



# CHAPTER 1

## - *Roots* -



*J. Wenonah Paul Gunning:* In the summer of 1922, I was eight years old and confused. So much had changed in Pauls Valley since we left three years before. The Harkreader family had moved into our big house in town, and we were living out at the farm, cramped up in the old house where Papa was born. It's a good thing it was summertime, because the roof leaked and there were big cracks in the walls. There was no indoor plumbing like we had in town, and we had to use an outhouse and draw our water from a well. Mama no longer had a maid and had to do all the housework herself. She worked outside too, helping my oldest brother, Willie, tend the animals and plant a few crops. Papa didn't have a job or a car, but every morning he'd get dressed in a suit and tie anyway, hitch up one of the horses, and drive the buggy into town.

I blamed Papa for our troubles, probably because Mama told me it was his fault. She used me and my six-year-old brother Bob to blow off steam. We'd sit in the kitchen, and while we watched her cook and do the dishes, she'd tell us how our lives had been ruined by Papa's drinking. "Your damned old daddy," she'd call him. He hated to be called "daddy."

While I always took Mama's side, not everything she said made sense. After all, it was Mama's idea to leave Pauls Valley in the first place, and the jobs Papa had tried since then were her idea, too. Sometimes Papa didn't come home at night, but we didn't see him drunk. My brothers and sister

were divided on who was to blame. Bob, like me, sided with Mama, but Haskell and Kaliteyo sided with Papa. They said everything was fine until Mama talked him into leaving Pauls Valley. If Snip had an opinion, he kept it to himself. Besides, he was too busy cooking up schemes to make money. My sweet brother Willie never took sides. He just did what he could to help out the family and to keep the peace.

We didn't get much company that summer until Uncle Tom came to visit us. I'd never seen my mother's older brother before. He was tall and slender, his hands rough and his face ruddy from working out in the sun. He walked with a limp because he wore an artificial leg. He didn't talk much, but once he got started, he could tell some good stories. He had a thick Southern drawl, like Grandpa.

Mama was working in the kitchen the day Uncle Tom arrived. She kept staring out of the window, trying to make out who it was, until suddenly she screamed at the top of her lungs, burst out of the door, and ran down the road to meet him.

For a while, everyone was happy. Mama and Papa took Uncle Tom around to see our friends and relatives. There were a few people who still remembered him from when Mama's family had come to Indian Territory as settlers thirty years before, and of course, he went down to Ardmore to visit Grandpa in the old soldiers' home.

Uncle Tom spent about a month with us, and it made Mama so happy to be with him. They would sit together and talk until late into the night about their childhoods, about their family's long migration from Georgia to Indian Territory after the Civil War, and about living in a log cabin and tilling the fields with a hand plow pulled by an ox. They told us stories about the big "*lobo*" wolves that howled at night and sometimes tried to get at the livestock, about the old bachelor who used to visit them and play the fiddle, and about their mother teaching them all to read and teaching the little girls to sew. Uncle Tom told Mama about his farm on the banks of the Mississippi River, how he had to fight the tobacco worms, how some years the river would flood and he would make rafts for himself and his horses, and how he made annual trips to Hot Springs, Arkansas, to have the malaria "boiled" out of him. When Papa wasn't around, Mama would confide in her brother about her troubles and about how we had come to be in our present depressing state of affairs.

In my eight-year-old mind, I had decided all our troubles were the result of Mama and Papa's marriage, and since Uncle Tom was Mama's older brother, I figured he should know all about it. After all, he had been with

her when she came to Indian Territory, when she started courting Papa, and when they got married. All month long I screwed up my courage, and finally one day I asked him. He was drawing water from the well. “Why did you let Mama marry Papa?” I blurted out. He looked right down into my eyes and replied—I’ll never forget it—“We did everything we could to stop Vick from marrying your father, but she was headstrong.”

Mama’s family came from the deep South. Grandpa and my grandmother Emily were born in Georgia, where their parents owned plantations. They didn’t consider most people their equals, especially people of color, and although they had to compromise in Indian Territory, where the prominent citizens were all Indians and most of the whites were “low class,” they certainly didn’t approve of their daughter marrying Papa, a Chickasaw.

I never knew my grandmother, Emily Bass Rosser. She died of a tumor soon after the family came to Indian Territory. But Grandpa lived with us when I was little. I was named after him. I was supposed to be a boy. His name was James Thomas Rosser, and I was named James Wenonah Paul. Everyone called me Jamie when I was little, and later, Jim. As much as I loved Grandpa, I hated having a boy’s name. Mama did give me a feminine middle name, Wenonah, although most people still called me Jim until I was grown. She got Wenonah from Longfellow’s poem, *The Song of Hiawatha*. She spelled it wrong—Winona—but after I was old enough to read the poem myself, I started spelling my name like Longfellow spelled it.

It’s a beautiful poem:

*By the shores of Gitche Gumee,  
By the shining Big-Sea-Water,  
Stood the wigwam of Nokomis,  
Daughter of the Moon, Nokomis. . . .  
Fair Nokomis bore a daughter,  
And she called her name Wenonah,  
As the first-born of her daughters.  
And the daughter of Nokomis  
Grew up like the prairie lilies,  
Grew a tall and slender maiden,  
With the beauty of the moonlight,  
With the beauty of the starlight.<sup>1</sup>*

*The Song of Hiawatha* tells how the beautiful Wenonah was swept off

her feet, so to speak, by the West Wind, by whom she bore a son named Hiawatha. In spite of his lofty stature among the gods, the West Wind turned out to be a deadbeat dad. He deserted Wenonah and left her to die of a broken heart. So as you see, Wenonah was quite a romantic figure, not at all like me.

As a member of the Southern aristocracy, my grandmother Emily was raised to be a lady, to know how to dress appropriately for any occasion, how to entertain guests and join in polite conversation, how to grow beautiful flowers, and how to prepare tasty *hors d'oeuvres* and desserts. Grandpa grew up on a neighboring plantation, learning the corresponding behavior and skills appropriate for a gentleman.

When the Civil War broke out, Grandpa joined the Confederate Army. He attended a military school as a boy, and even when I knew him he still stood ramrod-straight, like a soldier at attention. I don't think he saw much action. Mama ordered his military records when she applied for membership in the United Daughters of the Confederacy. They showed he enlisted as a private in May of 1862 and was reported as "sick in hospital" on the next muster call.<sup>2</sup> He doesn't appear in the records again until August of 1863 when he re-enlisted, this time as a sergeant. He married my grandmother Emily in the meantime.<sup>3</sup> Six months later, Grandpa resigned from the army for good.<sup>4</sup> I don't really think his heart was in it. He always said the war was caused by "a bunch of hotheads."

James and Emily's world was turned upside down by the Civil War. Not only was much of their family's wealth destroyed, there was looting and chaos, and a poorly functioning government. With the support of some freed slaves, opportunists from the North, known as "carpetbaggers" for the luggage they brought with them, took over many government positions. The hostility between those newcomers and the Southern whites led to the encounter that forced Grandpa and Emily to flee their home in Georgia.

Emily had just delivered their first baby, Cora Lee. There was an election coming up in Cedartown, and Grandpa was trying to convince the family's former slaves not to vote for the carpetbaggers. While he was making his case to an ex-slave, a carpetbagger came walking by. The man accused Grandpa of trying to influence the black man's vote, and there was a fight. The man fell, his head hit a rock, and he didn't get up.

There was no time to lose. Southern whites had virtually no influence at the time, and Grandpa was facing a long jail sentence, at the least. I'm not sure if the man died or not, but Grandpa couldn't afford to wait around to find out. That night he and Emily took their baby Cora, and whatever