

DEC. 6, 1986

AN UNRECONSTRUCTED REBEL'S SAD LAMENT
by
Marshall T. Bassett

I really don't know whether my impressions of what the Civil War was like for the average Southerner is correct or not. So much has come out in print and on the silver screen of a fanciful nature that I'm sure only the most well informed savants of Southern history really know what the conditions were. My mental image goes something like this: The Yankees have burned the house (complete with Corinthian columns, of course). The darkies have all run off, except for Papa's faithful manservant but luckily we got the Haviland and the flatsilver down the well. The stock is gone, the crops burned and Sister is throwing up in the turnip patch vowing she'll never go hungry again. But she's still a lady and offers up her excellent pedigree as proof.

Sorry if I sound a little sarcastic. Like many people I have rejected a lot of the precepts of Southern culture on which I was raised and which we embraced until quite recently. Not only have I come to feel that they were immoral, but I also think they were based on imperfect knowledge of that the Old South was really like. I think this came about because those who were born in

the several decades following the War romanticized and greatly exaggerated what they heard their fathers and grandfathers discuss about the old days. Somehow we convinced ourselves that every Southerner who wasn't "Po White" had a plantation larger than it was, at least 100 slaves, a punkah in the dining room, drank mint julips and danced the quadrille at the Hunt Ball every Saturday night. Oh, don't let me forget the most incredible myth of all- the Blacks were actually content with their lot under slavery. People always tend to whitewash the past. It's a form of reverie. But it's rather like going to Williamsburg. If they want it to be realistic, why don't they drop pig manure in the streets?

I know that my family did not live in this opulent way, and I doubt if yours did, either. Both sides of my family were similar in their social and economic make-up. My father's family during the middle years of the last century lived in Christian and Warren Counties, Kentucky and my mother's lived in upper South Carolina, near Columbia. The Kentucky ancestors were Confederate sympathizers and supporters. My forebears were of English/Scotch-Irish descent. Their social lives centered around their churches. The men tended to be professional people: lawyers, doctors and ministers. There was great value placed on education, the men having gone to colleges and seminaries and the ladies

to local academies. They had small farming operations to augment their incomes. Since farm labor was seasonal, workers could be hired from neighbors' plantations. They owned a few slaves as house servants. I know from writings saved through the years that the slavery issue was not an important one to my people on a personal level because the direct economic effect of owning or not owning them was minimal. They led comfortable, solid lives, but not lives of leisure. As is the case with me today, they were part of the great middle class.

Although I have cultural identity problems to some degree based on this mismatch between what I perceive to be the real and the ideal, there seems to be one aspect of my heritage with which I agree somewhat. I am rather loath to admit it, but I don't very much care for the North, to put it as nicely as I know how. It is an attitude which was tenderly nurtured from the cradle. For example, I was nearly full grown before I knew that the Beast Saint John was talking about in the Book of Revelations was not William T. Sherman. U.S. Grant was a drunken boob, which his later presidency served to prove. And President Lincoln...Well, I actually think he was a great man... But, please, don't tell anybody!

But Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, Joseph E. Johnston,

Nathan Bedford Forrest, Albert Sidney Johnston: These were men whose names I have always been taught to revere as being above the rabble of mere mortals. On the battlefield as well as off they had more personal integrity, honor, courage and genius in their little fingers than in the entire Union Army put together. Catholics have statues of the Virgin, the Russian Orthodox hang icons, the British pictures of the Queen. We hang pictures of Robert E. Lee.

But this strength of feeling doesn't only extend to the players in that ancient drama. Modern-day Northerners still aren't looked upon as quite "folks". Any native imperfection one might have is put down as being a function of his unfortunate place of birth. If one is not quite friendly enough or if his manners aren't very good, the blame is invariably placed squarely where the guilt lies: "Well, what more could you expect from a Yankee?"

I'm being tongue-in-cheek, I know. But, really, gentlemen, there is still bitterness over the Civil War after all these years which spills into my attitudes. It's been handed down from generation to generation like a gold pocket watch. What are the major experiences of the people which lived back then which contribute to the parochial view I have of the vast majority of my fellow countrymen? Why can I still not bring myself to sing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic"? In discussing this, I feel that I must limit

myself to only those original source documents in my possession, since to do anything more would be beyond the scope of this paper. I have enough letters, diaries and oral tradition to be able to examine the causes of the great amount of ill will which existed a century ago and which still exists to some extent, today.

First of all, I find no evidence that anyone in my family ever went hungary - at least, not at the home front. However, there is no doubt that great privations existed and that many resources were expended in the War effort. Allow me to cite information from a diary written by my great-great-grandfather, John McLees, a Presbyterian minister in Greenwood, South Carolina during this era. In his December 31, 1861, entry he remarked upon the staggering inflation rate and that times were getting very bad. By that time, he said, corn had risen to \$300 per bushel, pork \$100 per pound and other things in proportion. The ladies of the village even decided to open their own factory to make cotton cards. A pair, which had once cost from $37\frac{1}{2}$ ¢ to 50 ¢, was now bringing \$25.00.

The scarcity of commodities was later described in some detail by Rev. McLees. It is interesting that even by this time, the Industrial Revolution was providing mass-

produced goods, and that people had stopped making things at home which they once did as a matter of course. His words speak more eloquently than mine:

The South has learned sad lessons during these years- people among other things, have learned to be satisfied with much less than they were accustomed to. Things at one time which were thought to be necessities now are viewed as luxuries. Pins and needles are treasured and women loan them to one another as a great favor. Again women are making candles....Shoe polish is made of cooked elder berries and molasses. Confederate fruit cake contains molasses, .peanuts, and watermelon preseves, cherry preserves, dried apples and peachherbs, and berries. For coffee, we use parched grain, and tea is made of leaves or roots or ground okra seed. Burnt corn cobbs give us our soda. Salt is very difficult to get. The dirt floors of smoke houses have yielded some. We get our ink from oak balls or walnut hulls. Paper is much treasured. But the ladies' hats- I am not well versed on the subject of millinery, but even I see their hats...The hats are generally of straw and in winter are covered with cloth from curtains or coat tails.

I jot all of this down because of its pathetic significance. I must write something and haven't the heart to write the story of bloodshed.

In a school composition, McLees' daughter, Mary, described how to make molasses, which she indicated had been previously purchased from abroad, now made unattainable by the blockade.

There may have been strong convictions from many Confederates to give of their worldly possessions to aid the "Cause."

A letter in 1862 from one of my South Carolina kinswomen to another expresses jingoistic concern that this be done:

Are the people in Greenwood going to give the bells of that place to our government to make cannon out of or are they not patriotic enough? I think every

Southerner ought to open their hearts and give until they have nothing to give. When I can get some money I intend to give it for purchasing a navy and to the dear soldiers. What Southern heart is not willing to give all they can to such a glorious cause?...May the God of us all deliver us out of the hands of the enemy.

One of the textbook indictments against the Northern Army has always been their destruction and theft of private property. There is evidence in my possession which indicates this was a reality. There is an old family tale about a great-great-grandmother of mine who lived in South Carolina in an area right in the path of Sherman's Army. A camp follower who was "in the family way" without a family walked into Granny's house, into the dining room and started rummaging about in her sideboard. When Granny saw what this woman was doing, she became perfectly livid, and got behind the dining table, which was on casters, and shoved it as hard as she could against the back of the unfortunate bawd. The woman miscarried and died. How Granny escaped incarceration, I don't know. My grandmother says that when she was a little girl, everyone was terrified of Granny. Maybe everyone was terrified of her back in the 1860's, too.

I had a set of great-great grandparents who lived in Bowling Green, which, as you know, was occupied early in the War by the Confederate Army under the command of General Simon Bolivar Buckner. Buckner, the only Confederate general who was a native of Kentucky, later held Fort Donelson. My grandfather always said he was responsible for virtually

handing Fort Donelson over to the Yankees, therefore putting an important section of the Cumberland River under their control.

Be that as it may, my ancestors became acquainted with many of Buckner's officers stationed in Bowling Green during that brief period. In particular, they became friends with Major Nat Cheairs, a planter from Spring Hill, Tennessee. When Donelson fell, he was taken prisoner and sent to Fort Warren, Mass. We have several interesting letters from him in prison.

His major concern from the confines of prison seems to have been the treatment of his family by the Union Army under a General Nelson, which had just taken Spring Hill. He had received word that Nelson had encamped on his place for a few days, "that they literally demolished everything I had, took possession of my house and took all the Bacon, corn, wheat, fodder, oats and hay that I had..." However, I know the house survived, because the place was later on turned into the now-defunct Branham & Hughes Military Academy, with which some of you may be familiar.

One important source of ill-will seems to have been of a psychological nature. There was much said about the insult to Southern honor perpetrated by the invasion of Southern soil. The prevailing attitude seems to have been a desire

for Southerners to defend their homes against the evil designs of the North and to gain independence from their tyranny.

However, all else aside, the two things which had the most indelible effect on the Southern people was the widespread disease which swept the South and the constant acquaintance with death they suffered. Smallpox seems to have been the worst disease. It started in the camps and army hospitals and spread all over the South. Following is an excerpt from a letter by Dr. J. H. Logan, an army physician, to a member of my family:

I desired very much to spend Christmas with my dear family and friends at home, but I could not leave my post here, the battle of Fredericksburg filled our hospital with sick and wounded men, and the Smallpox was gradually becoming rampant. I wonder often how I have as yet escaped this loathsome disease; God in his mercy has protected under great exposure....I have had case after case to break out in my wards; I have gone to the smallpox hospital and prescribed for patients suffering from its most horrible and sickening form. If you have never seen a case of confluent smallpox, no description of mine or the books can give you a full or just idea of all its loathsomeness and terrors. I will briefly depict it as it has appeared to be. You have often looked upon the ulceration made upon the arm of one by the vaccine; now conceive of just such ulcers on every portion of the body surface from the crown of the head to the soles of the feet, and on the eye balls, all confluent, not a pins head surface of skin anywhere visible and with this in the face such an amount of swelling that the features look distorted and horrible. By then these postules are supperating and the entire skin of the patient and his eyes are one unbroken running ulcer, then the matter begins to dry up, and the ulcers to scale off, when a stench arises which once experienced

can never be forgotten. The ulcers in the eyes sometimes completely destroy these organs; a poor fellow now lies in one of the tents who has lost an eye and may lose the other before he recovers.

The numbers of those killed in battle must have been staggering. There are pages and pages of letters from those relating who had fallen, wondering whether the killing would ever end, and offering fervent prayers to God for it to end soon. All express the horror and agony of it all. Another great-great grandfather of mine, an army physician, was killed in the battle for Columbia when a shell exploded on the hospital where he was working. ~~and killed him~~ Reverend McLees had four nephews killed in battle. There may have been other family members killed that I don't know about. They always told me that there were many old maids in the post-war South due to the dearth of marriage prospects. If such is the case, the spite of many an old maid was sufficient to carry hatred of the Yankees on for many a decade. The vehemence of this hatred is effectively expressed by John McLees' brother, Hugh, who was an army chaplain, no less, in a letter of May, 1864:

I have seen enough of blood and suffering in the last three days to lead me almost to the point where I can use the 109th Psalm as a prayer for Lincoln and his clan. I saw some nasty blue Yankees in the cars in Atlanta and as I looked at our poor boys there with their ghastly wounds and some of them cold in death I could much more easily have taken a dagger and said to them, see there what a carnival of blood you have made and as you love it take still more, take that of your own hearts, take that which you have already drunk. I could act towards them the part that I know a truly brave, magnanimous man must ever act towards a foe in his power and unarmed. My God, give me grace to live a Christian.

The extract from one last letter written after the end of the War by a cousin from Marietta, Ga., sums up the feeling of the South against the North which became our inheritance:

The town was devastated by the Yankees. There must be three or four hundred cases of smallpox. Our town was once beautiful, it is now ruined. It will be years before it can be made to look as it once did. We have more Yankees than we want flocking down South in crowds, but...I cannot like them, and never, never will. They have done for me what they cannot undo and now they put everything on us they can. I hope the Lord will forgive me, but I hate them.

So, what choice do I have? After all that venom surely you don't ask me to be the one to change. I simply don't have the courage. My son or his son may be the one to break the chain. That's their decision and their right.

But as for me: FORGET HELL!