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# Bulletin *Times*

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## Bolivar native delves into Hardeman County history with new book, "Finding My Way Home"

### Celebrate Black History

As a child growing up in Bolivar, Martinette Mitchell would regularly quiz family members about her family's history. "I wanted to know about my family and where I came from," the Lakewood, New Jersey resident said. "It was just something that always intrigued me." It was years later, long after Mitchell married, moved to New Jersey and started raising a family of her own, that the 43-year-old would learn the answers to the many questions she asked as a child.

When Martin Bills, Jr. was cleaning out the room, he came across a trunk filled with old postcards, letters and pictures. Knowing of his niece's interest in family history, he sent the contents of the trunk to Mitchell.

The trunk's contents propelled Mitchell to undertake a seven-year journey, exploring exactly where she came from and who she was. What Mitchell found along the way is chronicled in her new book, "Finding My Way Home" (Anundsen Publishing Co.). "I never intended to write a book at the start," said Mitchell, who is a home-based child-care provider. "But along the



Martinette and her husband, Preston Mitchell, proudly display Mrs. Mitchell's book, "Finding My Way Home."

“I grew up in my grandmother, Ophelia Bills’ house in Bolivar,” Mitchell explained. “There was one room in the house that was used for storage. I never went in there because there was just too much stuff.” In 1996, however, a part of that “stuff” made its way into Mitchell’s home.

way, I realized that it was important to record the information not only for myself, but for my children and my children’s children.”

As she began sorting items in the trunk, Mitchell was amazed at what she found, including letters written to her great-great-grandfather from his

## **Celebrate Black History**

Continued from page 1A

brothers; military record; old postcards and many other documents. “It was a great gift but I wanted to know more,” Mitchell said. “With every bit of information I learned, I wanted more. Once one question was answered, another came up. I was hooked.”

Mitchell made her decision to write a book the day she received information from author Katie Brown Bennett, a Hardeman County native now living in Colorado, who was working on a book about plantation owner John J. Bills and his family. In her book, Mitchell describes this epiphany: *“Katie sent a copy of my Great, Great Grandmother Emiline and her son Mitchell’s original Bill of Sale as slaves. So many emotions flooded my mind and body. For me to actually hold a copy of this transaction, which had transpired between two slave owners, was an awakening in me. A tangible item that represented the humiliation, the pain and the suffering of my ancestors was right in my hands! This single piece of paper intrigued me and encouraged me to search further. I*

her every step of the way. “They were my strength,” Mitchell said. “And her biggest fans,” Preston Mitchell added. “What she has accomplished is amazing. For the first time, there is a written family history, due to her work and tireless efforts.” Last October, Mitchell finally completed the book. “It was a feeling of joy and relief,” Mitchell said. “It was a very long journey filled with highs and lows, but it was over and I felt very satisfied and proud.”

Since her journey began, Mitchell has been asked on various occasions on what drove her interest in her ancestors. Her answer, she said, is simple. “They are a part of me, they are a part of my inner being,” she explained. “After all, I do carry their genetic makeup. The true and unchangeable fact remains: From the very moment of conception, we are who we are and will be forever.” Mitchell told the Bulletin she was especially proud of the impact her book has had on the many families who were reunited through her research. “I was able to find a brother that had been separated from his sisters for more than 35 years,” Mitchell explained. “The sisters were searching for him through various organizations, but no one could find him. I found him in about ten minutes. It was wonderful.”

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By 2000, Mitchell began writing in earnest. For nearly three years, Mitchell wrote and rewrote the book which chronicles the family from 1817 to 2003. Included in the 473-page book are genealogy charts, a chapter devoted to Bolivar during slavery and the Civil war, the unions of various parts of the family, photos and copies of documents, including the bill of sale of Emiline and Mitchell. “It was a long and sometimes hard journey,” Mitchell acknowledged. “I hit dead ends, but my family encouraged me to go on. It was my journey, but, in a sense, it was all of our journey.”

She credits her husband, Preston, and children Khalis, 22, and Ashley 16, with supporting

Copies of the “Finding My Way Home” are available for purchase by calling (732) 961-6175 or going to

[www.spiritgifts.com/findingmywayhome.htm](http://www.spiritgifts.com/findingmywayhome.htm)