

No longer distracted, my anxiety returned. I felt I needed to get on top of this thing, to get control of it. To that end, I copied my hero Socrates and went into analysis mode. There seemed to be two options: either I had somehow witnessed, or been part of, an actual historical event, or I had somehow, be it dream, hallucination, or whatever, imagined the whole thing. Having already struck out trying to research hallucinations, I decided to see if my dream was consistent with history, was something that could feasibly have actually happened. If that was the case, maybe I wasn't crazy. Maybe I had just been a Confederate soldier in a past life. It's a measure of how far I'd gone in a mere twelve hours that I would think such a thing as though it was completely normal, even mundane. Oh yeah, let me tell you about my many past lives...

I started with the easy question—the magnolia tree. Could the giant in front of the restaurant have been a sapling during the Civil War? The answer was yes. Turns out magnolia trees can live up to 120 years—plenty long enough. Indeed, given its enormity, it was very likely it *was* a sapling, in that very spot of course, a century or so earlier.

The next question was when might a troop of Confederate soldiers have been boarding a train in Meridian? How to answer this stumped me for quite a while until I suddenly remembered the sapling had been in bloom. That meant spring. Okay then. There were five possible springs: 1861 through 1865. I ruled out 1861 since the troops were so bedraggled. In spring of that year the Confederacy had only just elected Jefferson Davis president and Fort Sumter had only recently been attacked. Any soldiers would be new recruits and much better decked out.

Then, for a while, I failed to come up with a way to narrow further the options until I remembered what every schoolboy in Meridian knew, that Tecumseh Sherman had sacked Meridian and, in the process, torn up the railroad. That turned out to have been in February of 1864, so now I was left with only 1862 and 1863. There had been action in Mississippi in the spring of 1862, up in the north end of the state, around Corinth and the Tennessee border. In 1863 there was the siege of Vicksburg at the west edge of the state. I had no sooner thought this than it dawned on me that the train in my dream had been going west. Could they have been headed to Vicksburg?

On April 30, Ulysses Grant had crossed from the western side of the Mississippi at Bruinsburg, and the Confederates had abandoned Grand Gulf by May 2. As a result, Confederate troops under Joe Johnston had been rushing south and, more to the point, west to oppose Grant's push toward Jackson and the encirclement of Vicksburg. So Vicksburg made a lot more sense than up north in Corinth.

Sherman met and defeated Johnston at Jackson on May 14, so if those troops were meant to oppose that they would have been boarding that train some time before the 14th. It seemed quite reasonable then to think that Confederate troops could have been boarding a westbound train in Meridian sometime in the first two weeks of May.

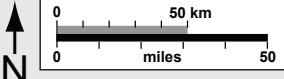
But still something niggled at me, something from my dream I had yet to bring to consciousness. I very nearly gave up trying to tease it out and was packing up to leave when I thought, "Wait a sec. I-not-I had said "Magnolia". Which I now realized was odd. Why would I tell the man next to me, a Southern boy, what kind of tree we were next to?

Everyone in the South knows magnolia trees. No, I now thought. What if I-not-I was telling him our destination—Magnolia, Mississippi?

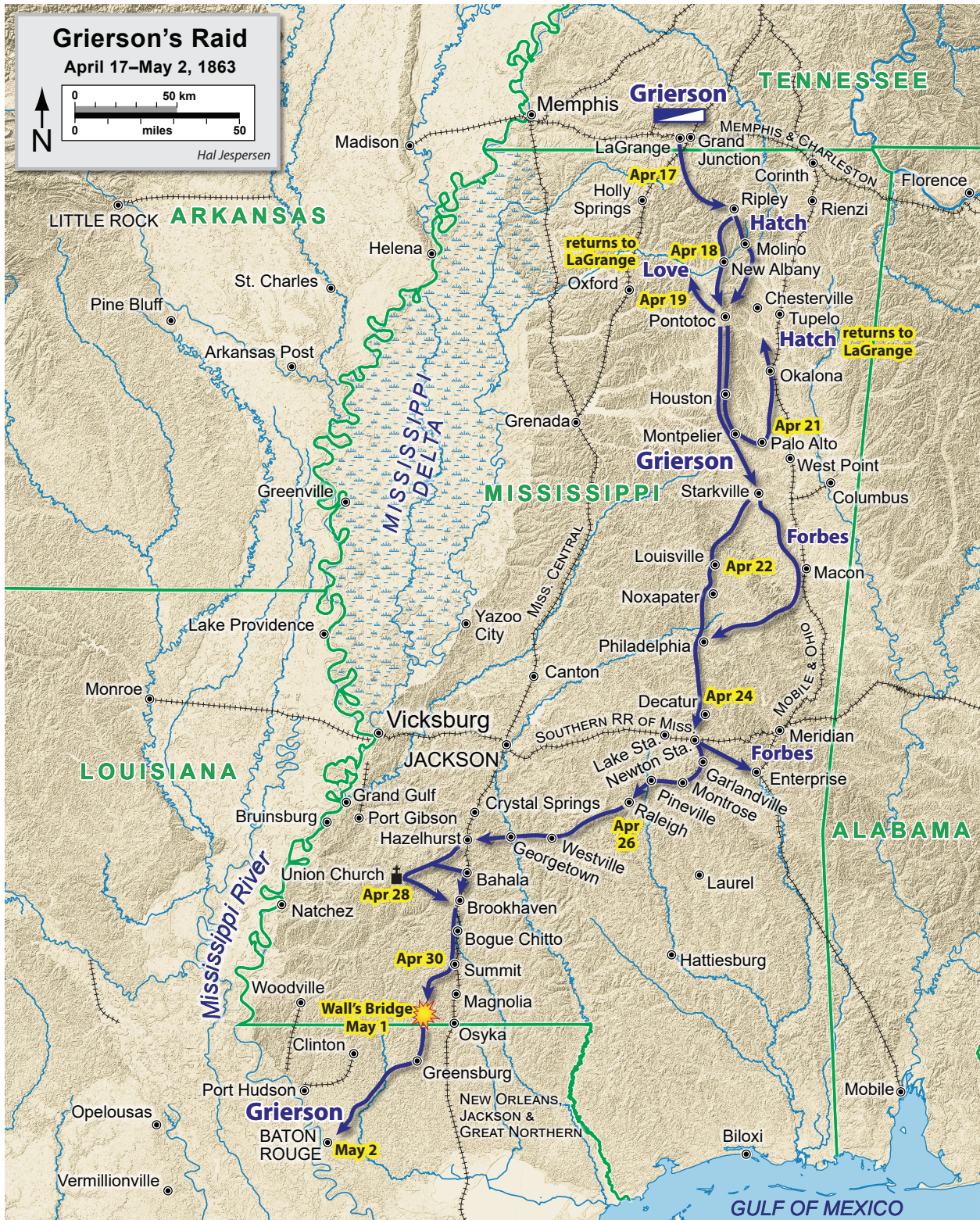
I got out more books and maps and finally found it on an old Civil War railroads map. The railroad from Meridian to Vicksburg first went through Jackson—where it intersected with a north-south line. And that line went south to Magnolia. And just a few miles from there Rebel forces finally caught up with Grierson's Raiders at the Battle of Wall's Bridge, on May 1.

Grierson's Raid

April 17–May 2, 1863



Hal Jespersen



This Union cavalry unit had started in Tennessee and had nearly gone the length of Mississippi by the beginning of May with Confederates chasing them most of the way. Was my troop meant to be in that chase? If so, and they were not on their way to the battle of Jackson, then that narrowed the window to a time when they would have been wanted in Magnolia—in other words, the first week of May, 1863.

Once, when I was a boy, I saw a dog chasing a squirrel. There were two trees right next to each other and the squirrel scrambled up one of them, but the dog stood barking at the bottom of the other, and I thought, “Damn, that dog is barking up the wrong tree.” Cliches are cliches for a reason, and I experienced one now. Believe me when I say a chill ran down my spine. Today was a day in the first week of May. Could I have seen an event from exactly a century earlier? Of course, said event could have been on the 1st or 3rd or any other day in that week. And, of course, I could be entirely wrong about those troops being bound for Magnolia and thus not the first week of May at all. Not to mention, I still had in no way established it was an historical event. Nevertheless, it was creepy that something just like that could very well have happened one hundred years to the day when I walked out of that restaurant. In fact, I suddenly remembered, wasn't the sun in pretty much the same place the sky in both my dream and that morning? Could it have been something that happened not just to the day but to the minute?

I left the library in a daze and wandered into a nearby park to think it over. I sat on a bench near a Spanish American War memorial that featured a rough rider sort of soldier holding a long rifle. On the other side of a wide set of steps was a World War I memorial that featured a doughboy running with his bayoneted rifle in his left hand. I thought, if he's running toward the enemy he's probably gonna get himself shot. These

monuments were dwarfed by the obligatory Confederate memorial in the center of the little plaza. This was an obelisk a la the Washington Monument. In 2016, at a time when Americans were finally beginning to understand that Confederates were not freedom fighters but traitors, and started to demand the removal of such memorials, Alabama passed the *Alabama Memorial Preservation Act* which would “prohibit the relocation, removal, alteration, renaming, of other disturbances of certain commemorative statues, monuments, memorials, or plaques which are located on public property”.

In 2020, in the aftermath of the George Floyd murder, protesters tried to pull the damn thing down but couldn't. Instead, they pulled down a statue of a guy who was a Confederate blockade runner, and for whom the park is now, to this day, named. Unable to pull the obelisk down, they vandalized its base. The mayor then brought in a crane and, on June 1, a state holiday honoring Jefferson Davis, had the thing carted off. Which put the city in violation of aforesaid law. The fine was \$25,000. Birmingham citizens started a GoFundMe campaign that raised \$57, 619.

I wondered what had been happening on this very spot on May 2, 1863, not knowing that the city of Birmingham didn't even exist at that time. It did indeed look as if what I saw was consistent with an event that could have happened. But where did that leave me? I remember thinking, well, that event either happened or it didn't. If it did, then I somehow had witnessed it. No, “witness” seemed insufficient—I was there. But it wasn't my body. I was in someone else's body—a Confederate soldier's. So, a previous life? But, aside from having to come to grips with the whole reincarnation model of life, there remained the problem that it didn't fit with any reincarnation, previous life memory I'd ever heard of. In those, the entire world doesn't change. The latter day

person remains in their world but sees in their mind the other, previous world. But maybe those people were wrong? Or misdescribing their experiences? Or maybe this was a second way that sort of thing could happen? I had more questions than answers.

Nor was I better off assuming I hadn't witnessed an actual historical event, for, in that case, it was all a figment of my imagination, and I could not comprehend how in the world I could have imagined so much detail, how I could even have thought to reverse age the magnolia tree to its infancy, and without even knowing how long magnolia trees live. Worse, if it was all in my head, what the hell was wrong with me?

I don't know how long I sat on that bench but I suddenly realized I was hungry. I had forgotten about lunch and hadn't been bold enough to steal a sandwich from the cops. I set off down the shady, tree-lined street in front of me and, after passing a few restaurants that would tax Aunt Charlie's stipend unjustifiably, I found a decent looking diner, went in and sat at the counter.

I couldn't have picked a better spot to eavesdrop on several conversations. Surprisingly few were about the children that day. Most of the chatter was gossip except for one argument about the murder of William Moore and the freedom marchers then approaching the Alabama border. A middle-aged couple in the booth behind me were talking to a middle-aged man a couple stools up from me.

Stool man said, "C'mon Inez, be reasonable. What's all this gonna accomplish? Did this Moore fella actually think he was gonna change Ross Barnett's mind?"

“That ain’t the point,” said Inez. “Of course nothing woulda come of it. The silly man would have walked his silly feet off and ended up in Jackson, if he even made it that far. The worst thing that could have happened happened. Some dumbass shot him.”

“Yeah,” said Inez’s husband (I presumed). “They’d have left him and his damned letter standing on the capitol steps until he either slinked away or was arrested for vagrancy.”

“And then,” said Inez. “They’d have shipped him back to Maryland.”

“But Inez,” said Stool man. “You know as well as I do that looney wasn’t gonna reach Jackson. The Klan woulda got him if whatsisname hadn’t.”

“Well now,” said Inez. “Ain’t that my point? Here we are again in the public limelight, news shows all over the world, newspapers, magazines all saying, look what they like down there in Alabama. Of course, Moore was looney, and of course, there weren’t no way he was gonna get that letter to Barnett. So why kill him? Why give all them Yankees and Reds and Kennedys and Martin Luther King Juniors something to go on about? It’s just stupid.”

“Y’know,” said Inez’s husband. “I know the guy what done it. From a few Klan rallies. Never struck me as all that zealous, I’m kinda surprised actually.”

“Tellya what, Jay” said stool man. “He ain’t the one to blame. I blame the authorities who let a madman go traipsing across the South carrying signs telling one and all he was a nigger lover.”

“And his wife too,” said Inez. “Where was she? Up north somewhere not even in Maryland. If that man was ill why wasn’t his wife with him? How could she let him roam all over Alabama like that, where he weren’t welcome, knowing his cockamamie views and all?”

Stool man laughed.

“Maybe she wanted to get rid of him,” he said.

“Yeah,” said Jay. “Maybe she’s the one gave him the idea.”

“Laugh all you want,” said Inez. “But it’s like right outta that damn movie over at the Melba.”

About then Inez and Jay left and stool man turned back to the counter and ordered another coffee and some apple pie. When it came he told the waitress, “Now there are nine more on the road, and five of them is white. Should meet ‘em at the state line, load ‘em onto a bus, and give ‘em a quick tour straight through to Mississippi. Let Mississippi handle ‘em.”

The waitress considered this idea.

“You might have something there, Otis,” she said. “No trouble and a pretty neat way of letting damned Yankees and the damned N-double-A-CP know we’re tired of making martyrs of their victims.”

That last bit almost made me choke on my dinner. Poor Alabama, forced into making martyrs! I didn’t say anything, but they both noticed. The waitress moved off to clean some counter while Otis informed me that the South wasn’t the only part of the

country having racial trouble. He listed for my edification Harlem, Chicago, Detroit, and even “our own” Washington, D.C.

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s a problem.”

Otis wanted to educate me further, how we’re living under martial law and how you had to be in the N-double-A-CP to get any respect or consideration, but the minute I was done eating I was gone.

Then, heading back to the motel on a nice street, I turned a corner and there was the Melba Theater showing *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Really? I thought. On the same day they’re arresting children for walking down a street, for trying to pray at City Hall, we have Mockingbird playing?

Back in my room I made a collect call to Aunt Charlie to tell her I was running a day behind. Said I’d gotten a late start in Meridian. She asked where I was and got excited when I told her Birmingham, wanted to know if I’d seen any of the events there that day. When I said I had accidentally found myself in the middle of it, she got Zuri on the extension. Seems Zuri was very familiar with Birmingham, knew exactly where I’d been. It was Zuri who first named the church for me – the 16th Street Baptist Church.

Aunt Charley asked if I had a camera. When I said I didn’t she asked if I had the money to buy one, but before I could answer Zuri said that wasn’t a good idea, that I’d be at risk running around taking pictures of the cops, like it’d been in Oxford when photographers got attacked. So then Aunt Charley said, okay, but get a notepad and pen and write down everything I’d seen that day. She said, not

to do it like a school essay, not to care about grammar or spelling, but just start writing and not stop until there was nothing else to say. That's how I have the previous diner conversation, for example, nearly verbatim. In fact, she wanted me to stay there another day or so in case more happened and she'd wire me more money if I was running short. I said I still had enough but I'd let her know.

Then there was a lull.

"And guess what," I said. "There's a movie theater here playing *To Kill a Mockingbird*." We had discussed the movie and book on a previous call.

"Are you kidding?" she fairly yelled. "*To Kill a Mockingbird* is playing there in Birmingham? *Now*?"

"Where's it playing?" asked Zuri.

"At the Melba."

"Why, that's just a couple blocks from the park and church!"

"And they say there's no god," said Aunt Charley. "Listen, AJ. Go to the movie! Go to every showing if you can. Try to move around the theater, see if you can overhear what people are saying. Whites and blacks."

"He won't be able to overhear any blacks," said Zuri. "They're in the balcony and he can't go there."

"Oh, that's right," said Aunt Charley. "Well, do what you can AJ. I want to know how these people are reacting to that movie. In fact, try interviewing people. In fact, tell them you're a reporter for the *Gettysburg Times*."

When I protested that I wasn't a reporter and had no idea how to be a reporter, she pooh poohed me, saying all you have to do is get people to talk about themselves. Believe me, they're itching to tell you.

"But won't I get in trouble impersonating a reporter for a Gettysburg newspaper?"

"They'll be thrilled, dear, believe me. I know the editor. He has no one there now and to get a correspondent on site out of the blue, and for free no less, he'll be tickled."

And so I became a civil rights reporter for the Gettysburg Times. Sort of.

I didn't go to the movies that night however. It had been too long a day. The hallucination or dream—I still didn't know what to call it—could that have been just this morning? And the near accident in Eutaw? And the Bama library? Then Trixie coming onto me, and the kids and the Birmingham library. Funny when you think about it, how most days nothing at all happens and then you get a day like this. So I thought, to hell with it. I'll go tomorrow night. Tonight I'll write Aunt Charlie's report and get some sleep.

But then I found I was still too wired to sleep so I turned on the TV. In those days it was slim pickings. At most you might have four channels. The TV at the White Motel only had two. And there were no remotes, so you picked one and stuck with it. Thursday night it was either *Hazel* or *McHale's Navy*. This when I needed something engrossing, something escapist, to take me out of myself. I think I picked McHale but I probably couldn't have told you even at the time what the so-called plot was, my mind was in such a whirl. The disconnect between TV America and real America boggled the mind. I do

remember Andy Williams came on next and it was Andy's droning that put me to sleep. I woke up just as the new guy on the *Tonight Show*, Johnny Carson, was winding up. After that came the national anthem and the test screen Indian. I think it meant something to someone—didn't to me. After turning the TV off I had a heck of a time getting back to sleep and spent one of those nights where you keep waking up thinking you haven't been asleep but then realize that crawling through that tunnel and coming out in a Bugs Bunny cartoon must have been a dream.