



Mary with Tom & Billie Washington at the 2012 Cherry Blossom Festival

Essay by Mary Achor

In what universe would one find a gathering featuring the niece of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and these, the most unlikely joining of historical descendants?

--Dred Scott, the slave who sued the U.S. government for his freedom. His case went all the way to the Supreme Court before he lost.

--John McLean, the U.S. Supreme Court Justice whose fiery 35-page dissenting opinion against slavery further enflamed the country and led to the U.S. Civil War.

--Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederate States of America.

--And not one, but two descendants of Thomas Jefferson! One from his wife Martha Jefferson, and one from Sally Hemings...

Perhaps you might guess that this unlikely assemblage took place at an Ivy League college or at some prestigious East Coast think tank. But you would be wrong.

This Forum of Reconciliation transpired in a quintessential Missouri small town in the Ozarks, a place called Marshfield. Surprised? So was I. Actually, I was stunned. For two solid weeks after the event, I roamed aimlessly about my house, wondering what I had just experienced. Two years later, I am still in awe.

One of America's best kept secrets, it is called "The Cherry Blossom Festival and Presidential Family Reunion." Descendants of presidential families—and history buffs of all stripes—eagerly gather there year after year after year.

The festival was founded by a remarkable young man named Nicholas Inman, who returned to his Marshfield home after a stint as an intern in Washington, D.C. He decided to combine his love of American history with his Midwest hometown, and began the festival in 2006, replete with cherry blossoms and presidential forums—and cherry pie at the Uptown Café for a buck.

Witty George Cleveland, who is the spitting image of his presidential grandfather, had enjoyed *All The Presidents' Children*. He contacted Doug Wead and me, saying, "Did you know...?" Since I live only a few hours from Marshfield, I was hooked. I had to see what this was about. Before long, I was invited to speak at the 2011 festival. "Be sure to wear cherry blossom pink," I was warned.

There I met a descendant of Jack Washington, George's favorite full brother who took care of business while George Washington was away founding a country. And a descendant of John Adams and John Quincy Adams, who regaled me with stories of going to the Adams' home, Peacefield, to sit in John Adams' chair and wear his spectacles. There was a baby shower for the infant descendant of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. And a Nixon went shopping for baby presents at Wal-Mart with the other descendant of Thomas Jefferson. And I got my picture taken with Senator George McGovern.

Merrill Eisenhower Atwater, Ike's great-grandson, spoke at the State Dinner. It is remarkable that he works developing biofuels to lessen our dependence on foreign oils. His great-grandfather was responsible for our interstate highway system after becoming frustrated at attempting to get military convoys across the country on horrible roads.

This past year was as much fun as the first. I was invited to stay in a lovely home, and my housemate turned out to be Bill Clinton's cousin, a merry woman who was instantly my sister. I had lunch with Jake, the 9-year-old descendant of Calvin Coolidge, and he taught me how to do long division. I interviewed Dr. Richard Harding, who told me about President Harding's imperious sister who would march up to the White House, rap on the door with her umbrella, and say, "I am the President's sister, and I want to show these folks around." I shared with James Monroe's descendant about the last years of Monroe's ne'er-do-well brother who moved to Missouri in 1820 and took part in a notorious murder trial. And this year, I got my picture taken with Jenna Bush Hager.

It is the camaraderie that is the benediction. How astounding to watch descendants of bitter political rivals sit and laugh by the hour. George Cleveland noted that there may always have been acrimony and hatred between presidents, "but by the time we get to Marshfield, it is all gone."

One last thing: This year's Cherry Blossom Festival is April 25 through 27, 2013. cherryblossomfest.com Make plans now. If you love American history, you won't want to miss a minute.