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HIS OWN FAMILY; EDWARD BALL'S ANCESTORS INCLUDE SLAVE TRADERS . . . AND THE PEOPLE THEY BOUGHT AND SOLD

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Click, a painted portrait of a wigged gentleman appears. Click, a faded photo of people in a field. Nothing unusual in all of this. It could be a meeting of a genealogical society.

Except that Mr. Ball is white and many of his relatives in the slides are black.

What's more, Mr. Ball's family owned many of these people - or their ancestors. The Balls were slaveholders, slave brokers, doing business from 1698 until the end of the Civil War.

In miniature, **Edward Ball's** family story is the story of America; certainly, it's the story of the South. Mr. Ball, author of *Slaves in the Family* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), appeared recently to talk at Black Images bookstore and answer questions from the audience, made up mostly of members of Black Dallas Remembered, the historical society. The discussion ranged from Clarence Glover Jr.'s objection even to the term "slaves" ("it's not a word Africans ever used") to heated exchanges about how the experiences of black men and black women differed under slavery ("I'm offended that any black man says we enjoyed slavery," said Betty Tanner).

Race and sex, money and bloodshed: It's no surprise Mr. Ball's appearances around the country have generated talk, some of it fiery and bitter. Add to that volatile mix family - Mr. Ball's family is so interconnected with American history that the debates attain an epic scope. The 39-year-old free-lance writer is the descendant of a once-prosperous clan of rice planters from Charleston, S.C. - with relatives such as the president of the Second Continental Congress, Henry Laurens, who signed the peace treaty that settled the Revolutionary War.

It's characteristic of many of America's founding fathers, however, that Henry Laurens, lover of freedom, was also Henry Laurens, co-founder of Austin & Laurens, the largest slave-trading company in the British colonies. He imported thousands of captured and purchased Africans into Charleston, turning Sullivan's Island, a sandy strip in the city harbor, into the American slave industry's primary port.

The dunes of Sullivan's Island, Mr. Ball recalls, were where he spent his childhood summers. He learned only recently that for years the Pest House had stood nearby, the compound where slaves were quarantined after their ocean voyage.

And where many are buried in unmarked mass graves.

Mr. Ball is related to prominent Carolinians - and because of sexual relationships between masters and slaves, sexual relationships that started with the very first generation of Balls in America, Mr. Ball is also related to descendants of some of the Africans who came through Sullivan's Island. He is related to blacks in the military, black members of the Masons. He's distant cousins with Ray Fleming, an African-American record producer.

He is blood kin to the slaves his ancestors owned, sold, fed, whipped. However ironically, however unwillingly, they are all family.

"Many black families have an oral tradition of white ancestors, white relatives," Mr. Ball says. "They often know precisely who they are. But white families have removed those memories. Even in the crossover generation [when the sexual relationship occurred and mixed-race children were produced], the knowledge of it was choked off. By the next generation, many white family members had no knowledge of what happened."

As a result, "I haven't met a single white Southern family that openly acknowledges its black members.

"It's not that many don't want to," he adds. "Members of my own were dying to know, now that I made that possible."

But it's also true that many didn't want to know - and were furious about his research.

"It's been very painful for members of my own family," he admits in his quiet, somber manner. "A lot of people supported me, but it's been painful even for them." In his book, Mr. Ball quotes an older white cousin who snaps, "To do this is to condemn your ancestors! You're going to dig up my grandfather and hang him!"

And then there were the responses of the African-American relatives he contacted.

Pleasure and anger

Edwina Harleston Whitlock, an elegant woman in her 70s with sepia-colored skin, greeted the former Village Voice columnist bemusedly: "It's a great pleasure to meet a long-lost cousin," she said. Not surprisingly, others were stunned - an astonishment that faded into a desire to know more.

Still others, such as Leon Smalls, a Baltimore truck driver, were angry. A white man comes to your door: How does one greet a distant relative whose ancestors once enslaved and exploited yours? Particularly when, as in Mr. Smalls' case, his light skin was derived from the Balls. As a child, he was mocked by other black kids who called him "red" and "cracker."

"Until you walk in my shoe you don't understand what makes us tick, and what makes us feel the way we feel," he told Mr. Ball. "The racial situation, it's worse today than it were then, when I was young."

It was a 1994 family reunion of the white Balls that inspired his cross-racial genealogical research, Mr. Ball says. For National Public Radio, he originally did twin interviews with elderly female relatives, one white, one black. But he knew the story was much bigger.

"We've had hundreds of years of white history," he says. "And in the past 30 years, we've had some black history.

"What I wanted to write was a combined history, a shared history."

Indeed, one of the book's remarkable moments occurs when Mr. Ball interviews an elderly black woman, Emily Frayer. It turns out that the family tales she heard from her grandmother about the day a cavalryman in Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman's command arrived to liberate the slaves on the Ball plantations match the details in the diary Mr. Ball tracked down from a white ancestor. The exact same family events viewed with elation - and with bitter regret.

That fusion of reports - like the twin perspectives in an old stereopticon bringing a picture into three-dimensional clarity - lends *Slaves in the Family* some of its force. From Boston King, a Ball family slave who escaped to England in 1783 and returned to Africa, to the Orangeburg Massacre, the 1968 National Guard shooting of black students at South Carolina State College - which Emily Frayer's granddaughter attended - *Slaves in the Family* finds American history very alive, very personal.

And frequently a mix of the horrifying and the tender.

Reams of records

In one respect, **Edward Ball** was fortunate in his quest: The Ball family records were not "gone with the wind" after the Civil War. Some 10,000 pages of documents are stored in four archives in South Carolina. Even so, the family account books that recorded the hundreds of purchases and deaths of Africans listed only first names, given names like Primus or Caesar or Sue or Bright Ma. At times, Mr. Ball had to knock on doors, publish notices in black newspapers, even cold-call dozens of strangers.

Beyond his blood kin, Mr. Ball estimates there may be as many as 100,000 living African-Americans across the country who are descended from Ball family field hands and household servants (very few are in Texas). Needless to say, he couldn't contact all of them. Instead, he concentrated on eight families with whom he developed a friendship (however warm or uneasy), families whose history he could document.

In fact, reviewers have noted that in the annals of American racial history, *Slaves in the Family* stands out because Mr. Ball actually traced several African-Americans' lineage back to individual slaves and from there to particular tribal regions in Africa from which the original captives had come.

This is extremely rare. Even Alex Haley's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Roots*, often hailed as one of the first complete chronicles of an African-American family, is now considered by scholars to be partly a fictional reconstruction. Mr. Haley himself called the book "faction," a mix of fact and fiction.

In touring the country in support of his book, Mr. Ball has spoken to history groups, bookstore audiences, radio shows, cultural institutions, black and white. Generally, he says, the experience has been the same. The audiences have been somewhat mixed, and before he speaks, there's a sense of tension, of anticipation over what might be said.

"But after I've talked, there's this release," he says. "It's as if they've been given permission to talk about something that had been forbidden.

"And that's the secret of the book. The secret is that once you've expelled your fear of all these ghosts, you feel better. I guarantee it. White or black, it gives relief."

But that's not what happens in Dallas.

A hot debate

When Mr. Ball takes questions from the audience at Black Images, the discussion quickly turns to the issue of apologies and reparations for slavery.

And it quickly heats up.

Mr. Ball had said it would have been "meaningless" for him to apologize to every African-American he met in his research for what his family had done to theirs. "But I did apologize to two individuals whom I thought it would help."

Lee Bilal, who is black, vehemently objects to the entire idea of apologies for slavery. Apologies are hardly enough.

"I'd feel it almost an insult if someone came up to me to apologize," he declares. "Apologies from Clinton or whoever will not handle the situation. What we need is a business conference. A straight business deal is what I want. We didn't just lose our basic dignity, we lost our wealth, our opportunity to accumulate anything. There really is no justice present."

Others bitterly agree. And Mr. Ball basically concurs. "The discussion of reparations definitely should go forward," he says, particularly in light of the federal settlement paid to Japanese--Americans for being interned in camps during World War II.

But Mr. Ball also cautions that while the issue of compensation for slavery is a very real debate in the black community, "I haven't met a white person yet who doesn't roll his eyes when you bring up the subject. The races are poles apart on this."

James Rogers, co-chairman of the Dallas chapter of the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparation in America Inc. (N'Cobra), reports that even in the black community, "you can find people on both sides of the coin on this." But he attributes such disagreements mostly to "our difficulty in getting the word out. Our job is to educate people because most haven't really thought about this. They don't understand the many ramifications."

Even if agreement could be reached, reparations would involve huge practical issues. Who gets the money? From where? The Ball family has no hidden fortune left to disburse, "no dirty money," Mr. Ball says. The son of a working Episcopalian minister, he himself needed a scholarship to attend college.

"Why should we trust you?" one audience member bluntly demands, and Mr. Ball is taken aback by the question.

"I went deeply into debt to write this book," he exclaims. "I took out a loan from my publisher in the form of an advance. Which I still haven't paid back."

Individual audience members praise him for his efforts, but it's also evident that there is no sense of common cause or even relief. To the contrary. The feeling in the room remains tense.

Pointing toward peace

What does point toward some emotional resolution is Mr. Ball's final suggestion.

What America lacks, he argues, isn't just a "conversation on race." There are no historical monuments to slavery, no shrines to consecrate its losses, contemplate its meanings, nothing like the Vietnam War Memorial or the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. As controversial or inadequate as such monuments may be, they focus debates, preserve memories, give people a place to visit to consider and commemorate.

For such a site, Mr. Ball proposes his boyhood summer idyll - Sullivan's Island. It is the Ellis Island for black America.

It's been estimated that Ellis Island was the debarkation point for 40 percent of all American families of European extraction. The largest restoration project of its kind in America, the Ellis Island Immigrant Museum opened in 1990 - and now attracts more than 2 million visitors per year. It took six years to raise the \$ 156 million necessary to renovate a handful of the 33 buildings on the island, the vast majority of which are still crumbling.

Coincidentally, 40 percent of all African-Americans' ancestors came through Sullivan's Island. But on that narrow sandbar about three miles long, there isn't a single memorial to the slave trade, Mr. Ball says, to mark where the bodies were dumped overboard when the slave ships arrived, sometimes with half their human cargo dead. There's no record of the enormity of what happened.

"It's quite beautiful," he says of the island. "But all that's there are some attractive summer homes."

No longer the hub of the rice industry or the hotbed of the Confederacy, Charleston depends on its leading industries, the military and tourism. Five million people visit every year, Mr. Ball says. A new tourist site in Charleston, then, would seem to hold some promise, particularly when the public affairs office at Ellis Island reports receiving complaints each year from blacks who feel excluded from that monument to American immigration.

On the other hand, Charleston's current tourist trade is "95 percent white," Mr. Ball notes, "and they come to see the handsome vestiges of the antebellum South."

So Charleston, much like such preserved "museum towns" as Savannah, Ga., carefully controls its white-columned image and any public consideration of slavery. The city's official Web site extols in detail the town's history, finances and housing - and never mentions its place in American slavery in any context.

"It's a conservative town and a conservative people," Mr. Ball says. In confronting its legacy to African-Americans, "Charleston has a ways to go," he adds with understatement.

Thus, any Sullivan's Island slave memorial has a long ways to go, too.

Yet Mr. Ball's idea of a monument has enough appeal that it dissolves some of the tension with his Dallas audience. Refreshments are served and the evening breaks up into book signings and small discussions.

At one point earlier in his presentation, Mr. Ball paused to note what he and audience members have often heard. Of American slavery, "people say, 'It's past. Get over it.'

"But this," he said simply, gesturing toward the projection screen and all the people that appeared there, "this is only three generations ago.

"That's not long at all."

And the family ties are still with us.