

## “I Am An American”

by Corrine Ardoin

In 2015, when Barack Obama was president, my husband and I embarked on a road trip across country, from California to Washington D.C. and back. Our objective was purely genealogical, being obsessed with family history, but what came of our six-week vacation, was more of a pilgrimage. I had read the book, *The Art of Pilgrimage* by Phil Cousineau, so I believed I was prepared.

We took our time crossing the nation. State by state, we watched the scenery turn from city to desert landscape, then to fields dotted with grazing buffalo, elk, and pronghorn antelope. Bare rock formations gave way to mountains and forest. It looked like America. When we reached Texas we were greeted by traffic cops who seemed to be thrilled to pull over a Californian. Gruff old men at the gas station looked as though they had never smiled a day in their life. At the campground, the ranger sternly told one camper, "You are no longer in the United States, ma'am. You are in *Texas*." I saw my first armadillo in Texas. Then we traveled into Louisiana, seeing the fields with rows of shacks lining their edge and children gathered on porches, people staring at us driving by on back roads. It became an unfamiliar America, but one I needed to experience.

Nevertheless, I had asked my husband not to visit any Civil War battlefields, too morbid. I learned why when we drove into Mississippi. I fell in love with the wide fields and autumn thickets. Fires burned at will with no one tending them. Scenes I once imagined from books I had read came to life before my eyes, like *Souder* and *Where the Red Fern Grows*. Then, entering Tennessee, the memory of massive carnage was almost palpable as the gaping wound appeared: *Vicksburg*. I braced myself as we entered the park and drove the guided tour route. By the time we came upon the open maw where battlefield scars and blasted pits could be seen, I nearly fell to my knees when we got out of the car. I needed to cry, but I couldn't. I was in shock, stunned. I knew, without a doubt, that it was a great wound that had not yet healed. I knew that our country had not yet healed. It is still suffering, still hurting, still grappling with the pain. We, as a nation, are still grieving. The sin of slavery yet burns in our nation's soul.

After weeks on the road, which included family visits in New Mexico and Louisiana, the weight of history, both unresolved and unanswered, crept from the shadows. We traveled the Blue Ridge Parkway and willingly became entranced with the autumn riot of colors. Like a bright light, the hills glowed in gold, orange, yellow, and red. Each bend in the road revealed yet another miracle of beauty that stopped traffic. We visited old mills and cabins, and hiked portions of the Appalachian Trail. We peered through windows of homes abandoned when the road was built, their family burial plots nearby.

When we reached the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia, the home of my father's ancestry on his father's side, I was in awe, seeing the Fultz and Foltz surname everywhere, Fultz being my maiden name. I pointed out storefronts of Foltz-owned businesses, Foltz Road on a street sign, even a Foltz Creek! Caught up in the joy of discovery, I reminded myself I was, after all, on a pilgrimage. Hundreds and hundreds of ancestors were buried there, since before the Revolution. They fought the Indians, women having hid in their chimneys, holding their babies. They fought the British, their homes containing secret passageways. Being Lutherans, they fought against slavery, but were persecuted for it. Still, many fought with the Confederacy to defend a way of life that included slavery and were burned out because of it.

Eventually, my heart and soul awoke to what I was being shown on that trip, where I needed to direct

my attention. First, I was disallowed entrance to my Great-Great Grandpa Fultz's homestead. The owner, a Fultz cousin I had never met, and who hadn't answered my letter asking if I could visit, wouldn't let me come onto the property. My grandfather had taken that trip in the 1950's and visited the house when his step-brother, Earl Fultz, lived there. My father had taken that trip in the 1980's and visited the house when Earl's son lived there. And, now I was there, following in my grandfather's tracks, visiting the sites he mentioned in a fourteen-page, typed letter. But, I was unable to visit the house where Earl's grandson then lived. That is so typical of a pilgrimage.

Perhaps it was the many visits to cemeteries, standing over the graves of my ancestors. Perhaps it was the struggle to recapture my grandfather's hallowed tale of his own pilgrimage to the land of his birth. Or, it might have been because it was Hallow's Eve, a time when the veil between worlds gently parts. I'm not sure, but I ended up in tears in a restaurant restroom, banging my fists on the wall, crying, "Daddy! I need you! Help me find what I'm looking for!" I believed I was failing to find all the ancestral homes and to meet the people who now lived in them. That's what my dad and my grandpa had done. I wanted to be like them. I wanted them to be proud of me. And, I believed I had failed. I knew that pilgrimages take us on a quest for something other than what we are seeking. They take us on a journey for what we need to find. But, what was that? In that restaurant, I, too, fought a battle. But, I surrendered.

Then, I discovered the grave of one ancestor, Henry Rinker, who was a representative from Shenandoah County for the vote on the Constitution of the United States, who fought in the American Revolution. I felt so proud of him! Visiting the Lantz Mill in Shenandoah County, I was glad that my Hollar ancestors were no longer the owners when the mill was later used as a slave auction site. Slaves were chained in a back room until the auction began. I was glad that my ancestors were pacifists and anti-slavery, being church founders and pontificators on the sinfulness of enslaving one's fellow man.

I could not find what I went to Virginia to look for, my Home, my roots. But, I was shown what I needed to see: the wounded heart of my country that yet bleeds upon ground consecrated by my forefathers and all our forefathers who raged and yet rage still.

When we reached Washington D.C., after a visit to Harper's Ferry, we were merely tourists, American citizens visiting our nation's capital. I wanted to see the Lincoln Memorial. I wanted to gaze upon the wide expanse of the reflecting pool stretching toward the Washington Monument, where Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his great speech to thousands upon thousands. It would never have occurred to me that all I saw that day could ever be used other than for good, that the capitol building could, years later, be met with something terrible, something terribly wrong. People fight for a dream of something good, something better. How could people in our great nation believe in and fight for a lie, for hatred of others? How has it come to this? For some to believe they want to fight another civil war? Why?

I return to that scene at Vicksburg and know the hurting in this country, the suffering, the fear, and the anger. There are wounds in our nation as a result of slavery and civil war that have not healed. They lay bare to the wind and the rain, baked under the sun that shines but does not warm the bones scattered across the fields of our broken dreams, our disappointment in, not our leaders, but each other. How has it come to this? That such awful hatred could rise, as if on command, and tear justice asunder, is a reality too frightening to absorb all at once. But, there it is, a darkness overhanging our country, our democracy, calling forth, summoning its army, appealing to the worst in us, and mastering those who heed its twisted cry. Thankfully, there is another call, a call for goodness, for dreams renewed, for healing, for peace. It is this call which I heed and, as I stand overlooking the great expanse of this country, I know that I am an American. I choose healing. I choose goodness. I choose love and truth. I

choose peace!