lives doing the tasks of life, neither seeking nor receiving notoriety. They face great difficulties in life and persevere. I am sure that we all could find such heroes in our family histories. I have recognized three such unsung heroes in my direct family ancestry on my mother's side, each of whom was a mother. Two were GreatGreatGreatGrandMothers.

One was **Susannah Cunningham**. I have not been able to verify any information about her prior to marrying Matthew Cunningham, one of my GreatGreatGreatGrandFathers. Note that I wrote the plural because at five generations back each person potentially has sixteen fathers and sixteen mothers. Some sources say that her maiden family name was Glaze and that she was born in Ireland; however, I have not found any verification. Presumably, she is one of four females living in Matthew Cunningham's household in Laurens County, South Carolina, as recorded in the first United States Census in 1790. Unfortunately, US censuses before 1860 do not provide the names of persons other than the head of household. Based upon my evaluation of later census data, the other females listed in the 1790 census were probably adult relatives living in the household who either moved out before the next census or died. By the time of the 1800 Census Susannah and Mathew have four children, one boy and three girls. In the 1810

Census they now have nine children, four boys and five girls. Circumstances change dramatically for Susannah. Matthew dies on December 5, 1810.¹

Matthew dies intestate. Susannah sells most of Matthew's chattel to pay debts;² however, she can hold on to their farm of about 400 acres. To date, I have not been able to verify where this farm was located nor where Matthew was buried. I suspect the farm was in southwestern Laurens County in the vicinity of present-day Mount Pleasant and New Prospect Baptist Churches. Susannah was left with nine children and a farm. Five children were under the age of 10 (3 boys and 2 girls), one child age 10 to 15 (a girl), and three children age 16 to 26 (1 boy and 2 girls). Susannah proceeds to find a way to support her large family.

Her two oldest daughters marry local men. Francis (Fanny) married J. William Hudgens and Anna married William Bolt. The marriages greatly relieved Susannah's burden of family support. William Hudgens became administrator for Susannah's third oldest daughter, Jane, who was blind. Hudgens also became guardian of Susannah's oldest son, Zachariah. Zachariah may have been sickly, for he died before 1816.

In 1812, Susannah Cunningham marries James C. Clardy, who has five children from a previous marriage. James was older than Susannah and this marriage appears to have been one of convenience to both Susannah and James. James and his children may have moved in with Susannah. Fortune again serves a blow to Susannah. James Clardy dies around 1819. In the 1820 Census, Susannah Clardy is the head of household with only her five younger children by Matthew living in the home: sons Elihu and Jacob, and daughters Sarah, Mary, and Elizabeth.

As her children moved on with their lives, Elihu became the titular head of the extended family. Elihu may have inherited the family land. The record of Susannah disappears. She probably took up residence with Elihu. In the 1840 Census, Elihu's household includes a female in her 70s. This would be the right age for Susannah. If so, Susannah is not listed in Elihu's household in the 1850 Census. Sally Cunningham never married and died in 1855. Mary Cunningham predeceased

¹ From list of amounts due by Matthew Cunningham in Probate Court records.

² From the probate records of his estate: Susannah Cunningham was appointed administrator of Matthew Cunningham's estate on January 7, 1811. On 19 February of that year, an appraisal of \$859.34 was submitted for perishable property was submitted by Robert McNees, Robert Alison, Christopher Hardy, and Benjamin Nabors. This inventory included 4 horses, 4 cows, 4 yearling cows, 3 calves, 1 steer, 23 head of hogs, and 31 geese.

Sally.³ Elizabeth may also have been a spinster.⁴ At some point, Elihu takes his blind sister Jane into his household.⁵

My other GreatGreatGreatGrandMother whom I believe was an unsung hero was **Rachel Gilliland**.⁶ I know little about her from before she married my GreatGreatGreatGrandFather Robert Stewart. Robert and Rachel were natives of the Bethany community in eastern Laurens County north of the City of Clinton. Rachel was the youngest daughter of Nancy and Robert Gilliland. Rachel's sister Anna was married to Robert's older brother Samuel. Seeking to find soil that was not worn out, Rachel's older brother Robert Gilliland and his wife Martha Robinson moved to an area a few miles from present-day Gray Court. Shortly thereafter, Robert Stewart bought 400 acres near the stagecoach stop of Fountain Inn. In 1843 Robert and his older sons built a log cabin on the property. In 1844, Robert and Rachael moved their family of twelve children into the log cabin. They joined the New Harmony Presbyterian Church⁷ on September 14, 1844 as the fourteenth and fifteenth members. On November 24, 1844 Rachel gave birth in her new home to her thirteenth child.

On March 25, 1845 Robert Stewart died. Rachel Gilliland Stewart was now in a new home solely responsible for her thirteen children: William age 20, Robert age 19, Rebecca age 17, Isabella age 15, Nancy age 13, Martha age 12, Clark age 10, James age 8, John age 6, David age 4, twins Joseph and Benjamin age 2, and Samuel age 4 months.

Rachel Gilliland Stewart was a strong woman.⁸ She remained a widow and raised her large family of nine boys and 4 girls. In the 1850 Census her three oldest

³ In her will, Sally Cunningham designates money to be used for the preparation of her funeral expenses and the preparations for her and sister Mary's graves.

⁴ In her will, Sally Cunningham leaves her bed clothes and other belongings to her sister Elizabeth D. Cunningham.

⁵ In the 1860 Census return of Elihu Cunningham, a Jane Cunningham, age 61 years and blind, is listed as living with him. It is assumed this is the Jane identified as wards of William Hudgens. William Hudgens was married to Francis Cunningham, one of Matthew's older daughters.

⁶ Much of the information about Rachel Gilliland comes from the Walter Stewart Clan, House of Robert, <http://walterstewart.org/histrob.html>.

⁷ The area in which Rachel and Robert settled was populated with Baptists and Presbyterians. Neither sect had enough members alone to support a church. They decided to build one church building and to share use on alternating Sundays. This church stands today and is called Harmony Church. Robert and Martha Gilliland were charter members of the New Harmony Presbyterian Church which shares the Harmony Church building.

⁸ Family tradition says that she had red hair.

boys William, Robert, and Clark were living in her household and listed as working as farmer, mechanic, and farmer, respectively. The three sons are not listed in the household in the 1860 Census.

When the Civil War erupted, eight of the Stewart brothers went to war in the service of the Confederate States.⁹ One brother, James Preston, had a crippled foot and walked with a limp. He remained with his mother and four sisters to maintain the home. By the end of 1863, five of the brothers were dead: Robert Gilliland Stewart (1826 - 1862),¹⁰ John Stewart (1838 - 1863), David Taylor Stewart (1840 - 1863), and twins Joseph Warren Stewart (1841 - 1862), and Benjamin Franklin Stewart (1841 - 1862). William Stewart, Walter Clark Stewart, and Samuel Turner Stewart survived and returned to Laurens County.

Rachel Gilliland Stewart died on September 26, 1867 at the age of 63. She is buried in New Harmony Church Cemetery, Frontage Road Off Highway 276 near Fountain Inn, Laurens County, SC.

Lila Lawson Cunningham, born in 1885, was the GreatGrandDaughter of Susannah and Matthew Cunningham and the GrandDaughter of Elihu Cunningham. In 1905 she married Edwin Martin Stewart, a GreatGrandSon of Rachel Gilliland and Robert Stewart.

In 1910, Edwin and Lila were living in Laurens, SC. Edwin worked in a cotton mill as a loom fixer.¹¹ In 1920, they had moved to Scuffletown Township of Laurens County, where Edwin worked in farming. Edwin's father Hastings Dial Stewart lived with them.¹²

On February 12, 1927 Edwin Stewart died at age 42 following a brief illness from heart trouble. At this time, they were living in Clinton, SC where Edwin worked as a clerk.¹³ Lila Cunningham Stewart was left with a family of seven

⁹ There is no record of Rachel or Robert ever owning a slave. William, their oldest son, is said to have received a slave as a gift from his wife's parents when he married in 1850. It is not known whether he ever acquired more slaves.

¹⁰ Robert Gilliland Stewart was the author's GreatGreatGrandFather.

¹¹ US Census 1910.

¹² US Census 1920.

¹³ Edwin Martin Stewart Death Certificate.

children: Ruth age 21, Marvin age 19, Earl age 17, Ralph age 14, Edwin 8, Mildred age 5, and Helen age 1.

Edwin was not a rich man. Lila was faced with a monumental challenge to support her family. Lila never remarried. The greatest asset she had were her older children. In 1930, Ruth was married to a fireman, Marvin worked in a wholesale grocery, Earl worked in a cotton mill, and Ralph worked as a salesman.¹⁴ Without their support she could not have weathered the Great Depression.

By 1940, Marvin and Ralph had married and started families of their own; however, they lived close by. Marvin was a city policeman, and Ralph was a loom fixer in a cotton mill. Earl was unmarried and lived in the family home. He worked as an operator at a cotton mill. The youngest son, Edwin, had completed one year of college at Presbyterian College in Clinton. He also worked as an operator in a cotton mill. Mildred had completed high school and was working in a hosiery mill.

1941 brought war again to the nation. Ruth's husband, Thomas Plummer Owens, was a veteran of World War I. Now, he was 46, married and had two children. Marvin and Ralph were both married and had children. Earl and Edwin were unmarried. Earl enlisted in the Army in October 1943 and served in the European theater until November 1945. Edwin, the youngest son, had completed two years of college. He enlisted into the Army in August 1941 and served for the duration of the war. He became a Captain of Engineers.

Lila's youngest child, Helen, was about 16 when the war began. Doris Owens, Lila's oldest grandchild was about 11 at the time and spent a lot of time Lila. Helen and Doris would do the food shopping. Earl would give his mother the money, and Lila wrote the shopping the list. Doris and Helen liked Vienna Sausages (mini ones sold in a tin). Helen would buy some even though they were not on the list. Doris was concerned but Helen told her that Earl never questioned the bill nor counted the change.¹⁵

Following WW II, Earl returned home and became his mother's primary support. Marvin and Ralph lived nearby and helped their mother. Edwin did not return to live in South Carolina. He married a Brooklyn, NY girl and completed his

¹⁴ US Census 1930

¹⁵ Memory related to Al Riebel, Jr. by Doris Owens Benjamin.

college education at Pace University, NY. Edwin served again in the Korean War from March 1951 to March 1953.

Mildred was working at a hosiery mill in nearby Laurens, SC when she met a dashing young man named Furman Ott. They married in 1941. Soon thereafter, they moved to Charleston, SC, where her husband took a job working at the Charleston Naval Yard. They had two children. Doris Owens accompanied her Grandmother Lila on a bus trip to Charleston to visit Mildred and Furman. Lila had a large package in her lap, but when she was told that there was room in the overhead compartment for it, she replied that she was fine with the package in her lap. Many of us today may never have taken a long bus ride without air conditioning. When they arrived in Charleston Lila gave a package of fresh eggs from her back yard to Mildred.¹⁶

In May 1944, Furman was inducted into the US Army. Mildred moved back to Clinton with her two children to live with her mother, Lila Cunningham Stewart, and her brother Earl. Furman was in training for about 10 months before being shipped overseas to the Philippines and Japan. Mildred was able to visit him during this training, and it was then I entered this story. I was born about a month after he was shipped out. I did not meet him until I was about nine months old.

Lila's youngest child, Helen, graduated from high school in 1942 and moved to Charleston. A few weeks later Lila was treated to a visit by Federal Bureau of Investigation because Helen had put in for a job with the US Army Port of Embarkation in Charleston for which a secret clearance was required.¹⁷ While working at the port, Helen met a young warrant officer named Albert Harry Riebel. Lila and Ruth's oldest child, Doris Owens, took a bus to Charleston to visit Mildred and Helen. They missed their stop and recognized Al Riebel walking down the street. Doris jumped up and pulled the cord to stop the bus. They had arrived.¹⁸

In May 1943 Mildred's second child is on the way, so Lila goes to Charleston to help care for the older child and visit with Helen.¹⁹ Helen and Al fall in love and marry in November 1943.²⁰ The wedding is held in Charleston and Furman gave

¹⁶ Ibid, Doris Owens Benjamin.

¹⁷ Story related by Doris Owens Benjamin to her son Zeke.

¹⁸ Ibid, Doris Owens Benjamin.

¹⁹ The Greenville News (Greenville, South Carolina), 30 May 1943, Sunday, Page 19.

²⁰ Information from Albert Harry Riebel, Jr.

the bride away. Many from the family came to the wedding.²¹ Their first child was born in August 1945. In December 1945, Albert is discharged from military service. In 1946, Helen and Al moved to Al's hometown of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Al begins a career in steel making.²²

I remember Grandmother Stewart as a truly kind, sweet, and unassuming person. She was in her early sixties and had already lived a hard life. It could not have been easy for her to have two toddlers and an infant living with her. I am told that I had to be kept in a crib in the small parlor behind locked glass doors to keep my two brothers from harming me! After my father returned in early January 1946, he purchased a lot in Laurens and constructed us a new home.

Grandmother Lila continued to live in her house in Clinton for about another 10 years. All her grandchildren came to play and get treats. Her home was the center of her extended family. Her older sons built a garage and shop behind her house. Earl subsequently constructed himself a second story apartment above the garage/shop. The first television in the extended family was put in her house and her family gathered to watch the fuzzy black and white shows. I remember many wonderful Sunday dinners at her home.

Grandmother's strength and mind began to wane. Her children began inviting her for extended stays at their homes. She was truly an unsung hero.

Lila Cunningham Stewart died in 1979 at the age of 94.

End

²¹ Ibid, Doris Owens Benjamin.

²² Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania), 24 Feb 2010, Wednesday, Page 13.



Figure 1. Lila Lawson Cunningham Stewart
New Prospect Baptist Church Cemetery, US 221 S, Laurens County, SC