

From "True Confessions"
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THE SECRET OF MY LIFE

By - John Wilkes Booth II

A Revealing Fragment of History Related by the Son of the Man Who Assassinated President Lincoln. He Tells How Wilkes Booth Escaped Through the Union Lines, Sought an Asylum in the Southwest and Eventually Committed Suicide Thirty-eight Years Later.

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For more than a score of years half-formed rumors have been whispered about that John Wilkes Booth did not pay with his life for the assassination of President Lincoln as history relates, but escaped and lived for a long time in a strange community under an assumed name.

For some reason these rumors have not been taken seriously by historians, who, apparently, have made no earnest efforts to verify them. At least, we are not familiar with any American history that makes a definite statement to this effect.

True Confessions has in its possession a confession written by a man now living in Texas who purports to be a son of the slayer of Lincoln, and as he is only thirty-six years old, he was born more than twenty years after the assassination of the President.

It is difficult to verify every story we receive and in this instance we shall leave it to our readers, giving them an excerpt of a letter addressed to the editor by the writer, who, by the way, is not known by the name of Booth. Any one who desires to correspond with him may do so by addressing him in care of this magazine.

The author writes in part:

"I hope this manuscript will not be rejected simply because it is the truth. It is an absolute fact that John Wilkes Booth was not killed, but escaped to the Southwest and lived mostly in Texas, near Granbury, Hood county, under the assumed name of John St. Helen. He married and was the father of several children. I do not feel at liberty to reveal the whereabouts of his other children and grandchildren. He took his own life at Enid, Oklahoma, in 1903.

"Anyone who wishes corroboration of my statements may correspond with the authorities of the city of Enid, where the body of John Wilkes Booth, alias John St. Helen, was embalmed and kept, and where it still may be seen unless it has been removed within the last two or three years.

"If further verification is desired, the curious and interested should obtain a copy of a book entitled, I believe "The True Account of Lincoln's Assassination, or The Escape and Suicide of John Wilkes Booth," written by a lawyer who knew Booth intimately from 1868 to about 1885. This lawyer, a Mr. Bates, still is living in Memphis, Tenn., so far as I know. Mr. Bates identified the body of John St. Helen, who had confessed to him, he said, that he was really John Wilkes Booth."

I have intended for a number of years to make this confession, but only recently have I fully decided to do so. There are persons living who know the confession to be true, and as they were friends of my father, I have no fear of them. In any event, however, I cannot be punished by law for being who I am.

I will begin by stating that I am thirty-six years of age and have a wife and three little children, all of whom I love dearly.

As to my name - my legal name, or the name under which I was born and which I now bear - that does not matter. However, I am not ashamed of my name and no stigma attaches to it or my birth. For the sins and mistakes of others which took place before I came into this world, I am not responsible.

My father was John Wilkes Booth, the famous actor, who shot President Abraham Lincoln in a box at Ford's Theater in the city of Washington on the night of April 14, 1865, shortly after Lee surrendered his army to General Grant. I need not reiterate how my father fled from the city, with a broken leg, and how he escaped through the cabin of Union soldier sentries surrounding Washington by giving the correct password, as that is a matter of current history.

It is well known that in times of war and public danger, when a password is used by the army, it is revealed to no one under penalty of death, except officers and members of the guard then on duty, commanding officer, secretary of war or cabinet member, member of either house and president or vice president of the nation, and only to these non-military people on demand and for special reasons.

Yet my father was in possession of the password used by the guards on that night, and was safely passed through the Union lines when he fled on horseback from the city. This you will admit because history tells you that he did escape from the city. However, historians, with Delphic astuteness, did not mention the fact that my father was in possession of the password.

This in itself, however, proves nothing except that my father was furnished the password to escape from Washington by some one very high in the service of the American government. As to whom that man was, it does not matter now. He is dead and most of the others are dead and I do not care to bring a storm around my own head.

I see the reader smile and say, "Well, that would make the author of these lines nearly sixty years old at least, as Booth was killed twelve days after he assassinated the President." However, I reiterate my former statement that I am only thirty-six years of age and a son of John Wilkes Booth, the great tragedian, and that I was born on the 17th day of September, 1886, over twenty years after President Lincoln was killed by my father. My father was only twenty-seven years of age and had never been married when he shot Lincoln in Ford's Theater.

Before I proceed further, I will state that I am fully cognizant of the fact that few persons will credit this confession as truth. I do not care whether they do. This is one of the few truths that is stranger than fiction; for there are cases where the truth is stranger than fiction.

I also will admit if history is all true, my confession cannot be true. I will further admit and gladly concede that in the main history is correct, accurate and true. I also will say in fairness to everyone that historians were guilty of no intentional falsehood when they stated that John Wilkes Booth was killed. Everyone knows that parts of history are not always correct, and the next generation of historians simply copy something previously written, taking it for granted that it is true.

My father, John Wilkes Booth, was not killed by Sergeant Boston Corbett in a barn below Fredericksburg. The body of a man that was taken to Washington, unwept and unhonored, by a detachment of Union cavalry, none of whom ever saw Booth in life, and who had been furnished with steel cuts by the secret service of the War Department to identify him by in the event they captured him, and which was hurriedly buried under the old Capitol Prison, was not the body of my father.

I am quite willing to admit that a man was killed by Corbett, who deliverately violated the most explicit orders of the War Department and the officers over him in doing so. That the soldiers thought the man killed by Corbett was my father is not doubted by anyone, including myself. However, I know differently. The man shot by Corbett and dragged dying from the burning barn had on her person my father's property, including gold money, letters, field-glasses and other things, which would identify beyond a reasonable doubt the man as John Wilkes Booth, especially so since none of the party had ever seen Booth in life, and the man killed looked something like my father, being

about his size and build, although a little shorter in stature and perhaps a trifle heavier.

My father was one of the most cultured and talented men in the world, while this man who had been entrusted, for a large consideration in gold, with the dangerous task of bringing my father his property, was an unlettered countryman, a farm hand and a day laborer, from what I have learned.

Now, as is known to many, my father made his way into the far Southwest, where he remained on the frontier of civilization, living under an assumed name and finally died by his own hands in the city of Enid, Oklahoma, in the year 1903. His body was positively identified by living witnesses, who knew John Wilkes Booth personally and intimately in life. The body was embalmed and can be seen there today and it is positively and absolutely the body of John Wilkes Booth, - and I am his son.

My father did not live all the time in Texas and Oklahoma, but spent a good deal of the time in other parts of the West and Southwest. As to my native town, name, business, I prefer not to speak. I have ascertained from sources I do not care to divulge that my father contracted another marriage a good many years before his death, under the name of John St. Helen. A daughter was born of this union, my half sister, whom I never met and who died of tuberculosis a number of years ago, leaving two children, one of whom is living.

My father was not a criminal - not a murderer. Although my statement will bring about my head a storm of criticism and protests, I must state that he believed he was doing an act of the highest patriotism when he shot the great and good War President.

The terrible conflict of four years had hardly ended, and many great and wise persons believed the people of the South would be virtually enslaved and ground into the earth under the iron heel of a great nation flushed with victory by the sword and led by Abraham Lincoln.

Anyway, my father was to a great extent the tool of designing politicians and high officials.

He lived to realize his terrible mistake and to regret his deed. He would willingly have given his own life a thousand times over, if by so doing he could have brought back the life he had taken. Finally, in contrition and sorrow for the mistaken deed of his impulsive youth, he did take his own life, and long before his time. He was a man of exceptional vigor and health and although more than sixty years of age when he committed suicide, he probably would have lived twenty or more years longer had he not taken his own life.

No sorrow, however, nor penitence for the rash deed of his younger days could have saved him from the fury of his enemies had it been generally known that he was alive. Even after he had ended his life by his own hands and it became known in Enid that the suicide was John Wilkes Booth, it was necessary to conceal his body at first, as the old Union soldiers and others wanted to subject it to indignities and dishonor.

During his life, with a few rare exceptions, he kept his true identity carefully concealed and much of the time he was known as John St. Helen. He knew what to expect should it become generally known that the slayer of Abraham Lincoln was living. Like the so-called regicides, who condemned Charles I, King of England, to death, he knew that his only chance for safety from his enemies lay in concealment in that part of the country least friendly to the Northern cause, so he elected to spend the rest of his life on the border of civilization in the far Southwest.

Just a word more concerning myself and I am through. I look more like my mother than father. I always believed that I have dramatic ability of the highest order, but I am not a professional man, although a college graduate. I am simply a business man - in trade, as the English would say.

On reaching my majority I came into possession of a considerable sum of money, which my father had earned as an actor before and during the war, and which he had deposited in a Canadian bank before he shot President Lincoln. The sum, with accrued interest, amounted to more than fifty thousand dollars, although I did not receive all of that sum. The money was withdrawn during my father's life, but not by him. However, every dollar with interest found its way into his hands and he disbursed it as he saw fit.

I live in a small city in the Southwest and am prosperous and happy. I care not a snap of my finger whether my confession is believed by all those who read it, but it has the distinction of being true. I am absolutely sure that some eyes, which are growing dim, will see these lines and the owners will read and not doubt, as they know this confession to be true.