Lo my son, John III,

May you soon discover that

Sandi's strength is in

your DNA.



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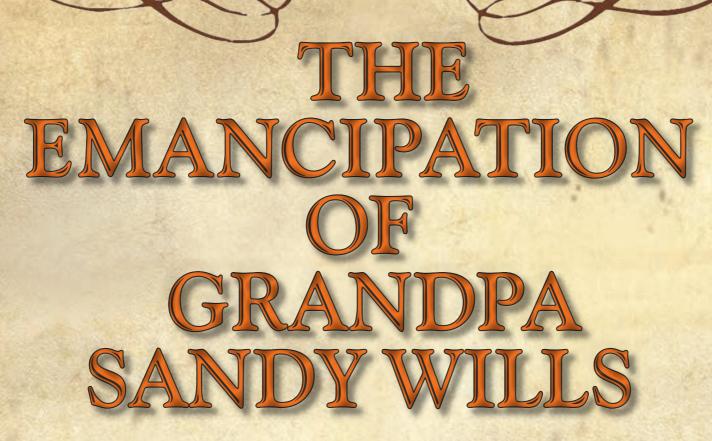
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The Emancipation of Grandpa Sandy Wills by Cheryl Wills
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CHERYL WILLS

ILLUSTRATED BY RANDELL PEARSON





The funeral director calling it a "celebration of life."

Nothing we did that day could bring Daddy back. Clarence Wills, 38, father of five, had died in a motorcycle accident. And at 13, I had lost the bravest father any child could want.

He was also mysterious. All I knew was that my dad was a firefighter and that he was born in Tennessee. He hadn't talked much about his side of the family. Who were the other Wills on my family tree?

That question still haunted me thirty years later. Sure, as a popular TV news anchor in New York City I had interviewed hundreds of people, but I needed to know who *I* was.

One day I came home and searched a genealogy website that helps people learn about their ancestors. I entered my dad's name and "Haywood County, Tennessee," where he was born. That's when I uncovered some breaking news: I was the great-great-great grandchild of a Tennessee slave named Sandy Wills.





Sandy was no ordinary slave—he was a freedom fighter!
In 1863, he escaped the plantation and took arms to battle against the pro-slavery Confederates in the American Civil War. He joined the Union Army that fought to rid America of slavery once and for all. Still, the Union Army was racially segregated, so Sandy served with free and enslaved black men in the United States Colored Troops division.

Once the Union defeated the Confederates in 1865, Sandy was set free. The tallest, strongest man in his unit, he married a woman named Emma and they had nine children.

Reading the historical records was fascinating, but the more I learned, the more questions I had. It was almost midnight, so I turned off the light and crawled into bed.

Oh, if only I could hear Sandy Wills' voice, [yawn] or see his face, [yawn] or just find a photo [yawn]. That would be... so...so...ama-zing [snore].





I felt a cold hand on my shoulder. I slowly opened my eyes to see this tall, thin man with shiny silver hair hovering over me. He was wearing a dusty blue Civil War uniform with a musket at his side. "Sandy Wills...is...is that you?" I said, rubbing my eyes.

"Yessum, it's me," he said with a strong southern drawl. "I am grateful you woke me up. I haven't slept well these past 126 years."

"I must be dreaming. This is impossible! What's going on here?" I said in total confusion.

"You're the famous reporter—go ahead, ask me whatever you want," he said.

I looked around. I was sitting behind the news desk at my television station and Sandy was pulling out a chair to sit next to me. He looked straight into the TV camera as my producer counted down: three...two...one...ACTION.