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### Texas 'Our' Texas: My Family's Deep Roots in the Lone Star State

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# Texas, “Our” Texas: My Family’s Deep Roots in the Lone Star State

by Karen Kossie-Chernyshev, PhD

From my earliest days at home and Sunday school, which were often one and the same in my father’s house as he was a pastor, the significance of history was interwoven into all aspects of life. History was instructive and essential. It provided context and a meaningful way to understand the past, its influence on the present, and implications for the future.

As my father walked through what he believed to be his calling to establish a church that is still thriving in Houston’s historic Fifth Ward—the birthplace of such dynamic Texas originals as Barbara Jordan, Mickey Leland, and Ruth Simmons—he often described the experience as a kind of tug-of-war between him and God, with God telling him, “Son, you can’t tell your story about how this work [the church] is being developed. I’m telling mine.”

As a little girl who loved stories, I decided to wait around and watch the drama. The stories my father told

eventually became the foundation for my PhD dissertation at Rice University. Not long before my father passed, I asked him for a favor I knew he would find irresistible despite his weakened physical state: “Dad, will you pray with me about a history project I’m working on?” He waited for a moment and then interjected, “Your roots are very deep.” I presumed

he was referring to my longstanding commitment to Texas Southern University, where I have labored in the groves of academia for almost 30 years. In retrospect, I realize he was referring to what I would soon learn about my family’s historical connection to Texas history just a few days before my birthday, thanks to a timely email from *Ancestry.com*: a transcription of my paternal great-grandmother’s death certificate: Delia Shields Tyres (15 September 1870–2 May 1928). Her age at the time of death—57—caught my attention. Inspired by the document, I set out to trace my family’s genealogy to the period of slavery as a birthday present to myself. I found an answer that left me speechless and brimming with gratitude.<sup>1 2</sup>

Detail	Source
Name:	Mrs Delia Tyres [Mrs Delia Shields]
Gender:	Female
Race:	Colored (Black)
Age:	57
Birth Date:	15 Sep 1870
Birth Place:	Texas
Death Date:	2 May 1928
Death Place:	Houston, Harris, Texas, USA
Father:	George Shields
Mother:	Adline Richardson

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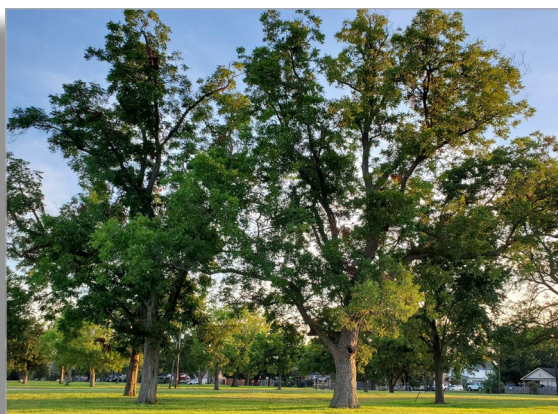
Figure 1: *Ancestry.com* transcription of the death certificate of the author’s grandmother, Delia Shields Tyres (1870–1928).

Figure 2: Death certificate for the author’s great-grandmother, “Adline” Richardson Shields.

More than 300 documents affirmed my family’s undeniable presence in Texas from Mexican Texas history to the present. Slavery, freedom, the Dawes Act, Jim Crow, World Wars I and II, and beyond were all evident in the records. I learned that Grandma Delia’s parents were William (Dick) Shields (1841-d. unknown) and Adaline Richardson Shields (1848-1919). I also learned that Adaline Richards Shields attempted to take advantage of the Dawes Act to claim Cherokee ancestry and the land that came with it, but her application was denied (1896).<sup>3 4</sup>

Adaline and her husband migrated to Texas from Tennessee more than likely with the “Old 300,” the group of white settlers who petitioned the Mexican government to bring their slaves with them to work the land. As slavery was forbidden in Mexico, slave owners found a loophole to continue exploiting their slaves. They called them “indentured servants,” “farmers,” and “housekeepers” in lieu of their designation as enslaved.<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding their life in bondage, the 1880 census affirms that all of George and Adaline Richardson Shield’s children were born free: Robert (12), Adam (10), Delia (8), Caroline (6), John (4), George (1), and John, born later in 1889.<sup>6</sup>

On 31 December 1899, Delia Shields married George Tyres in Wharton County, Texas, and the couple moved to Houston, Texas, between 1900 and 1906.<sup>7</sup> Although they were free, their lives and those of their siblings and children bore witness to Jim Crow and the limited educational and professional opportunities that came with it. Delia was described as a “domestic” and her



*Figure 3: This century-old tree shown in the center of this photo stands on property that descendants of George and Delia Tyres owned for more than 100 years, until the City of Houston seized it through eminent domain.*

husband, George Tyres (4 July 1871-7 March 1925), a “common laborer” on one record and a machinist at Lucy Manufacturing Company on another.<sup>8 9</sup> John Shields (1887-1953), Delia’s younger brother, though a man at the time of the 1930 census, was described as an “elevator boy.”<sup>10</sup>

George Tyres took advantage of his right to own property, one of the most vital rights afforded African Americans in the aftermath of slavery. He owned several acres of land in Ryan’s Addition, fertile soil that remained in the family’s possession for approximately 100 years until the City of Houston seized the land through eminent domain.

When George Tyres acquired the property and from whom has yet to be determined. The land seizure deeply affected the neighborhood. Longtime residents and the Galilee Baptist Church were displaced. So, too, was Elysian Products, a historic concrete business established on the family homestead by George Tyres’s grandson, Carl Otis DeWalt (27 February 1928-13 January 2020)—one of Houston’s early black businessmen. The proposed freeway that forced him to relocate his business was never constructed.

The tree that Carl Otis’s grandfather planted, shown in figure 2, as well as

his fruitful progeny, bore witness to the family he established there. According to my father, the late Roy Lee Kossie, Jr., my great-grandfather George Tyres planted this tree more than 100 years ago. It still stands on the former Tyres/Dewalt/Jackson/Kossie/Randle Homestead, located in Ryans Addition, Kashmere Gardens, Greater Fifth Ward, Houston, Texas.

Little did George and Delia Tyres know that one of their great-grandsons, Harold DeWalt, a machinist, would receive a personal “thank you” note from President Ronald Reagan for a brass and aluminum chess set that Harold spent 70 hours creating for the 40th president, despite opposition from Harold’s “staunchly Democratic chums.” Harold noted in his interview with the *Houston Chronicle* (12 July 1981): “In a sense, I was trying to make Reagan more aware of the plight of black Americans, trying to make him see that we can produce fine work, if only we’re given the chance.” Nor did George and Delia Tyres know that



*Figure 4: Delia Shields Tyres, the author’s grandmother.*



one of their great-great-grandsons, Jalen Hurts, Otis DeWalt's grandson, would lead a distinguished career in college and professional sports by serving respectively as a quarterback for the University of Alabama, University of Oklahoma, and Philadelphia Eagles.<sup>11 12 13</sup>

Bearing its own unique fruit, Great-Grandma Delia's death certificate led me for the first time in my life to her final resting place, Evergreen Negro Cemetery, which the Texas Historical Commission designated as a Historic Texas Cemetery in 2009.<sup>14</sup> I had no idea I had driven past—perhaps even *over*—her grave countless times on my way to Texas Southern University. Nor did I realize her husband, George Tyres, my great-grandfather, was also buried there. This discovery came later.<sup>15 16 17</sup>

With the help of my husband and son, I walked through Evergreen looking for a headstone that bore Great-Grandma Delia's name. I also met Woodrow W. Jones, who was granted trusteeship to take care of the cemetery. He informed me that Evergreen Negro Cemetery was established by Alexander K. Kelley (1847-1928), an African American former slave and philanthropist who wanted to ensure that African American Houstonians had a dignified final resting place. I learned further that 461 bodies had been

Figure 5: Death certificate for Delia Shields Tyres (1870-1928).

exhumed to make room for Lockwood Drive, which was paved in the 1950s, the same decade the highway system sliced and diced Houston's historic Fifth Ward community, where my free ancestors chose to settle. I was saddened that my great-grandmother might have figured among those who were exhumed, but I was very grateful that I had a record affirming her physical location and direct ties to

Figure 6: Death certificate for Mr. George Tyous (1871-1925).

Houston's and Texas's history from the state's earliest days.<sup>18 19</sup>

I learned that all of my ancestors who died during the Jim Crow era were buried in African American cemeteries throughout the Houston area, including Evergreen Negro Cemetery, Oak Park, and Golden Gate, where the late Congressman Mickey Leland and African American Houstonians from every social stratum were interred. Their death certificates also revealed the names of the black-owned funeral homes that prepared their bodies for internment, including Clay & Clay (3101 Lyons Avenue), Sacred Hope (1505 Jenson Drive), Kashmere Garden Funeral Home (5908 Lavender Street, Houston, Texas), and Lewis (2516 Odin Avenue).<sup>20 21 22 23</sup> All but Lewis Funeral Home are still located in Houston's historic Fifth Ward and Greater Fifth Ward regions. My ancestors and some of their descendants were eulogized in historic African American churches in the area, including Latter Day Deliverance Revival Church (4036 Lyons Avenue), founded in 1966 by George and Delia Tyres's grandson and his wife, the late Bishop Roy Lee Kossie, Jr. (4 July 1932-22 January 2018) and Co-Pastor Barbara Lessie Linton Kossie (11 May 1934-14 November 2001), my



Figure 7: George Tyous, the author's great-grandfather.

of Texas and beyond, including Jarvis Christian College, Grambling University, Howard University, Prairie View A&M University, Texas Southern University, Dallas Baptist University, Houston Community College, Michigan State University, Rice University, Sam Houston State University, San Jacinto College, Stephen F. Austin University, Texas A&M University, University of Alabama, University of Houston, University of Oklahoma, The University of Texas, and others. They have served

as administrators, college

biological parents and the grandparents of Julian Duncan, Chief Marketing Officer for the Houston Rockets.<sup>24</sup>

Thanks to my great-grandparents' death certificates, I have a fuller picture of who I am and where my paternal grandmother's and grandfather's families came from. Their documents, as well as their possibly displaced remains, are material evidence that my family's history is interwoven with that of the city, state, and nation—a history that can never be denied. For George and Delia Tyres set into motion the birth of more than 100 Texans and counting, beginning with Willie Mae Tyres Randle (23 May 1909-18 October 1957) and her fruitful younger sister Millie Ann Tyres Dewalt Kossie (1910-1997), who bore seven children, most of whom raised families of their own.<sup>25 26 27</sup>

Thanks to social change, Delia's descendants have pursued college degrees at historically black colleges and universities and historically white institutions throughout the State

and professional athletes, barbers, businessmen, managers, mavericks, musicians, nurses, preachers, principals, professional chefs, teachers, and college professors—including Dr. Patrick Dewalt, Fresno State University (Fresno, California), and me, the first African American female to earn a PhD in the field of history from a Texas institution (Rice University).<sup>28</sup>

It is encouraging to know that through faith, hope, and perseverance, George and Delia Shields Tyres and their descendants defied the odds. They managed to survive, live, strive, and thrive in and beyond the Greater Fifth Ward, Houston, Texas—a region saturated with African American Texas history. Thanks to their records and those of other relatives, I can rest knowing that no piece of legislation can ever negate their history. For together they declare through documents spanning 141 years and seven generations to date, "Texas is our Texas, too!" ★

**About Karen Kossie-Chernyshev, PhD:** Karen is a fifth-generation Texan and the first African American woman to earn a PhD in the field of history from a Texas institution (Rice University). Her research focuses on African American women's intellectual history, African American religion, and topics in the African Diaspora. Her edited works include *Recovering Five Generations Hence: The Life and Writing of Lillian Jones Horace* (Texas A&M University Press, 2013) and *Angie Brown* (Outskirts Press, 2017). Dr. Kossie-Chernyshev is also the founding director of SWATH, an interdisciplinary summer workshop on African American Texas History for K-16 teachers: [www.swathonline.org](http://www.swathonline.org).

**Image attributions:**

Figure 1: "Texas, U.S., Death Certificates, 1903-1982," Texas Department of State Health, death certificate #21488, Mrs. Delia Tyres, 2 May 1928; database and images, "Texas, U.S., Death Certificates, 1903-1982," *Ancestry.com* (<https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/40050486:2272> : accessed 11 August 2022); citing Bureau of Vital Statistics, Austin.

Figure 2: "Texas, U.S., Death Certificates, 1903-1982," Texas Department of State Health, death certificate #483, Mrs. Adline Shields, 6 March 1919; database and images, "Texas, U.S., Death Certificates, 1903-1982," *Ancestry.com* (<https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/40011006:2272> : accessed 11 August 2022); citing Bureau of Vital Statistics, Austin.

Figure 3: Image courtesy of the author.

Figure 4: Tommie Lee Kossie Jackson Photographic Collection, Courtesy of Lucinda Clark Kossie.

Figure 5: "Texas, U.S., Death Certificates, 1903-1982," Texas Department of State Health, death certificate #483, Mrs. Adline Shields, 6 March 1919; database and images, "Texas, U.S., Death Certificates, 1903-1982," *Ancestry.com* (<https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/40011006:2272> : accessed 11 August 2022); citing Bureau of Vital Statistics, Austin.

Figure 6: Image from Funeral, Tommie Lee Kossie Jackson Photographic Collection. Courtesy of Lucinda Clark Kossie.

Figure 7: "Texas, U.S., Death Certificates, 1903-1982," Texas, Department of State Health Services, death certificate #521, George Tyous, 7 March 1926; *Ancestry.com* (<https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/22168478:2272> : accessed 15 August 2022).



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