

Looking for Her Children

By Duane L. Herrmann

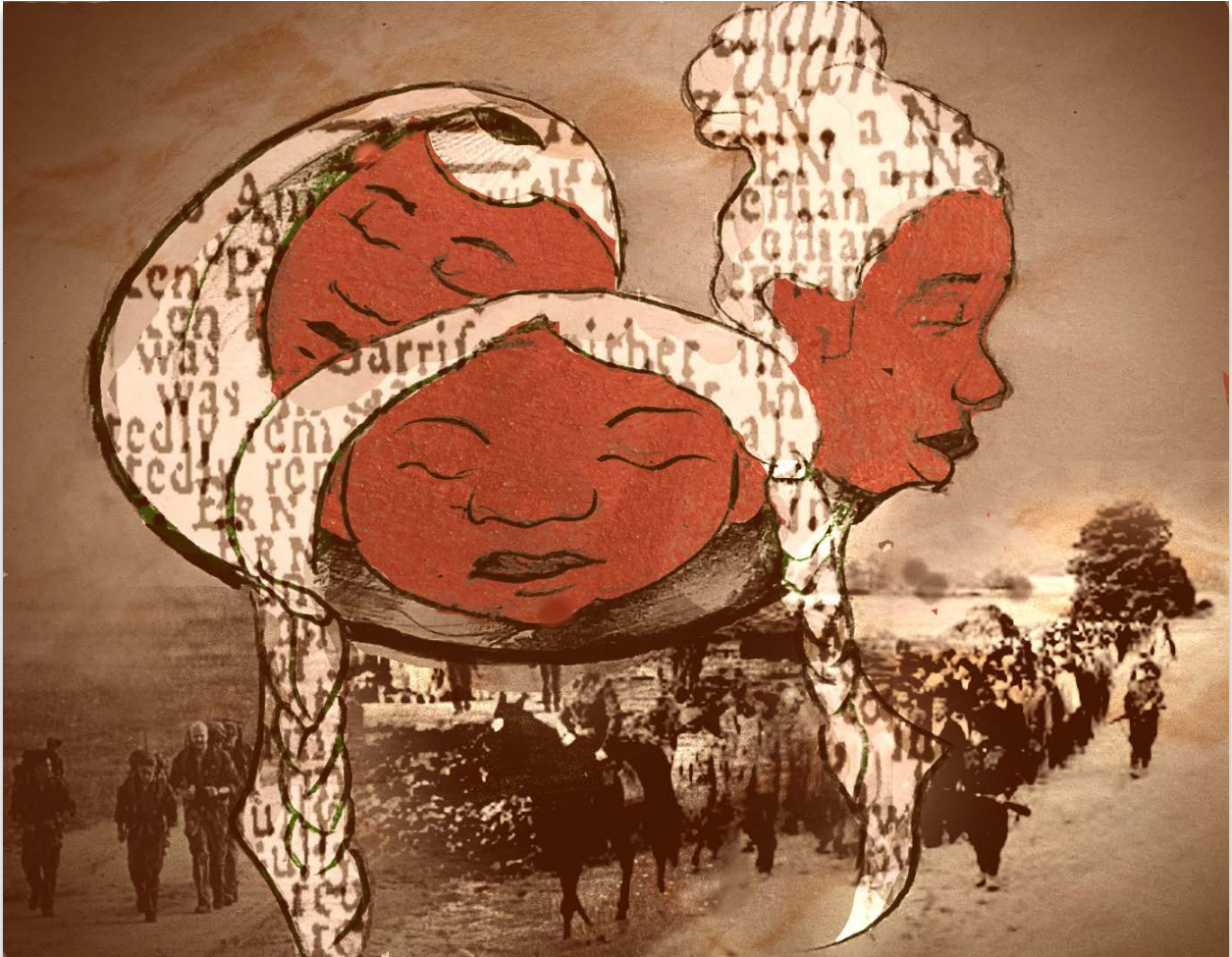


Illustration by Joe Stewart

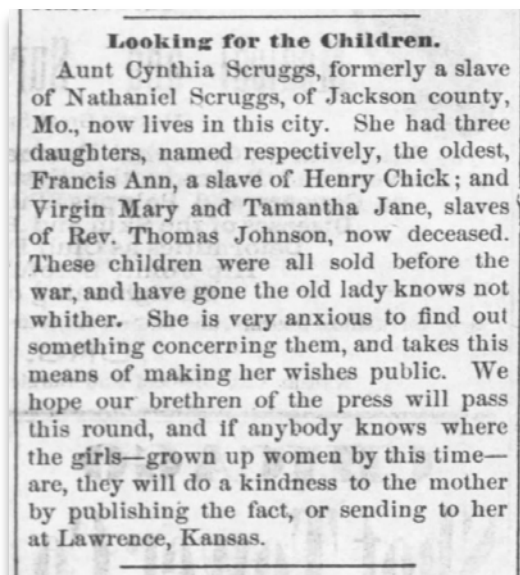
The old woman sat in her room and looked at the two newspapers in her lap. She didn't often hold a newspaper, but these newspapers, the *Daily Kansas Tribune* and the *Western Home Journal*, had a notice about her children. She had heard that some people used newspapers to look for missing family members. Before the Civil War and emancipation, enslavers split apart many families. Like hers.

She remembered the kind newspaperman's words: "We'll put this in both newspapers, Aunt Cynthia, and if any readers know about your daughters, they'll tell us."

She could read only a few of the words. It had been illegal for her to learn to read while she was a slave, and illegal for anyone to teach her. After slavery, she had to work hard to earn money, and

counting her money was difficult. The work was not much different from before the war, but money was very different. She didn't have time to learn to read.

The notice in the newspaper—*her* notice in the newspaper—was circled in pencil so she would know where it was. It said: “Looking for the Children. Aunt Cynthia Scruggs, formerly a slave of Nathaniel Scruggs, of Jackson county, Mo., now lives in this city. She had three daughters, named respectively, the oldest, Francis Ann, a slave of Henry Chick; and Virgin Mary and Tamanca Jane, slaves of Rev. Thomas Johnson, now deceased. These children were all sold before the war, and have gone the old lady knows not whither. She is very anxious to find out something concerning them, and takes this means of making her wishes public. We hope our brethren of the press will pass this round, and if anybody knows where the girls—grown up women by this time—are, they will do a kindness to the mother by publishing the fact, or sending to her at Lawrence, Kansas.”



Daily Kansas Tribune (Lawrence, KS) August 13, 1878.
<https://informationwanted.org/items/show/3560>

Like most people, the newspaperman called her “Aunt Cynthia.” She wasn't anyone's aunt, but she was called that because of her age. She lived in Lawrence, Kansas. People who didn't like slavery started this town. She had come to Lawrence as soon as she could after the war. It was a long way to walk from Missouri—over 50 miles. Her feet had hurt more than anything. And she had been hungry, only eating berries and drinking creek water that she found on the way. That trip was 20 years ago, but she remembered it very well.

While walking to Kansas, she remembered another trip. When she was much younger, the entire plantation had moved from Virginia to Missouri. The slaves had to walk all that way—over *1,000 miles*. They had no shoes. They had food, but the overseer didn't give them long to rest. His whip fell on anyone who was slow. Some older folks died on the way.

Cynthia remembered her daughters. They had been sold before the war. They were children then. The old woman was sure they were grown women now. She wondered: Did they have their own children? What did they look like? Would she know them if she saw them? Would they know her? The old woman couldn't fret about any of that now. She just wanted to see her girls.

She last saw them the day they were taken away to be sold. Their hands were tied together behind their backs. Their feet were tied with a rope that let them take only small steps. Big men picked them up and put them in the wagon with the others to be sold.

“Mamma! Mamma! Help me!” They screamed and cried. “Mamma! Help me! Mamma! Help me!”

Their cries were painful. Cynthia could do nothing. She wanted to run to the wagon and take them out, but big strong men held her back. She fought to get free, but they held her. Finally, when the wagon was out of sight, they let go of her and she fell to the ground crying.

For days and days, all she could do was cry. She had to work too, but she cried while she worked. Where were her babies? Who was taking care of them? Where were they?

Late one night, Big Sam, the enslaved man who drove away with her daughters, came to see her. He told Cynthia that a Kansas City man named Henry Chick bought her oldest daughter. A preacher named Thomas Johnson bought her youngest daughters. Big Sam didn't hear where the preacher lived.

Big Sam had watched the auction with his enslaver, a man named Nathaniel Scruggs. It was held on the steps of the courthouse in Independence, Missouri. Cynthia didn't know where Big Sam was now. During the war, before slaves were free, he said he wanted to find his wife and his own children someday. Cynthia hoped he had.

The old woman cried now. For years she had asked any Black person she saw if they knew about her daughters. She learned that the preacher had died. She learned that people could use newspapers to find missing family members. She learned that newspapers needed money for that. She saved up money for the advertisement.

Cynthia had been scared to go to the newspaper place, but she wanted to see her daughters before she died. The nice man there took only some of her money. She smiled as she remembered his kindness. Someone there had even held the door for her. That was a pleasant surprise.

Now, sitting and remembering, she prayed for the good Lord Jesus to find her daughters for her. She wanted to see them one last time.

About the author:

Duane L Herrmann was surprised to find himself on a farm in Kansas. While trying to make sense of that, he's grown fond of grass waving under wind, trees and the enchantment of moonlight. He aspires to be a hermit, but would miss his children, grandchildren and a few friends. His work has been published, cited, and quoted in print and online, even in languages he can't read (English is difficult enough!). These include a sci-fi novel, seven collections of poetry, a local history, stories for children, and a few other things.

About the artist:

Joe Stewart is originally from Bronx, NY, and relocated to Atlanta, GA after graduating from Clark Atlanta University. He holds a BA in Fashion Design and MA in African American Studies. His passion for art led him to become a published tattoo artist. Stewart utilizes his artistic skills as a six-year Visual Arts educator for Atlanta public schools. His current art series, Cultural Currency, is a multimedia project which focuses on prominent civil rights leaders, freedom fighters, and abolitionists. Each figure is featured on a fictional currency and includes important imagery connected to each figure's personal story.

Notes:

This is a fictional story based on an actual notice that appeared in the following newspapers.

Daily Kansas Tribune (previously *Daily Journal*), Lawrence, KS, August 13, 1878, p. 4.

Western Home Journal, Lawrence, KS, August 15, 1878, p. 6.

<https://www.findagrave.com/> memorial for Washington Henry Chick: 9 February 1826-18 December 1918. Born in Virginia, died in Kansas City, MO (Jackson County), buried in Mt. Washington Cemetery, Independence, MO

Created with support from these partners: