

The Swamp Rabbit ~

In 1856, the news of a proposed railroad, to be known as the *North Eastern Railroad Company*, with plans to pass across the Santee about midway from Charleston towards the North, was received with great elation. Captain Theodore L. Gourdin, my 2nd great-granduncle, gave the right-of-way, with only one provision, that a depot would be maintained at the crossing of the Santee River Road (just along the north side of the Santee River in Williamsburg County).

When the right-of-way was completed across the swamp, the cross ties and rails laid, and the train began to cross over (headed north), all the natives looked on in wonder. To them, it signified the arrival of the machine age. They began to spruce up and drive for miles with their families to see this wonderful train called the "Swamp Rabbit."

In approaching the depot from the south, the train began gaining speed on the opposite side of the swamp, a distance of about five miles, so as to get enough momentum to pass through the valley (swamp) of the Santee and reach the more elevated ground at the depot.

As this remarkable train approached, belching forth clouds of black smoke and cinders all over the passengers, swaying back and forth upon the uneven road-bed, with steam escaping noisily and water dripping from every conceivable part of the engine, it all appeared so wonderful. About the time the engine reached the depot, it seemed it climaxed its demonstration of great power, its massive strength and efficiency. The more tender-hearted among the mothers would plead with those in charge to let the poor puffing, tired, and weeping critter rest from such a feat. Many a mule and horse, at the sight of Swamp Rabbit, broke loose from its hitching post and made haste to its stall back on the farm.

During the construction of the railroad, quite a large amount of the work was done by the slaves of landowners, and in payment, these gentlemen received stock from the railroad company. Being stockholders, they were lenient and sympathetic in regard to accidents and the irregularity of the schedules.

It was not uncommon for a family living some distance from the depot to send a servant boy early in the morning, many hours ahead of their departure, with torchlight, to sign the train down and request the conductor to wait until his Master and Missus could arrive. While, at other times, these passengers would be on time and would sit around for hours, and possibly days, before the train arrived. In both

instances, everybody seemed satisfied and perfect harmony prevailed between the train personnel and the passengers.

As years passed, this harmony between the two became more distant and today, the palatial streamliner of rapid speed slides between New York and Florida as if governed by the tide, which waits for no man.

When the news of the railroad trickled back into the more remote sections of the country, it aroused among the inhabitants a great curiosity and a burning desire to embark upon what to them was a hazardous venture; namely, to ride upon this train known as the Swamp Rabbit. A certain family residing at Spring Pond, in the Cedar Creek community, talked the matter over, and decided that they and their brood of nine children must see and experience the thrill of this adventure. Such excitement and commotion as reigned among the youngsters when they were told about the trip planned for them.

On the appointed day of the trip, they were up before dawn. Such washing of ears, combing of hair, and dressing up in their Sunday best! When all were ready, they clambered into the big wagon and started on their way to Gourdin Depot, fifteen miles away. During this several hours' journey, they talked and laughed in eager anticipation of the greater ride to come – their minds had but a single thought – riding on that wonderful creature, the Rabbit.

Neither the parents nor children had ever seen this crude first edition of the modern streamliners, and so, naturally, had no definite picture in mind as to what to expect. The children had been born and reared along the fringes of Spring Pond, and were quite familiar with the woods' animals, including the timid brown bunny, so after hearing so much about the Swamp Rabbit, they looked forward to seeing some enormous and wonderful animal, large and strong enough for many people to ride upon.

When the family finally arrived at Gourdin Depot, all remained quietly in the wagon while father negotiated with the stationmaster for the tickets. Then, hearing the whistle blowing as the train approached, he turned and hurried toward the wagon; an amazing scene met his eyes. The children, who had caught their first sight of the purring, blowing, smoking, creaking engine, so entirely different from their conception of what a rabbit would look like, had, with one accord, leaped in terror from the wagon and scattered in every direction. All behind trees and bushes in the nearby thickets. When the train stopped, its entire personnel, both passengers and crew, having witnessed the occurrence and sympathizing with the father's

predicament, descended en masse and offered to assist in rounding up his frightened offspring.

By this time, however, the mother also had changed her mind about wishing to ride on the Swamp Rabbit, so she pleaded that the whole thing be called off. So, after the vicious contraption pulled out, mother gathered up her brood, bundled them all back into the wagon, and spent some time quieting and soothing their fears, while father went back to the stationmaster to request that the ticket money be returned. The latter graciously agreed to do this.

Then, a disappointed and crestfallen family slowly made its way back to Spring Pond. Thus ended one eventful day in the history of the Swamp Rabbit.

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