

Family Secret

There is a story, a secret in our family, that I think is true, but I'll probably never know all the details. Most of the older relatives deny the stories and seem to be embarrassed at the possibility there could be any truth in them. Certainly it was scandalous when it happened nearly a century ago, and might be today.

Maria was still in her teens when she started working in the fields for the Williamson family near what is now Harlingen, Texas. In the early 1900s, the railroads were still laying tracks and building the big steel bridge over the Arroyo and water had started flowing into the Valley through the canals that Lon Hill had envisioned. He was right. The desert soil was fertile, and the Valley already produced crops, including cotton, small fruits and vegetables. Cotton and other Valley crops required a lot of labor to plant, care for and harvest, but field hands just seemed to appear where they were needed.

The border with Mexico was well defined by 1900, but there was little concern for who crossed the border in either direction, so labor from Mexico was natural and spread all over Texas. The landowners needed workers and the workers needed jobs. Maria appeared at the Williamson place and went to work in the fields. If she had a family somewhere, no one knew. Or cared. She spoke English and Spanish interchangeably, switching easily from one to the other

Despite her youth, Maria proved to be a good worker. Like most of the field workers, she didn't say a lot, but she had a cheerful demeanor and was always in the fields when work was to be done. She wore a large straw hat into which she somehow pushed all her long, dark hair, a long sleeved men's blue work shirt and a long skirt, a field worker's uniform that protected her small form from the hot Valley sun. They were probably the only clothes she owned, as no one ever saw her in anything else. She lived with the other women in a "lean-to," a shed that extended from one side of the Williamson's barn. Whether she was hoeing weeds, planting seed or harvesting, she always worked steadily and usually accomplished more than the others. Not in a competitive sense as much as naturally efficient.

Harold and Jessie Williamson were hard working people. They treated their field workers well, provided good food and paid fair wages. No more than the other landowners near Harlingen, but no less. Their oldest child, Adelia, was already married with two children of her own. Harold, Jr. was also married but lived and worked on the Williamson farm. He worked mostly with the teams of horses, whether preparing the soil for planting or cultivating between rows.

“Jessie,” said Harold, one evening not long after the harvest was complete, “we’re in pretty good shape. We’ve got a good farm, money in the bank and no debt. We’ve given our kids good educations, and this farm should feed all of us well for the rest of our lives.”

“Isn’t that a satisfying feeling?” she asked. “We really don’t have any wants. The good Lord has provided well for us.”

“Well, he had a little help from you,” he replied, chuckling. “You’ve worked hard, managing this house, the children, and the crews. All those people that work for us would do anything for you.”

“We’ve been a good team,” said Jessie.

Maria and the others had just finished their breakfast and were starting into the fields for the morning. “Miss Jessie?”

“Yes Maria.”

“I’ll be along in a minute. I need to stop at the shed.”

“That’s fine, Maria. Would you bring another roll of twine when you come out?”

Jessie went on with the field workers. Harold walked with them to the barn, then went in to hitch the horse to the wagon. He was going into town to talk to the banker, who was offering the Williamsons some adjacent land.

“I’ll be back before supper.”

But he wasn’t, and Jessie was worried. She had one of the hired men saddle a horse to go see if Harold had broken down or gotten sick on the road. Nearly two hours later, the man returned, driving the wagon, his horse tied to the back. Alone.

“The wagon was at the train station, Miss Jessie. Mr. Harold left it there and took the train to Houston.”

Jessie was baffled. Why? What could have happened?

Then she remembered. Maria hadn’t returned to work that afternoon. She went herself to the shed. Only Maria’s straw hat remained.

Maria had never ridden on a train before, and now she was on one, leaving the Valley and riding toward a new life. She was not sure what that new life might be, but she trusted Harold and would go wherever he took her. She wasn’t going with him because of passion or a wild love affair. In fact they had never really been alone together for more than occasional conversation, and most of that was about the farm and work. But two days ago he had talked to her in the field, away from the others.

“Maria, I have a secret. But you can’t tell anyone. OK?”

“Of course, Mr. Harold.”

“I’m leaving. Leaving the family, the farm and the Valley. Starting over. Would you like to come with me?”

She hadn’t asked why, but maybe she knew. The preacher had been showing up at the farm more frequently, staying for dinner and having long talks with Jessie. She had seen them near the barn one evening, standing very close, and she had wondered. But that was not her business, and she spoke to no one about it.

“Yes, Mr. Harold. I’ll come with you.” He was more than twice her age, but that made no difference to Maria. She knew him, trusted him.

“It will be a whole new life, Maria. We’ll buy a farm and start from scratch, somewhere far away.”

That morning, they waited at the new train depot as the northbound train came into the Harlingen station from Brownsville. It consisted of a steam locomotive, a coal car, one car for baggage and freight and two passenger cars. Leaving Harlingen, the two passenger cars were each just over half full.

Maria was on a train going north toward Corpus Christi and Houston, places she knew very little about. Harold hadn’t told her much more yet about their future, but she felt confident, and free. She could make a new life with Harold, or without him if things didn’t work out, but she had a good feeling about him. Yet, there was a feeling of guilt that she was with another woman’s husband, and really, she wondered, why had she come?

“Maria, we’re going to be on this train the rest of the day. We don’t really know each other all that well, so anything you want to know about me or where we’re going, this is a good time to ask. Once we get to the end of this train ride, we’re likely to be pretty busy for a long time.”

“Was it because of the preacher?”

Of all the possible questions he might have expected, that wasn’t one. He was a little stunned.

“Was it that obvious? I thought I was the only one who saw it, and I was never positive, but yes.”

“I doubt anyone else ever thought about it, she replied. “Will I be your wife?”

Thoughts streamed through his head. “Damn! She’s sure right to the point. What’s coming next?”

Gently, he answered, “Yes, Maria. You know, I’m still married, so we can’t legally marry, but yes, I’d like you to be my wife. Whatever we build together will be ours, and in case something ever happens to me, it will be yours. I’ll have a lawyer see to it.”

It was Maria's turn to be surprised. "Mr. Harold, I'm not asking for anything."

"I know that, Maria, but I asked you to come with me, to be my partner and my wife. I don't want you cheated out of everything if something happens to me. You know, I'm almost forty-five, so you'll certainly outlive me. If we don't set it up right, whatever we build could end up with my oldest son. Also, No more 'Mister'. OK? Just Harold."

"OK. From now on, we'll take care of each other, Harold." Maria smiled and thought to herself that this was a good man.

"Maria, it was more than the preacher. That farm had been part of Jessie's father's ranch, so it was hers. She decided that if something happened to her, Junior would inherit the farm. That could leave me working for my son! I love him, but wouldn't want my life to depend on him."

To his relief, there were no more tough questions. As they rode, they talked, and he realized what a remarkable young woman she was. Barely twenty, she spoke and read English and Spanish. She was clearly intelligent and he already knew she could outwork nearly anyone in the field, man or woman. Moreover, she had a natural ability to lead. Other workers respected and followed her. Now he found that she was charming and interested in everything. She was unfashionably slender, not a "full figured" woman, but he found her beautiful.

They left the train in Angleton. Harold stepped down first then turned and reached up for her hand. Maria reached without hesitation, and as they walked through the station she put her arm through his. He squeezed with his elbow and they each smiled. They left his bag at the railroad hotel and walked to the bank, where Harold had been introduced by his banker in Harlingen. There had already been some negotiation by mail and they soon chose the farm that would become their home.

A middle-aged woman who was a recent widow wanted to sell the farm and return to her parents' home in Tennessee. The two-story house was sound, with a screened porch. The barn was large and sturdy, and the fields were already fenced and under cultivation. There was enough equipment to get started, and the price was fair.

Almost a year after they settled in, Sallie was born. Two years later Harold Jr. arrived and immediately acquired his nick-name, Harry. It seemed no time at all and there were four children. Maria was very happy in her life, but occasionally the feelings of guilt returned. She asked herself why she should feel guilty. Did the pastor who preached the Commandments to his congregation then flirted with Jessie feel guilt? Just lust. Both of them. Her judgment of the preacher and Jessie generally dispelled her doubts, but they returned from time to time.

Harold did not wait long to fulfill his first promise to Maria, but his meeting with the attorney became tense when the lawyer asked, "Why do you want to leave your land to a Mexican woman? Why not leave everything to your oldest son like Texas law suggests?"

Harold had to fight down the temptation to respond in anger. His face flushed briefly while he controlled his emotions then he responded quietly.

“First, this is my decision, not the state of Texas’ decision. Second, Maria has never even been in Mexico. Her family was ranching in Texas before there was a Texas. She came to work for me when her oldest brother inherited their family ranch, so she understands Texas tradition. Ed, this woman is my partner in this farm and in every sense of the word.

“Now, there’s something else that’s really important in this conversation, Ed. I want you to be prepared to protect and fight for her if necessary. Her family will back you up if push comes to shove, but she’d prefer not to ask for help beyond yours. I don’t want any bankers or neighbors or anyone else to ever feel they can push her around. Can I count on you?”

Wolters smiled, but with a little embarrassment for his bad start. He liked having a client who knew his mind. He also liked having a client with the power to back the attorney’s actions. “Harold, I was out of line and I’ll not make that mistake again. I came here as an immigrant from Holland so I shouldn’t be judging others. Yes, you can count on me in both respects.”

“Just one other thing.” Harold slid a folded piece of paper across the desk. “If something happens to Maria, and I’m not here, there’s how to reach her family.”

The lawyer recognized the name on the paper. In the years that followed, Wolters proved himself not only a capable attorney but a reliable family friend.

Although they had a few bad years, for the most part they benefited from a long growing season with plenty of sunshine and rain. Some years there was just too much rain. They knew the risks. Galveston was not far from Angleton and had been completely wiped out by a hurricane just over a decade earlier.

Harold selected his crops well and usually had enough rice planted during the wet years to pull them through. The country had been through tough economic times in 1913, but World War I gave him markets for everything he could raise. Then, when the war was ending the influenza epidemic came, and he nearly didn’t survive. The whole family caught that flu, but Maria and the kids recovered quickly. Harold was very sick and took longer to recover. But he did, and he quickly got back into the routine of the farm. He could even laugh when he heard the girls reciting as they jumped rope,

*I had a little bird,
Its name was Enza.
I opened the window,
And in-flu-enza.*

Walking behind the cultivator, Harold was happy. He had never minded working in the heat. He felt like he absorbed energy from the sun. His straw hat shaded his eyes and the soft leather of the reins looped over his head felt comfortable on the back of his neck.

He walked with both hands on the handles of the cultivator, guiding it as the big mule, Dandy, plodded forward, pulling the cultivator through the earth. Harold was watching the cultivator as the tines broke the soil, loosening the weeds and pulling their roots free from the nourishing soil, and tearing open an animal's burrow. Before he saw it, Harold had stepped into the burrow. He jerked his head back to stop the mule, but too late, and he cried out from the pain as the forward momentum snapped his lower leg bones. The same force jerked the reins tight on Harold's neck, yanking his face into the cross bar of the cultivator. He never heard the sound of his neck breaking and was dead before his body fell to the ground.

Dandy stood in front of the cultivator, waiting for Harold's command, or the pop of the reins signaling him to move on.

When Harold didn't come in at midday, Maria walked out to remind him it was time to wash up and eat. Take a break from the heat. She saw Dandy standing in front of the cultivator, then saw the broken, lifeless Harold on the ground. She ran to him, too late. He had been gone for hours, but she held him, sobbing.

Maria had two men bring Harold's body to the house, where they put him on the bed. She sent one of the men into town to get a pine coffin, while she washed and dressed Harold, then she lay on the bed holding him, crying until, exhausted, she fell asleep. "It wasn't fair," she told herself. He had survived the great influenza epidemic, though she had wondered if he would, and now this. Just because of a varmint's hole in the ground.

The neighbors came the next day, and the preacher. "Will you bury him here on the farm, Maria"

"No, pastor, I'm taking him home to his family."

The preacher thought to himself that this was remarkable, and that Harold's parents must be quite elderly.

As she rode on the train with Harry, Maria couldn't shake from her mind the song she had heard, "In the Baggage Car Ahead," because that's where Harold was. She couldn't remember where she had heard the song, but couldn't stop remembering the phrase

As the train rolled onward, a husband set in tears
Thinking of the happiness of just a few short years
Baby's face brings pictures of a cherished hope now dead
But baby's cries can't awaken her in the baggage car ahead

She held back her tears with difficulty. Harry held his mother's hand, and from time to time they would both cry silently, holding each other. When he asked her why they were taking Daddy on the train, she told him that this was what she must do, that there were other people who loved him.

When they reached the station in Harlingen, a wagon was waiting for them and the pine casket was quickly loaded. Maria asked the driver to take them to Jessie's farm. Now, she was a little uneasy. She didn't know what Jessie might say or do. She didn't know what she could say herself, but she knew she had to do this. As they rode, she learned that Jessie had remarried several years ago, and not to the preacher.

Maria decided she should be prepared for anything to happen when she arrived, and told the wagon driver to turn the wagon in the loop in front of Jessie's home before he stopped the wagon. "Once we're stopped, get down quickly and unload the casket, then get back in the seat and be ready to go. We may be there a while, but we may have to leave in a hurry."

The driver was an older man, probably an ex-cowhand. He smiled and said "Yes, Ma'am!", hoping this day might be more interesting than he'd expected.

As they pulled into the farm, Maria could see people on the porch, and as the wagon drew near, she could see Jessie, standing at the top of the three porch steps. The wagon stopped and Maria stepped down carefully, then held Harry's hand as he came down. As they walked toward the house, Jessie moved quickly down the steps to confront Maria. She was clearly upset.

"Maria! What on earth are you doing here? I don't want you here!"

Maria looked into Jessie's blue eyes, then replied quietly, "I don't want to be here and I don't want to hurt you, but it's Harold, Miss Jessie. In God's eyes, he's still married to you. I had to bring him back to you!"

Maria saw that the casket had already been unloaded, and the driver was climbing back into the wagon. No obvious haste. He just appeared efficient.

Seeing the depth of sorrow in Maria's eyes, and understanding the reasoning in her words, Jessie softened slightly. More, she didn't want to be asked about her re-marriage, so she replied in a more gentle tone, "Maria, we heard he had died years ago!"

They talked briefly, then Maria, still holding Harry's hand turned, climbed back up into the empty wagon and returned to Harlingen. The next day, she and Harry were on their way back to Angleton.

Knowing that Jessie had remarried long ago washed any remaining feelings of guilt from her mind. When she went away with Harold, she hadn't hurt Jessie, hadn't taken anything Jessie really wanted. Now she realized that Harold had always known that.

"I'll miss you, Harold, but we'll be okay."

Epilogue

Maria raised the four children and managed the farm until they were grown and married. She divided the farm equally between them. Maria lived with Sallie and her husband until she died in her early seventies. Her hair was still dark, with no hint of gray. Sallie, lived to over 100

Wolters , the attorney, did in fact protect Maria from men who sought to capitalize on her loss. He knew most of them and anticipated their moves with a warning before they could act, so they didn't.

In the early sixties, Jessie's son Junior, now an old man, located and met Maria's sons, his half brothers, not long after Maria's death. Maria's family was not aware of Harold's first family, as Harry had been very young when his father died and had never clearly understood the implications of their trip. The half brothers never met again.