Sons of Slaves, Sons of Slaveholders

By Chris Tomlinson

Preface:

On a hot September afternoon, I stood in a farmer's field in Falls County Texas with Charles Tomlinson and he showed me how to pick cotton. To pick cotton, you have to stick your fingers into the boll, trying not to scrape your cuticles on the sharp, dried out shell around the linty, white ball. He told me this was the hard method, but that it kept the cotton clean for the gin. The quicker, easier method was to pull cotton, where you grabbed the entire boll, shell and all, and threw it in the bag. I asked Charles, who was a 79-year-old former sharecropper, to show me how to pick cotton because I wanted to understand exactly what my ancestors had demanded from his ancestors, the slaves of Tomlinson Hill.

Charles was immensely patient with me that day on the Hill, allowing me to pepper him and his wife Zelma with questions about their family and the legacy of slavery and the Civil War. Here I was, a blonde, blue-eyed middle-aged white man asking about him to describe his life the son of a sharecropper who rented land from my relatives. Somehow, I'd convinced Charles to drive from his home in Kansas and to meet me on the Hill because I wanted to fulfill my childhood fantasy of living Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream: To have the sons of slaves and the sons of slaveholders meet in brotherhood. I told Charles that I needed his help to tell the story of our two families, and how our story was also the story of America.

I begin with two families who share one name. One is white, the other black. Both trace their heritage to a Texas slave plantation that also bore their name. The story begins with the first Tomlinson to arrive on the Hill and ends with the last Tomlinson to leave. For five years I researched these two families and how larger events around them influenced their lives. I poured through thousands of old newspapers, used every research tool on the Internet and spent hundreds of hours interviewing dozens of people from our two families and the communities where they lived.

From this mosaic of accounts, I found some heroes and villains, but mostly I found people who just wanted to give their children a better life by whatever means available. In reading letters and articles and listening to people tell their stories, I found a full chorus to tell the story of the Tomlinsons, of Falls County and of Texas. So many of these people expressed themselves so eloquently, and with such individual style, that I chose to use long block quotes to let them speak for themselves and to give the reader a sense of their personalities. Where necessary, I did correct spelling and some grammar to make sure the contemporary reader could understand them. I took out the um's, uh's and you know's from the oral histories I transcribed here. But I did not change the context, meaning or sentiment these people expressed. My goal is to let people speak for themselves.

Throughout the book, I take the liberty to occasionally step out of the story to make observations based on my experiences covering ethnic conflict around the world. I note the latest scientific and historical research to provide a larger context to what is mainly personal history. To keep the book from sprawling out of control, I decided to focus on the paternal line of both families, what happened to the sons, which is in keeping with the book's title. I cite statistics and historical background to help explain why people did what they did, or why they failed to do what was right. This work is not intended to be academic or comprehensive by any means, it is a work of journalism, not history. But I believe it will help the reader understand American history, race and bigotry a little better, no matter their race or nationality.

Chapter One:

Two Tomlinsons

When I was a child, my father told me about Tomlinson Hill. He said it was not much of a hill; just a plot of flat land on the Brazos River. But it was the place my family came from, the origin of our Texaness. My great-grandfather bought the Hill in 1856, grew cotton and owned slaves. Yet, my family never took me there. I was told it was just a boring open field, with a picnic pavilion for Memorial Day barbecues and family reunions. My parents never went to reunions there. But other Tomlinsons did.

When I spent the night at my grandparents' house on Twin Tree Lane in Dallas, I slept in my father's childhood bed, which had been his grandmother's. I found in his room some old leather-bound scrapbooks stacked on a book shelf. The amber-colored newsprint bore articles written in English and German. Most of them were about my grandmother's family, the Fretzes. But I was more interested in the history of my name. I wanted to know what it meant to be a Tomlinson. I already knew my middle name, Lee, was my father's middle name, my grandfather's middle name and my great-grandfather's middle name. When I got the back of one scrapbook, I found a folded-up newspaper obituary for a Robert Edward Lee Tomlinson, my great-grandfather. He was born on Tomlinson Hill in 1861.

The old family photos and newspaper articles sparked my imagination. They talked about Texas Rangers, cowboys and proud Southerners. My father had told me I was a fifth-generation Texan, something few white people could claim. There was also talk about a Tomlinson who died defending the Alamo. These clippings seemed to suggest my family's history was proud and epic. I created elaborate fantasies about my ancestors and their exploits.

The reality of my home life drove a desperation to find invent an illustrious family history. My father, Bob Tomlinson, co-owned a bowling supply shop with his father, and bowled in dozens of tournaments, hoping to break into the pro-tour. We didn't have much money. Dad spent his evenings and weekends in bowling alleys, so we rarely spent time together. I always seemed to be imposing on him. When he was home, my parents fought, usually about money and often about my father's lack of ambition. He was overweight, wore his hair long and had a 1970s mustache. He wore garish paisley shirts, high-heeled boots and listened to jazz on Sunday mornings in his bathrobe. He talked about doing a lot of exciting things, but rarely followed through. I knew better than to interrupt him while he was watching television. He believed in corporal punishment, usually with a belt.

My grandfather, Albert "Tommy" Tomlinson, was a taciturn man, and perhaps because they shared a business, he and my father fought a lot. My memories of him are few, but I know he wore a small, gray Stetson that made him look like Lyndon Johnson. My grandmother, Mary, cautioned me to never make a lot of noise or bother him while I was at their house, because he was easily angered. I spent most of my time in the kitchen with her and the African-American housekeeper, Faye.

So I was excited to find the scrapbooks. The obituaries and anniversary notices mentioned Tomlinson Hill, but little more. When I asked about it, relatives provided me only one fact about the era when my family lived on the Hill: When emancipation came, the former slaves had taken our name as their own. There were black Tomlinsons too.

To a white boy growing up in the midst of the civil rights turmoil in Dallas, this was a staggering revelation. All around me people were talking about race. In the early 1970s, it was perhaps the most important topic in Dallas, where the city council was dragging its feet on integration. Parents and activists, teachers and politicians, liberals and conservatives were all fighting over how to deal with the city's generations of segregation and discrimination. On the nightly news we watched race riots sparked by desegregation in Boston, and I wondered if that would happen at my school.

Before he died on New Year's Eve 1973, my grandfather tried to make me proud of being a Texan, while my father tried to keep me from becoming a racist. And bringing both points home in my young imagination was the knowledge that somewhere in the green fields of East Texas there were black Tomlinsons who shared our heritage. And that my ancestors had owned their ancestors.

I was a city boy and I tried to imagine the black Tomlinsons. Could they have moved to Dallas too? Were they still in East Texas? What an irony that would be; the white boy living in the city, while the African-American was in the country. I had always imagined blacks to be urban and the countryside to be lily white. To me, East Texas was the backwoods, a place where the sun didn't reach the forest floor, where rednecks still grew cotton, hunted deer, gigged frogs and fried catfish, where the Ku Klux Klan roamed the red clay roads and burned crosses at night. East Texas was the Boogie Man's home.

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A generation later I was standing on a mountain ridge near Tora Bora covering Osama bin Laden's last stand in Afghanistan. Fighter jets screamed through the bitterly cold winter sky, dropping laser-guided bombs on the caves where al-Qaida had fled following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. At night, I slept in a mud hut a farmer had been using to dry peanuts. His compound was the closest to the front and there were women in the main house, so a room inside was out of the question. After a three-way negotiation between the farmer, a warlord and me, we finally agreed on $300 a night, including armed guards. Now it was the home of an Associated Press team and a handful of other writers and photographers, huddling around propane heaters to escape the mountain cold. We could hear the relentless explosions of 2,000-pound bombs in the next valley over, but occasionally one would go astray and fall close enough to shake the walls of our fragile shelter. We spent our days with the mujahedeen at the front lines as they fought their way to reach Osama's redoubt. At night we sipped tea with Pashtun warlords, transmitted our stories and photographs by satellite phone and planned for the next day.

On the other side of the planet, a young African-American athlete worked hard to prove himself in his rookie year in the National Football League. During his senior year as a running back at Texas Christian University, LaDainian Tomlinson had led the NCAA in rushing, carrying the ball for 2,158 yards and scoring 22 touchdowns. The San Diego Chargers recognized his talent and picked him in the first round of the 2001 draft. The coach made him the starting running back, and he did not disappoint. Despite being only 5'10" and 220-pounds, he carried the ball for 1,236 yards that season, even though his team only won five games out of 16. LaDainian was one of the best running backs in the NFL, but the Chargers were one of the worst teams. He planned to change that.

On Dec. 15, 2001, I was sitting in the sun with Afghan warlords while they used a walkie-talkie to negotiate the surrender of Taliban fighters, decimated and demoralized by American air power. LaDainian was in Qualcomm Stadium in San Diego, being pummeled by the Oakland Raiders in a game that would end as a 6-13 loss.

Here were two men living very different lives. I was a war reporter; LaDainian was a professional football player. We had never met, but we shared a common legacy. We both traced our heritage to Tomlinson Hill. And we had both traveled far from Texas to create a better life for ourselves. I was the city boy who became a foreign correspondent; he was the country boy who became a millionaire football player.

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In 2007, I returned to Texas after spending most of my adult life overseas. After 11 years with the Associated Press, nine wars, and a long list of never-ending natural and man-made disasters, I needed a break. I had spent most of 2006 traveling to Somalia, getting to know the clan leaders and covering the war there. But I had lost my stomach for it. I wasn't frightened for my life, nor was I feeling any foreboding. I had just stopped enjoying my work. I didn't want to be surrounded by teenagers with assault rifles anymore. I didn't want to see any more starving babies. Somalia had already been destroyed by civil war and 14 years of anarchy. I had just witnessed another wave of violence, and I knew there was another one coming. I felt despair for the first time.

And then Anthony died.

When I became the East Africa bureau chief, I knew one of my staff would likely be killed on assignment. The two bureau chiefs before me had both lost someone. But I had worked hard to train everyone to stay alive in the four war zones we covered from Nairobi. I lectured endlessly on tactics and procedures. I had felt especially responsible for Anthony Mitchell. He had been expelled from Ethiopia because of his reporting and as a result his wife had also lost her job, and the main source of their income. I couldn't do much to help him in terms of money, but I tried to give him special assignments that he enjoyed to make up for his low pay and long hours. Coming home from one of those assignments, his plane crashed nose-first into a jungle in Cameroon, leaving his two small children without a father. Telling Catherine that her husband's plane was lost, and Anthony was likely dead, tripped a circuit breaker in my heart. I'd had enough death. So a few days later, when my wife Shalini told me she had an interview scheduled for an exciting job in Texas, I knew fate was telling me it was time to go home.

The return to Texas was fraught with emotional landmines. Since I had left home at 17, I'd rarely spoken to any of my relatives, mostly because none of us had ever gotten along that well in the first place. And none of my relatives had ever fully understood my career and were baffled by my travels. When I left for South Africa in 1993, my maternal grandmother was sure that even if I managed to escape the tribal violence, a wild animal would probably maul me. To people without passports and little knowledge of the world outside the United States, my decision to go to Africa was unfathomable. No one ever directly asked me why I wanted to go, but neither did I offer any explanation except to say I wanted adventure. Meeting Nelson Mandela or marching through eastern Congo with Laurent Kabila's rebel army did not impress them. They would occasionally ask me if I was making enough money to get by, but that was about all the interest they had in my career.

So after years of avoiding what Shalini called my “Southern Gothic Family,” we were moving to Austin, just a few hours’ drive away from my family. But I felt I was at a stage in my life where I was ready to tackle whatever skeletons would leap out of the Tomlinson closet. I had covered the end of Apartheid in South Africa, genocidal violence in Rwanda, clan warfare in Somalia and the invasion of Iraq. I had made friends with Somali warlords, negotiated with drunken child soldiers and faced down a mob of angry Rwandan refugees. How bad could my family really be? Besides, I was also going to live in my favorite city with my closest friends, whom I loved deeply.

I kept working for the AP on a part-time basis, making trips from Austin to Iraq and Africa on special assignments. But in between my overseas trips, I was remembering what it means to be a Texan. I saw my best friend from high school several times a week. Shalini and I would take walks on the University of Texas campus where we had met in 1991. She was delighted at how relaxed her husband had become now that he was no longer running a wire service bureau. And I loved being back in Texas. Maybe it was part of being on the north side of 40 and eager to explore my roots, but I wanted to learn the truth about my family and its legacy. I wanted to go to Tomlinson Hill, and I wanted to find the black Tomlinsons.

In February 2007 a colleague in Nairobi had sent me a New York Times article about LaDainian. It was datelined Tomlinson Hill. My father first told me about LaDainian in 1999 and he had guessed that LaDainian must be a descendant of the Tomlinson Hill slaves and he’d been right. LaDainian’s great-grandfather had been a slave on the Hill. LT, as he is known to his fans, had spent summers with his grandparents playing in the fields where his ancestors had picked cotton. He was a country boy, I was a city kid. I had become an Africa correspondent, spending 11 years living on the continent of his ancestors. LaDainian was becoming one of the greatest running backs in America’s favorite sport.

I decided the first step in my investigation into Tomlinson Hill was to find the old scrapbooks I remembered from my childhood. I hoped my father, Bob, would still have them. I also hoped he would tell me more about our family. The only problem was our strained relationship. We rarely called one another on the phone, but as he had gotten older he seemed to be more interested in me. Maybe this would be a chance to bridge the gap between us. Plus, I wanted to see those scrapbooks again, and for that I needed him.

I called Bob and he agreed to help. He had the scrapbooks tucked in a rented storage locker along with his favorite bowling balls and old camera parts. Most of his life was spent in bowling alleys in one capacity or another. In the early 1980s he started collecting cameras and that became a part-time business. Now retired, he supplemented his social security check by trolling estate and garage sales, buying old cameras for pennies and selling them on eBay for dollars.

A few days after we talked I set off for his home in McKinney, a town north of Dallas. I parked in front of the small brick house he shared with his third wife and knocked on the hollow steel door, causing a startling amount of noise. I heard a muffled voice inside shout “come in,” so I opened the door. When I walked inside Dad was at a table. As usual it was covered with haphazardly stacked cardboard boxes, bubble wrap, plastic bags, a few screwdrivers, four old cameras and assorted photography paraphernalia. Despite a recent bout of colon cancer that took 40 pounds off his frame, he was obese again and his breathing was labored. He complained it was from allergies, and I could see why. The house looked like it had not been dusted or vacuumed in years. The royal blue carpet was blotted with large stains that turned it black in places. Pet food was strewn around the house and a cat was perched on a side-table next to a water bowl. A deaf and blind 17-year-old dog of indeterminable breed sniffed around the clutter. I had taken two antihistamine tablets in the car, but the smell of animals and mildew made me wonder if the pills would do any good. I wondered whether wearing a respirator would really have offended my father that much.

There were cardboard boxes all over the house and a few had old photos and newspapers in them. On the right-hand corner of the dining table, Dad had cleared a spot and a scrapbook was open before him. He had pulled out some loose newspaper clippings and set them aside.

“I’ve been going through this stuff to see what you might need,” he said, with no acknowledgement that we hadn’t seen each other in four years. He was being the smooth bowling ball salesman of my youth, living up to my friends’ nickname for him: Smilin’ Bob.

The scrapbook had a red leather cover, but the binding had disintegrated long ago. Someone had glued the closely-trimmed newspaper articles to the pages in a way that made use of every square inch of space. Most of the stories were from the early 1900s. The majority of the clips were in English but there were also a good number of German clippings. I had learned German in school and while in the Army, but when my father asked me to read some of the articles for him I realized they were from a local Dallas newspaper which had published in an archaic form of Swiss-German. I could understand some of what was written, but most parts left me flummoxed.

“This scrapbook was kept by my grandmother on the Fretz side,” he explained. “I’m not sure who began it, but maybe my great-grandmother, judging by the age of the clippings.”

The vast majority of the stories were about the Fretz family and the Swiss Germans of Dallas. Emil A. Fretz, my great grandfather, had founded the Dallas Parks Board. On the day the Marsalis Dallas Zoo opened, a photo of Emil’s daughter Mary – my grandmother – was on the front page of the Dallas Morning News cuddling a baby cheetah.

“The smartest thing your grandfather ever did was marry your grandmother, because the Fretzes were a wealthy family,” Dad said. “She is largely the reason he was able to retire at 50.”

After my grandparents married in 1926, the scrapbook’s breadth expanded to include the Tomlinsons. The entries were mostly obituaries or family announcements clipped from the Dallas Morning News and other newspapers. Unlike most of the Fretz articles, the Tomlinson clippings were not glued into the scrapbook; someone had dropped them inside the back cover.

These carefully folded pieces of newsprint, some held together with straight pins, had provided the earliest knowledge of my family history. They had launched my curiosity and imagination when I was a boy. But now that I had them as an adult, they were far fewer and far shorter than I remembered. There were just 11 articles, eight of them obituaries. One was my grandparent’s wedding announcement, another a 50th wedding anniversary announcement and the last was a story about a bridge collapse that had killed R.E.L’s brother-in-law.

As I read more, I discovered the fallibility of an eight-year-old’s memory. As a child searching for self-esteem, I had conflated my great-grandfather’s life with his brother’s. Eldridge Alexander Tomlinson had been the Texas Ranger and cowboy. R.E.L. had been a farmer, a real estate agent and a school teacher.

> Trained in the art of teaching, R.E.L. Tomlinson took his place as chief pedagogue at Busby School where the Blue Back Speller and Friday afternoon Spelling Matches were the vogue. Mr. Tomlinson taught the principles of the Bible as well as fundamentals of good citizenship.[1] (Rogers, 1943)

This same story revealed other forgotten details about Tomlinson Hill.

> The double wedding of R.E.L. Tomlinson and Frank M. Stallworth to the popular Bettie and Billah Etheridge twins December 23, 1891 was the social event of the season. Old Beulah Church was packed with folks from all over the county to witness the nuptial ceremony performed by the popular Baptist preacher Rev. J.R.M.N. Touchstone. … Following the wedding an old fashioned In-Fare and recreation was enjoyed by the guests. Tables groaned under the weight of fried and baked chicken and all the trimmings. The festivities even followed the two couples to Marlin, where they made their home.[2]

Reading these articles with a 21st century adult's eyes I saw the clippings in a new light. As a child I had grasped for evidence of Texan aristocracy. Reading R.E.L.'s obituary as a child gave me pride in my southern heritage, but now the same words made me wonder what I would discover when I dug deeper. In an obituary entitled "Beloved Pioneer and Leader Expires Tuesday" the language was too easy to decipher:

> He was born at Tomlinson Hill Jan. 25, 1862 son of James K. Tomlinson and Sarah Jemima Stallworth Tomlinson, at a time when the star of the Confederate States of America shone in its greatest brilliance. Of a great family of Southerners, with typical devotion to the cause and its leader the young son born during the war, was named after the famous Confederate commander-in-chief.[3]

Recognizing these southern dog whistles as an adult, I knew that my eight-year-old self would likely be disappointed by what I might find. But the investigative reporter in me wanted to discover the truth.

The obituaries also told me that R.E.L.'s father-in-law was a well-educated Unionist who had spoken out against slavery and opposed Texas secession. When the Civil War began, Col. W.G. Etheridge fled to the north to avoid being lynched as a traitor to "The Cause." Afterward he returned to Falls County and served as sheriff from 1875-76 and was elected to the state legislature in 1882, well after Reconstruction had ended.[4] (Rogers, Obituary for Col. William G. Etheridge 1922) Falls County has never been known as progressive and the county seat, Marlin, was a small town where everyone certainly knew everyone else's business. So I wondered what Etheridge would have thought about his daughter marrying into a slave-holding family that supported the Confederacy. I wondered which legacy would emerge to have a stronger influence on my family, the Tomlinson racism or the Etheridge Unionism.

Growing up in Texas, I had known many racists and I understood something of their netherworld. While visiting my mother's parents in another part of East Texas I had listened to Baptist preachers claim that being black was to bear the "Mark of Cain." God's curse, they argued, justified segregation. I listened to the county constable and my maternal grandfather talk about those "damned niggers" who lived across the river in Coffee City. I always knew when white men were talking about black men because it was the only time they referred to a grown man as a "boy," unless they were talking about a "good ol' boy," which meant the man was white and "dependable." A "boy" could never be forgiven any mistake, whie a "good ol' boy" was forgiven any infraction.

I remember going to a school pool party when I was 13 and seeing how the wealthy white family that owned the home became annoyed because the school had required them to invite their daughter's African-American classmates too. My classmate complained that her parents would have to drain the pool afterward because of the "oils" they imaged the African American kids would leave behind. In high school, I had known cops who policed a predominately white suburb of a big city. They would spend their evenings driving down the city limits conducting what they called "border patrol." They pulled over any vehicle carrying a minority that turned into their town and then took a long time to check them for warrants. They always asked, "Where are you going?"

None of these white people would dare reveal their true feelings in “mixed company.” Most would sincerely deny they were racist. Instead, they would argue they were realistic. I knew their attitudes were wrong, but I never spoke up. I felt either outnumbered or that my protests wouldn’t make any difference. I came to accept this was how most of my white friends thought about race.

As I started my research, I wondered where my ancestors fell on the spectrum of southern bigotry, ranging from violent hatred to tolerance to acceptance or love. I started questioning my father about what he knew and what he suspected. As we shuffled through the scrapbook, he filled in the gaps where he could, but most of what he knew came from the clippings. R.E.L. had died when Bob was only two, so he had no memory of him, nor did he know anything about James, his great-grandfather. The only thing he possessed that was linked to James was a small, buckskin wallet with white stitching.

The wallet was tri-fold, with a leather strap used to hold it closed. There were a few handwritten markings on the outside, but they were too faded to make out. But when I opened it, there was another flap over an accordion-style change purse with three pockets. Using a fountain pen, someone had written in cursive script across the inside cover, “This book is an old heirloom.”

Across the closure for the change purse, in the same handwriting, was written “R.E.L. Tomlinson.” Below that, on the purse itself, someone had written “R.E.L. Tomlinson Marlin, Tex. July 15, 1883.” When you lifted the flap of the change purse, the same person wrote, “J.K. Tomlinson 1850 Ala.” There were a few coins inside, including a 19^{th} century German 10 pfennig piece and a buffalo nickel. We guessed that the wallet must have belonged to James K. Tomlinson, who moved to Texas from Alabama. R.E.L. was only four when his father died in 1865, so it appears that when R.E.L. turned 21, his brothers probably gave him the wallet as a memory of the father he’d never known. He’d decided to make sure no one would ever mistake its provenance by writing on it.

Dad said his father Tommy, born in 1901 rarely talked about the family’s history.

“He had the stock line that we treated our slaves so good that they kept the Tomlinson name after they were freed,” he told me. “But that might not be the reason they kept the name.”

My father then produced R.E.L.’s teaching certificates from the Sam Houston Normal Institute in Huntsville. They were printed on a stiff parchment, rolled up like diplomas and the blanks for the name and dates were filled in with a fountain pen. They said R.E.L. had earned a “Teacher’s First Grade Certificate” which entitled him to teach school for three years “without further examination.” The first was dated June 10, 1886 and the second was from May 31, 1888. This was how he had become the chief pedagogue.

But R.E.L. had started out at Texas Agricultural & Military University in 1881 where he received a military education. A&M had only opened in 1873 and the campus and student body were small and ill equipped. To become a teacher, R.E.L. had to finish his studies at the Sam Houston Institute, which was another 75 miles to the southeast. College Station was only 60 miles from Tomlinson Hill so he was never more than a day’s ride from home.

Unfortunately, my father said Tommy only talked about R.E.L. in fragments.

“R.E.L. Tomlinson had done some farming and from what my Dad said there was one too many floods on the Brazos,” Bob recalled. “The second or third time it happened, that finished him off.”

My father speculated that R.E.L. had inherited a portion of Tomlinson Hill after James died, but after losing too much money in the floods he probably sold it to focus his attention on teaching and real estate. “He was pretty prominent, but how prominent do you have to be in a town of 5,000? Although, Marlin was a pretty rockin’ town back then.”

In the early 20th century Marlin was known for its hot springs and is still called “The Official Mineral Water City of Texas.” Visitors came from across the state to “take the waters,” he explained, and it was a popular resort destination for in-state tourists. Bob said his memories of visiting Marlin — all from before he turned 10 — were few, but vivid. He said his father took the family to Marlin for the holidays by car. The drive was long and he and his sister Sally always knew they had reached the town when they saw the sign for the Falls Hotel. He said his grandmother lived in a wood-framed house with a big porch near the center of town.

“I do remember walking from their house down to the square and there was a fire station down there. They still had an old, horse-drawn fire truck,” Dad said. “They weren’t using it, but it was still there. When we were down there (a few years ago) we happened to see the new fire station, a bigger, fancier one. I asked if anybody had any idea what had happened to that (horse-drawn truck), but of course nobody knew. Probably got eaten by termites or something.”

My father said that reflection was not in Tommy’s temperament.

“He didn’t worry about the past, he was a builder. He wanted to put new stuff up. It if meant tearing down the (family’s) Liberty street house to put in a parking lot to serve a building he had built for another company next door, no problem,” my father explained. “He graduated from A&M in 1923 and never looked back, he moved straight to Dallas.”

Unlike his father, Bob holds on to history like a precious gem, in particular Dallas’ history. He knows the stories of many of the city’s inner neighborhoods and he laments the loss of the landmarks from his childhood. He talks about the old Dr. Pepper headquarters on Mockingbird Lane and how angry he was when the historic clock tower was accidentally destroyed during the construction of new condominiums. He told me stories about the Fretz family going back three generations. But strangely, he claimed to know little about Tomlinson history, and frankly didn’t seem to have much interest in it. He wouldn’t explain the contradiction, or even acknowledge that there was one. He said he had only tried to go to Tomlinson Hill once, but got lost on the back roads and couldn’t find anyone who knew where it was.

“And that was just a couple of years ago,” he explained. “When I was a kid we went to Marlin because that was where my grandmother still lived until 1951, when she died.”

Throughout our conversation, my Dad kept pointing out clips from his mother’s side of the family. He wasn’t overtly hostile to the Tomlinson side, but whenever he spoke about his father, he would take a quick gasp of breath and then his voice hardened.

“He wanted to retire at 50 so he could drive himself bonkers losing at gin rummy and getting drunk every afternoon at the Lakewood Country Club,” Bob said. “When he decided he needed to give me a way of supporting myself we started a bowling supply store.”

As our conversation went on, and I pressed him, Bob began to reveal more about my grandfather and I began to understand his reticence.

“He was an all-purpose bigot,” Bob said, speaking quietly as if someone else might hear. “At different times, he would go off on anybody and when he came to Dallas, the chief of police was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. That is a known fact. I don’t know if my father was ever a member, but he certainly had some sympathy for them back in the 20s and 30s. He became slightly more tolerant as time passed, but it was still right there. R.E.L. was a good southern man always loyal to the cause, so I guess we know where it came from."

Rationally, I knew my grandfather was unlikely to be progressive, but it was still hard to hear that his racism ran so deep. In my heart, I wanted my family to be above the fray. There has always been a liberal intellectual tradition in the South, and I wanted that to be my heritage, not the desperate and twisted world of southern populism that had kept the races divided. But I was finished with fantasies; I wanted to know the truth, no matter how ugly.

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A few days later I was back in Austin, trying to process everything that I had learned from my visit. I was feeling foolish about my childhood fantasies. Race relations were on my mind on when I watched Sen. Barack Obama, the African-American senator from Illinois, clinch the Democratic nomination for the presidency.

Frankly, I had never expected him to make it so far. I thought I understood racial politics in America and was sure his candidacy would never catch on. When Obama visited Kenya in 2006 his public speeches had impressed me, but I had dismissed talk of an Obama presidency as farfetched. Now I had been proven wrong. America had changed while I was overseas, and I wasn't sure I understood my country's politics anymore.

I listened to Obama's victory speech, absent of rancor, full of hope and reaching out to anyone who would join him. He reminded me of Nelson Mandela, whom I had met while covering the 1994 presidential campaign in South Africa. In his campaign Mandela had resisted political expediency and taken the high road, the harder route; the one that required true leadership to bring real change to his country rather than just transfer power from a white tyrant to a black one. He was not the demagogic African dictator that whites had expected and feared. Mandela's speeches were not filled with sarcasm and vitriol, like those of many American politicians, they were full of grace.

Obama was following Mandela's example, trying to disarm the less committed bigots. After spending most of my adult life overseas, I asked myself, how did America reach this point? How did we manage to accept a black candidate for president so soon after the civil rights movement? I found myself comparing race in America with the ethnic massacres I'd observed in Rwanda and Congo. This new political development fueled my desire to delve deeper into the legacy of Tomlinson Hill. I wanted to apply my reporting skills to my family history, to get to the truth of what my ancestors did in Texas.

Already I had discovered that Tomlinson history was more complicated, and frankly more interesting, than I had imagined. I had also come to realize that the story of Tomlinson Hill, like America, was the intertwined narratives of black and white. LaDainian's father had even fought off a bid to change the Hill's name. To understand my family history, I needed to track down the black Tomlinsons and learn their story too.

I started with the 1850s. I wanted to figure out why James K. Tomlinson had left Alabama and moved to Texas. Armed with a fistful of newspaper clippings and my childhood memories, I set off to discover the real story of the descendants of Tomlinson Hill and perhaps learn more about America along the way.

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