

sum of the parts: chapter one: *what can be named*  
FINAL DRAFT – January 10, 2010  
Deanna Bowen

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**First known generation: my great, great, great, grandparents.**

Details are few. I barely have dates...

I don't know their names.

I don't know their parents names.

I don't know if they had siblings.

I don't know when they died.

I do know that my great, great, great, grandfather was born somewhere in Africa and my great, great, great, grandmother was born in the State of Georgia. I believe that both were born around 1815 – about 196 years after the first Africans were brought to Virginia and about 21 years after Eli Whitney patents his cotton gin.

My great, great, great, grandparents were brought sixty miles south of Montgomery, Alabama to Butler County and had at least 3 boys: Dick, Reese and Jack between 1835 and 1840. Records indicate the likelihood that other siblings exist.

Growing up, my grandmother told me that a white family by the name of Thigpen owned us. I haven't found relatives by that name, but have found family by the names of Peagler, Powell, Gregory, and Bowen.

I believe we got our name from descendents of Charles Bowen of Jones County, Georgia.

I suspect that the Bowen's follow Revolutionary War soldier John Carter and his family to Butler County just shortly after Bowen's daughter Martha marries John Carter's middle son Jarrett in 1818. Martha and Jarrett died in 1843 and 1845. My grandmother's stories and those of the Bowen & Carter families' overlap when Martha and Jarrett's daughter Martha marries Elijah T. Thigpen in Butler County, December 20, 1855

To give you a better sense of the situation... In 1850, there were 3,204,313 registered slaves and 434,495 free blacks in all of the United States.

In the State of Alabama, there were 342,844 slaves of which *blackbelt* counties like Butler averaged about 7000.

At this same time, there were four free blacks in Butler County.

A decade later, in 1860 the number would rise to 44.

**Second generation: my great, great grandparents.**

Details are more abundant here... though most of what I have are names and dates.

Presumed to be the oldest, Dick Bowen was born around 1835; a year after Great Britain would abolish the slave trade.

I believe he lived and died in Butler County.

Little is known of presumed third child Jack Bowen. His name was found in a family bible owned by descendant Doris Peagler.

Jack was born enslaved around 1840 and died 'free' before 1910. I believe he was survived by his wife Jane.

Jack and Jane had four children: Lula, Frank, and twins Martha and Mary.

Twin daughter Mary weds Joe George, and together they have ten children. Their ninth child Eva has two known daughters: Doris Peagler and Sarah Powell born in Butler County in the early 1940s.

Doris and Sarah's family has lived and worked on what used to be John Carter's youngest son Alfred's land for several generations; first as slaves and then as sharecroppers.

The Carter family lost the land in the Civil War. Since then, the acreage has been owned by the family of slave holding planter, Harry Poole - deceased 1997, of Pine Flat, Butler County.

Sarah and her husband live in the Greenville area. In 1969 – the year I was born - their 8th child Eric would be the first family member born off the Carter/Poole plantation – some 106 years after Abraham Lincoln wrote the Emancipation Proclamation.

Dick and Jack's brother Reese - my great, great grandfather – was born about the same time that runaway slave and novelist Harriet Jacobs would go into hiding in 1835. He lived most of his life with his wife Sytha in Butler Springs until her death. At the age of 76, great grandpa Reese moves to Greenville and marries second wife Callie Goldsmith in 1911. I have no additional information about Reese beyond this date. I assume that he dies in Greenville sometime before 1925.

His first wife Sytha – my great, great, grandmother – was born in Alabama in 1852 the same year that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published. She married Reese in 1863 at the age of 11 and had nine children. She died in Butler Springs sometime between 1900 and 1910.

Born into slavery, it's hard to say what my great, great grandmother would have known about the world taking shape around her. In her lifetime, Fredrick Douglas would write *My Bondage, My Freedom*, the US Supreme Court would hand down the Dred Scott decision, blacks from California would settle in British Columbia, abolitionist John Brown would be hung for leading an attack at Harper's Ferry, and the Civil War would begin in 1861.

Reese and Sytha's first son Gus would be born in Butler Springs in 1864. In 1865, the war ended, slavery was banned, and Lincoln was assassinated.

In 1867, the BNA Act passed and John A. Macdonald became Canada's first prime minister. Reese and Sytha's daughter Mittie would be born around 1869. In that year, Louis Riel would lead the Red River Rebellion and Manitoba would become Canada's fifth province.

In 1870, daughter Minta would be born. In 1871, British Columbia joined the Confederation. Daughter Alice was born in 1872, son Johnie in 1874, and in 1875, Reese and Sytha's sixth child Missie would be born.

Mark Twain would write the *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* in 1876, and the *Exodusters* would begin their migration from Kansas in 1878.

In 1879 son Edd would be born.

In 1882, Texas cowboy John Ware – Alberta's first black cowboy - would move to Alberta, and in 1883 Reese and Sytha's youngest son, Augustus would be born.

The last spike was driven for the CPR and Louis Riel was hanged for high treason in 1885. In 1887, the Dawes Act was invoked and in 1889, Vincent Van Gogh would paint his famous *Starry Night*.

Details about the lives of Reese and Sytha's children are scarce.

Minta (Bowen) Lucas was a divorced mother of 5 children and caretaker of widowed father Reese, by 1910.

Reese and Sytha's son Edd and his wife Lizzie Lucas migrate to Freestone, Texas around 1905. Together they have four children: Thelma, Fred, Hubbard and Edd Jr.

Edd Jr. marries Bessie Lee Carroll. Together they have 6 children including son Kennard Bowen. Kennard weds Mary Louise Turner in 1966 and has two children: Camelia Bridget and Kennard Jr. - who would then go on to have Jonathan and Ashley with his wife Sheree Hunter.

### **Third Generation: My great grandparents.**

My great grandfather is Reese and Sytha's fifth child.

Early census records list him as Johnie but I know him as Willis Bowen Sr.

I know little of his life in Butler County except that he was born in 1874 and married wife Genie in his father's house in 1893. Some have said that he left Butler County because he had killed - or nearly killed – a man after an

argument at a dance sometime around 1901.

Great grandma Genie was half black and half Cherokee. She was born in Wilcox County, Alabama in 1875.

Her maiden name was thought to have been Thigpen, but discovery of her marriage license shows that her family name was actually Gregory.

I have no details about her parents, nor do I have any clues about how they came together. The family myth is that great grandma was the daughter of a chief... which might be true... Though, the most likely scenario is that great grandma's father had enslaved her mother, as the Cherokee nation is known to have kept black slaves then.

Together, my great grandparents Willis and Genie had thirteen children. Siblings Mary, Ivy, Willa, Reese, and Boadie were born between 1894 and 1900.

The family settled 650 miles west in Freestone, Texas with great grandpa's brother Edd and his family around 1901. There, they had daughter Magdaline and son Geoffrey between 1902 and 1903, though Magdaline would become ill and would not survive the year.

The family kept moving to what was then, Indian Territory – now Oklahoma. Not yet a state, and free of Jim Crow laws, the territory was a haven for blacks who hoped to create and govern their own lives. In 1904, the family settled around Clearview - a black-town seventy miles south of Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Son John Henry was born there in 1905 – just a year after Saskatchewan and Alberta became provinces of Canada. Willis and Genie's 9th and 10th children Obadiah and Elrene were born in Clearview as well, around 1907 and 1909.

The family thrived in Oklahoma; the children got good educations and the family owned their own land. In-laws Albert and Mary Gregory and cousin Columbus Bowen, his wife Martha and their 8 children were doing well there too.

But the climate changed when Indian Territory became the state of Oklahoma in 1907. Segregation laws were put in place soon after statehood and relations between blacks and whites eroded. Around the same time, the Canadian government had been encouraging settlement of the West with the promise of free or cheap land. Scouts from Clearview were sent to Canada as Oklahoma repealed voting rights and segregated the schools.

An exodus from Clearview began soon after.

Some families joined a movement to return to Africa. Others opted to settle 120 miles north of Edmonton, Alberta in Athabasca Landing around 1909.

My great grandpa Willis left for Canada from Guthrie, Oklahoma with our family, a few bachelors, and four other families – 40 people in total - in a chartered railcar in the summer of 1910.

The government had not anticipated the rush of black immigrants and quickly adapted entry restrictions in an effort to keep them from coming in. In 1911, a white mob would rape a black woman and lynch her and her son as they awaited his trial for a shooting some thirty miles from Clearview, in nearby Paden.

At this same time, Prime Minister Wilfred Laurier drafted a regulation that banned blacks from coming into Canada. Less than a year later, the order in council would be repealed because Laurier's government was defeated in the general election.

The trip from Alabama to Canada was especially hard on Great grandma Genie. She had suffered a stroke before leaving Oklahoma at the age of thirty-four and had never fully recovered.

One of each family member in the chartered railcar was turned away for health reasons after inspection in White Rock, BC. Immigration rejected the Bowen family because middle boy John Henry had a broken leg. The family had no choice but to wait for the leg to heal in Bellingham. When it did, Great grandpa Willis decided to take John Henry across separately through a different entry point. The rest of the family crossed at White Rock and continued on to Vancouver without issue.

In July 1912, Willis and Genie's 11<sup>th</sup> child Edward Hubert Bowen would be born in Vancouver.

The First World War had just begun.

Raised on the farm, great grandma Genie had no interest in the city. She hated Vancouver because it always rained and she didn't trust a place that had an ocean on one side and mountains on the other. She blamed the loss of her 12th child on Canadian doctors, believing that the child could have been saved if the family was around black people. So, the family moved to Amber Valley, Alberta - a black settlement near Athabasca Landing – not long after.

Eldest daughter Mary was stricken with meningitis along the way, so the family stayed at a public stopping house. Mary recovered, but the family contracted body lice and their belongings burned to the ground in Athabasca.

Great grandpa Willis was given \$125 dollars in compensation for thousands of dollars of household belongings because he could not prove its value.

With virtually nothing, the family lived in an abandoned house until Great grandpa Willis built his own - six miles from the post office, three miles from the country store, and a combined four thousand one hundred miles from Butler County.

In 1915, Willis and Genie's twelfth child Purvis Kitchener (a.k.a. P.K.) was born in Donatville, Alberta. Great grandpa Willis was hauling freight to Fort McMurray when his thirteenth and final child – my grandmother - Jean was born, February 27, 1919: 3 months before the General Strike shut down Winnipeg and 2 years before hundreds of blacks would be killed in the race riots in Tulsa.

The Bowen children were an integral part of the Amber Valley community in the early years. The older children began to marry within the community while the younger attended school. Their ailing mother Genie Gregory Bowen died (some say crazy) on April 27, 1932 in Amber Valley. She was 57 years old.

Six years after her passing, youngest daughter Jean married Albert Sterling Risby of neighboring black settlement Campsie - on June 15, 1938.

Great grandpa Willis continued to work the farm and was the first postmaster of Amber Valley through 1942. He returned to the States once, in 1943, when he tried to convince brother Edd to come to Canada.

Edd decided to stay in Freestone Texas with his family, who continue to live on the land to the present day. The brothers stayed in contact by writing each other regularly until it was no longer possible to do so. Their grandchildren Kennard and Norma Jean wrote on their behalf until their deaths in the 1970s.

Mama and Daddy – that's what I call my grandmother Jean and grandfather Albert – spent the early part of their lives together in Amber Valley. Jean and Albert's first three daughters: Eldith, Leora – my mother, and Ardith were born on the farm as the Second World War played out. Seven children followed between the years 1946 and 1957, including: Wayne, Donna, Verna, Ross, Carmen, Barbara, and Danny. Mama and Daddy thought that their kids would get a better education in the city, so they sent the older ones to Vancouver to live with Great Grandma Rose Risby in the early 1950's.

Great Grandma Rose took ill around the same time, so the rest of the family moved from the farm to live together in Vancouver's East end. Daddy worked as a porter for the CN then and Mama worked for her nephew at Vancouver's only black nightclub, the *Harlem Nocturne* on Hastings Street.

In 1955, my mother Leora was 13 years old and had started grade seven at an integrated school when the Montgomery Bus Boycott began in Alabama. She graduated from high school in 1961 and though Vancouver was as hostile as the States for blacks, she was working for the City of Vancouver when the March on Washington took place in 1963. She was working at the University of Washington in Seattle when the Marches on Selma began in '65 and was back in Vancouver in 1968 when Martin Luther King was shot. My mother met my father Lamarre Zack Smalley in Seattle at the *Checkmate* on 23<sup>rd</sup> not long after King's assassination.

About a year later, I would be born in Oakland, California - six months after Apollo 11 landed on the moon. My parents married in April 1972 and were separated by 1973 when my father's unresolved first marriage was brought to light.

In that same year, Shirley Chisholm would announce her candidacy for the Democratic nomination for president of the United States and the Watergate Scandal would break. A year later, Pierre Trudeau would be re-elected as Prime Minister of Canada, and less than a year after that, my great grandfather Willis Bowen Sr. would die in Amber

Valley, Alberta October 21, 1975.

He was 101 years old. I was six.

My mother lived between Seattle and Vancouver throughout much of the 70s and 80s.

Mama and Daddy raised me in the times when I didn't live with her. When my mom did live in Vancouver, we'd go to Seattle on weekends to visit her sister Eldith and her kids. I remember watching *Roots* there in 1977 with all of them.

When I lived with Mama and Daddy I went to bible camp in Newbrook, Alberta and Friday night teen meetings at Great Aunt Lena's church in Vancouver on East 22<sup>nd</sup>. I sang hymns with Daddy in church and grew up around a lot of old people I didn't understand. As a result, my childhood is marked by the passing of Mama and Daddy's church many friends, brothers, sisters, cousins, nephews, and nieces.

Between the years 1970 and 1991 my grandmother's siblings Reese, Boadie, John Henry, P.K., Willa, and Edward would pass, as would my grandfather's siblings Frank and Herman.

I remember when, in 1979, my grandparent's fourth daughter Donna died on Hastings Street. I remember when their son Carmen followed in 1982...when eldest son Wayne died in 1990. Jean and Albert's youngest daughter, and my favorite aunt Barbara passed more recently in 2003.

There were seventy-five 7<sup>th</sup> generation and ten 8th generation descendants born to the Bowen family by the time I finished high school in 1987. As of today, I know of 652 Bowen family members in total.

Mama and Daddy moved back to Alberta and started preaching again when Daddy was given his own church in Edmonton in the late 1980s.

I changed my last name to Bowen to honor my grandmother in 1991 and graduated from Art College in Vancouver in 1992.

Jean Bowen Risby died of a heart attack in Edmonton in 1993. Reverend Albert Sterling Risby died in Vancouver six months later.

My name is Deanna Jean Bowen. I moved to Toronto shortly after their deaths, and have lived here since August 1994.

This project began in 1996. What happened between then and now is another story.