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THE KNOWING IN THE NECK:  
MEMOIR OF A GIRLHOOD IN THE GLADES

By

DEBORAH L. HALL

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## CHAPTER 2

### THE HALLS IN LABELLE

In the recesses of time, where ancestors lived and breathed, not as the old people in my mind nor the names on headstones, but as the children they were, as real young men and women, they rose in the morning to boil water for coffee and, in the evening, for baths. They made love, fought, worked, and relaxed from toil in the shade of an oak tree where a breeze made them close their eyes imagining lives of pleasure. They had misty, grey sunrises that filled them with hope and golden-orange sunsets that waved the labor of day away. In exploring the facts of their lives, I must remember that they were not unlike me. They felt sadness from death and joy in the birth of a new baby. They were afraid when the winds dried, the earth grew dusty, and famine swept across lands. I don't know how unbearable life becomes before one pulls up roots and leaves a place knowing one will never return. In my life, three generations have remained in one area. Why one would travel an ocean chasing dreams, I can only surmise. From history books, it seems emigration is almost always due to poverty or persecution. It seems that no one would leave a native country unless they had crosses or misfortunes to bear. In my imagination, times would have to be drastic or desperate to sever the ties to a community and family for good.

I don't know if my ancestor William Hall was touched by the famine in Scotland in 1772, but I know he came to America from Scotland around then and settled in North Carolina. He fought in the Revolutionary War and received a pension for wounds he received. His wife, Nancy Sanders Hall, bore Soloman in 1785 in North Carolina. Since I only recently came across his name, it is with a curious, but detached spirit that I imagine his burdens. If only I had a story to make him real. Shortly after marriage, Soloman pulled up roots to chase his dreams to Georgia, a land that many were settling after the Revolution. To encourage migration to the

native-filled land, the government gave land grants to veteran soldiers. His wife gave birth to Stephen Decatur Hall in Georgia in 1826.

Stephen moved to Florida during the Seminole Indian Wars and lived in Camp IZard at Fort Sumter. He married Lennie Caruthers and had eight children; his sixth child was Washington Hall, born in 1866, who would become my great grandfather. During the Civil War, Stephen fought with the 9th Florida Infantry and may have known David Allen Rimes, the patriarch from my mother's side. A family emergency called Stephen home. He must have asked for permission to leave; it must have been denied because he deserted just before the war ended. His first born son, Harstuff, died in 1864 at age five, and may have been why Stephen deserted. He left for south Florida after Lennie died in 1870 fearing, it is believed, legal repercussions from the government. Lennie was living at Camp IZard at the time of her death. Her two-year-old twins were split up and adopted out. Of her remaining children, the oldest was seven. If he had been prosecuted for desertion, his children would have been orphaned. He took his family south, further into the wilderness of Florida. Stephen and his children moved to Sanibel Island, off the coast of Ft. Myers, and lived in the farming community called Wolcott in the late 1800s and died there in 1904.

It was in this area that Stephen's youngest son, Washington, met Mary Elizabeth Davis, married her in 1888 and moved to a small, nearby town called Alla. After Stephen died, they moved by Thomas Edison steamboat more inland to Labelle, a small town on the beautiful, brown-water Caloosahatchee River that runs south-westerly connecting Lake Okeechobee to the Gulf of Mexico. Washington built a shotgun house near the river and picked oranges, dug ditches and hunted wildlife for food and trade. He loved to read the Bible and began a weekly prayer meeting in the living room of his house. Eventually, he built Labelle's first Pentecostal Church of God next door, and when he moved to another house in the middle of town, behind the old courthouse, he returned to that church every Sunday for worship. Even when the Caloosahatchee flooded Labelle with overflow from Lake Okeechobee, Washington rolled his

pants up and tucked his Bible inside his shirt, wading to service. When strong winds blew, he went from palm tree to oak tree, leaning into the wind, full of stubborn obedience to his Lord.

Mary Hall was known as Labelle's seamstress. She could make anything with a picture from the Sears and Roebuck catalogue. Labelle women came to Mary's house to quilt. Her quilting frame hung from the ceiling. With a few adjustments, the frame would swing down and women could stitch and gossip. They got together to make jellies and can fruit, especially guavas. There were two colors of guava: white and pink. When Mary canned guavas, she altered the color, tucking the curved halves into each other, stacking these in the jar before pouring thick, warm, sugar water over them. Washington and Mary had thirteen children. My grandfather, Perry Ellis Hall, was the youngest, born in 1915. He knew not one story about his grandfather or great grandfather. He had never heard of William Hall or Scotland. I would discover the name as an adult, wonder at the connection of my people from the Glades to a country in Europe. Of course, it makes sense. Yet somehow, it never occurred to me. I examined his name as if a new child had been born in the family; it was the birth of an ancestor, a connection to something other than Big Water.

The town of Labelle grew as coastal Ft. Myers grew and as settlements developed around Lake Okeechobee. At first, everyone traveled by water. So the river was the highway making Labelle a bustling river town. The Everett Hotel hosted weary travelers as well as served as a place to hold court before they built the courthouse. The merchants ran supply stores, restaurants, a hotel, insurance, real estate and mechanic shops with parts for the steamboats. By the 1920s, they had their own newspaper, *The Caloosahatchee News*. The native Seminoles lived a one-hour wagon ride away on Brighton Reservation near Okeechobee and south of Labelle on Big Cypress and Miccosukee Reservations. Natives came into town in oxcart wagons to trade alligator and raccon skins for supplies and to cash their government checks. When they had completed their business at the Trading Post, they ate a cloth-wrapped lunch and napped in the shade of the oak trees across from the Post outside my Great Aunt

Priscilla's house waiting on the wagon to return. Her shy son Bernard would watch them from behind the trees hoping to play. He was frightened away when an old Seminole woman turned quickly and shot out her tongue. He first ran to his mama, who was hanging clothes, and hid behind her skirt. Later, he grew bold and climbed his tree house and watched the children romp with their handmade toys until the wagon came to collect them all. He watched with intrigue until the horse-drawn wagon and the colorful people in their red and yellow dresses turned the corner in front of the courthouse and headed north over the river, toward Okeechobee, black heads bobbing up and down.

Twice in my life, I have heard my grandfather, Perry, mention witnessing a lynching as a boy. When he mentioned it, he never told us the details. Rather, he'd get a hazy look in his eye and stare out the window as if remembering the sight of something he couldn't name. After he died in 2003, I went to Labelle and spent an afternoon reading about life in Labelle in the early 1920s. I came across the story. It seems the federal government sent in labor crews of black Americans from various parts of the South to build roads. In Labelle, the road crews lived in a tent town. Racial incidents in South Florida were rare, but not completely absent. In Labelle, and in most of Florida, the KKK had not made a strong inroad. Their philosophy was probably shared in the attitudes of the uneducated, untraveled, fighting kind, but Florida had a different history than the rest of the South and such hate was rare. This is why in 1926 when five hooded men walked into Labelle's Baptist Church's revival to place a check in the offering, the crowd went silent and held their breath. The men demanded the song "America" be played while they walked up the aisle. Reverend Durrance whispered to the choir leader, Professor Mazzei, who, without the help of the other musicians, played it on his clarinet. With the pomp of priests, the robed men walked slowly and mysteriously up the aisle, their faces covered by white hoods. They placed their contribution in the offering plate and the reverend said a prayer with them. They turned and promenaded out of the church. At once, a sigh of relief filled the air.

The church appearance of the KKK in March of 1926 was odd enough to make the *Caloosahatchee News*. Although the KKK didn't make any notable trouble, they must have been stirring fear, doubt and hate in the hearts of men because two months later, a startled scream from a surprised white woman began a manhunt for a boy that ended so horribly, it blanketed Labelle in a bloody shame and etched a sight in my grandfather's memory he would never forget.

On the outskirts of town, a young black man, Henry Patterson, left the walking road crew in search of a drink of water. He approached the back door of a little house not far from the road. The lady inside, Mrs. Crawford, was young, naive and not accustomed to seeing black people, let alone a man in her yard outside her door. At the sight of his large, dark figure, she screamed and ran away. Young Henry, also frightened, yelped and panicked, running back to the road. Without understanding what the man had wanted, Mr. Crawford quickly got the sheriff and the marshal after him. Everyone assumed he had accosted Mrs. Crawford. Once apprehended, in the marshal's car, Henry explained he had only wanted a drink of water. Fearing the worst, Henry jumped out of the car as it passed a palm-wood thicket, making his captors believe he was guilty of raping the woman as they suspected. Word spread quickly, and a posse of men gathered and searched. Hours later, when Henry returned to his road camp for clothes, the foreman notified the marshal, who arrived and turned him over to a mob of armed men whose breath smelled of moonshine from the afternoon of hunting for the fugitive. Their hearts were dark and certain. They would not wait for a trial although Henry begged for one.

At a street corner, ten cars and about forty men gathered with their prisoner. Henry, no more than twenty-years-old, cried for mercy, repeating the phrase, "I only wanted a drink of water." Mr. and Mrs. Crawford reported he had, indeed, done no harm. He begged for them to consider his good mama in Memphis. When he noticed a man in the crowd whom he had worked for, he begged the familiar man to tell the mob how he had always behaved himself.

"Yes, you did," the man said, nodding.

"Please, don't let them kill me," he pleaded. "I done nothing."

The boss man looked away.

From Bridge Street, the procession of cars and armed men drove their victim south toward the Court House. As Henry was shoved out of the car, shots pelted him from behind. Although Henry was still alive, the angry mob proceeded to gouge his eyes out, cut and mutilate his body while young boys looked on. He was thrown on the fender of a car and driven further, one leg dragging on the ground. The young man tried to lift his head and a foot stamped him in his face. In front of the Court House, the men threw a rope around a big tree. A crowd gathered and onlookers who were confused about whether the boy had committed a crime assumed that he must have. My grandfather told me when I was a teen that he had seen this happen. He was one of the boys sitting in the tree watching the grown ups take judicial matters into their own hands and believed all his life that Henry had probably, indeed, raped the white woman. Why else would men behave so cruelly and with such certainty?

In the library, I was unable to quit thinking about the tragedy of Henry Patterson's life, his mother who worried, or how a search for work in another state and a request for water had been ignited, by the scream of a woman.

Most people in Labelle were frightened by the lynching and the lawless night that followed. Doors were bolted; drapes were closed. The president of the Chamber admonished Christians in a letter to the newspaper to give a cup of water in Christ's name and to seek justice for this despicable act. Reporters were threatened by citizens who had participated, and the National Guard was sent in. Citizens were afraid to testify. One admitted to the judge that it would endanger the lives of the judge and jury if he told what he had seen. The judge remarked, "So far as this court is concerned, I know of no better death than to die while doing the highest duty before God and man."

After the lynching, Washington put the family's water barrel on the front porch, tin cup swinging at its side. Since the Hall house was downtown, parched National Guardsmen and

Army artillerymen sent in to protect the streets of Labelle and the courthouse proceedings stopped by for a sip.

Henry Patterson's murder trial lasted over two months. Of seventeen men charged with murder, nine were held with a \$10,000 bond and eight were released. In the courthouse, thirty-five black friends of Henry rose to leave after hearing the judge's ruling, pulling their hats low and shaking their heads.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this dark uproar, Washington and Mary's crew of gangly boys and girls grew up in a relatively quiet town, swimming in the Caloosahatchee River, coming home to the clanging of Mary's porch bell for dinner, hunting in the nearby forests and skipping school to fish from the bridge or a secret spot on the bank of the river. For weeks at a time, Washington would disappear from town on a hunting trip. He'd go to a particular spot he loved on the shores of Lake Okeechobee. It was a strip of land that jutted out into the water near where the town of Clewiston is today. He'd make camp there and hunt alligators until he had so many he could barely carry their scraped-clean and salted hides home. He'd come traipsing home after a twenty-five mile walk, skins hanging from each shoulder, smelling foul. One of his sons would yell, "Here comes Daddy! You can smell 'm coming!"

When Mary's dinner bell rang, a heap of boys would emerge from the river and race each other home. Since Perry didn't swim, he was the dry one who hung back from the rest as they bolted home for dinner. A friend asked Perry, "Why ain't you hurrying like the rest?" Perry kicked a rock. "It's just beans," he said. "It's beans and rice ever' night." He walked leisurely, looking at the sky, thinking how this river and these people were things that might never change.

In Washington and Mary's house, one long hallway extended from the front door to the rear. In the kitchen, a wood burning stove sat next to a hand-hewn table, around each leg of which was a coffee can full of water to keep ants from crawling up the legs. They had to change

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1. *The News of Hendry County*, a compilation of summaries of the *Caloosahatchee News* 1926-1932 found in the Labelle Library, research date July 2003.



the water periodically, otherwise, rust would form a film across the top over which ants would stubbornly cross. Covering that table was a red and white checkered cloth that Mary kept wiped clean after each meal. On the corner of the table were the condiments: guava jelly, hot sauce, vinegar, and mustard. Mary would fold the clean table cloth over the condiments between meals to discourage flies. Even after they built an addition that included indoor plumbing, Washington always preferred to use the outhouse in the back yard. It seemed uncivilized to him to attend to his nature inside a house.

After Perry graduated from Labelle High, he first worked on the construction of the largest Glades project so far: building a dike to completely surround Lake Okeechobee. It was the Army Corps of Engineers' answer to the devastation of the Hurricane of 1928, which killed over 2,000 Glades people due to the incredible storm surge from Lake Okeechobee when the small levee broke. For years after that storm, farmers unearthed bones left from decayed bodies, which were never recovered. After the dike was built, there were no more water-front homes. The lake became not a part of daily life, but an afterthought, a super-huge fishing hole. It wasn't easy to access anymore. You had to drive your boat to town, up the dike and over, down to the marina where you obeyed federal rules for boating and fishing. A way of life was exchanged for safety. Respect for water diminished. When the dike was complete, Perry left for Alabama to work at a civil construction site. From Pahokee, his brother Cecil sent him a letter saying he had a job at US Sugar Corporation if he wanted it. Perry sent his money home to his mother, who saved it for her son, and, when he returned, she gave it all back to him. "It's your money. You earned it, you keep it," she said. Perry must have sniffed the wind and smelled a new life blowing from the shores of Lake Okeechobee.

Cecil had married Lenora Bridges from Pahokee, and, when Perry moved back, he moved to their house in downtown Pahokee. It didn't take long for him to fall for Lenora's younger, brown-eyed, dark-haired sister Velma. The Bridges were a smart, tough family. Velma's mother, Willie, had long left their moonshining father, Luther Bridges, after years of

living in the Everglades and running a trading post in Homestead where Al Capone himself stopped to do business once. Willie had enough strength and mouth to stand up to any trouble that faced her as a single mother of five kids: two boys and three girls. She left Homestead and took her children to Pahokee and started over. When her daughter Merdis married a man who owned a drugstore. Willie ran the restaurant and helped keep the books. Willie lived ninety-nine years. She was my Othermama, my paternal great grandmother.

Velma and Perry gave birth to Ellis, their first child, in 1941, in Labelle. When the sugar mill offered Perry a job running the Bryant commissary store and meat shop, he accepted, providing they could pay for Velma to be a cashier. They moved to Bryant, a sugar mill subdivision in the town of Canal Point, on the east side of Lake Okeechobee, and commenced to raise a family, eventually having six children. The last one, Nelda Sue, was born in 1959, just four years before I was born.

In 1961, Washington came to live with Perry in Bryant when my father was twenty. By then, Washington was a bent, short man with small feet. He had a small nose and tufts of soft, white hair on his head. He wore a daily uniform of khaki pants, suspenders and cotton, long-sleeved shirts. When he went outside, he wore a dark, dress hat. His wife Mary had died fifteen years earlier, at home, surrounded by her husband and children. Washington's wish was never to die in a hospital. He was ninety-five when his heart failed, and Perry, his youngest, let him lie in bed, next to my dad's bed surrounded by the comforts of home.

By midnight, Perry's brother Arthur and his wife Eileen arrived. His sister-in-law was horrified that Perry had not called an ambulance. She insisted on calling Dr. Graham from Canal Point, who examined my frail great grandfather and confirmed that he wouldn't live long. Eileen insisted on hospital care despite Dr. Graham's conclusion, so an ambulance (that doubled as a hearse) arrived. Perry watched them strap his father to a bed and slide him into the dark, brooding car. It only took two hours more for Washington to die. He gave up the ghost in Everglades Memorial Hospital, the same hospital I would soon be born in. It was exactly what

he had hoped would never happen to him. Forty-two years later, Perry would get mad when his concerned children would not let him leave the hospital to return home, to die in his bed. They were sure he wouldn't survive the car trip. He, too, died in a hospital.