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TRIBUTE TO MAX S. LALE

By Randolph B. Campbell

Max S. Lale personified the word "gentleman." As an officer in the United States Army throughout World War II, newspaper reporter and publisher for many years, and community leader of his beloved East Texas hometown Marshall for even more, Max never failed to display the calm dignity of a man who understood himself and recognized his responsibilities as well as the rights and responsibilities of others. Max had a gentleman's respect for the past, admiring the courage and accomplishments of the people and the leaders of Texas and the United States without being blind to their faults or attempting to use their stories to support any contemporary agenda. Perhaps Max Lale could not claim the rank of gentleman by birth (he was, after all, a native of Oklahoma), but his life certainly earned him that honor.

Max Lale also personified the word "friend," a fact to which I can testify from nearly thirty-five years of personal experience. From the time I first met Max in November 1971, he offered encouragement and assistance that proved vital as I, a native Virginian who had joined the faculty at North Texas State University only five years earlier, attempted to build a career in nineteenth-century Texas history. I was drawn to Marshall and Harrison County by an interest in the history of slavery in Texas, a subject that more than a century after emancipation had never received a full-scale study. Harrison had the largest slave population of any county in Texas, so I decided to begin by examining slavery in that one locality and that led to a paper on the subject, which I read to an audience at the old courthouse on the square in Marshall on a Saturday morning in November 1971. After the presentation, as I remember it, a smaller group drove to the Excelsior House in Jefferson for lunch, and my wife Diana and I met Max and his wife Georgiana. Every aspiring young historian (I was thirty-one at the time) should be so fortunate.

Max and I talked about the importance of slavery to *antebellum* Harrison County, and he pointed to the wealth of sources available for a broader study of the community. And somehow I wound up concluding that I needed to put my ambition to write on slavery in Texas on hold and turn instead to a general history of Harrison County in the era of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Within a few years I was back in Marshall, making a presentation about the project that eventually would produce a book entitled *A Southern Community in Crisis, Harrison County, Texas, 1850-1880*. My copy of the talk has the notation: "Ask Max in introducing me to make it very clear that this is a description of my research project, not a presentation of the results of a completed investigation." Clearly, I had a sponsor.

Research on Harrison County continued through the 1970s and involved a great many overnight stays with Max and Georgiana in Marshall. Max helped me work on research during the day and provided wonderful hospitality in the evening. Indeed, I visited so often that in a September 1979 letter describing the progress being made by workmen who were re-carpeting the

Lale home, Max mentioned that they had completed “our bedroom, ‘your’ bedroom, the hall, and guest bathroom Monday and Tuesday of last week.” My sponsor had become my favorite host as well.

Max uncovered a journal kept by John B. Webster, one of the county’s largest slaveholding planters, in 1858-1859, which remained in the hands of a descendant more than a century later. I found it an invaluable source on plantation life in *antebellum* Harrison County, and Max and I edited selections from it for publication in the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* in July 1980. By then Max was my sponsor, host, and research associate.

In 1981, Max became president of the East Texas Historical Association, and to no one’s surprise, I am certain, the Association held its Spring Meeting in 1982 in Marshall. Max, he informed me, “suggested” to the program chairman that I would make a good speaker at the Saturday luncheon. He even had a possible topic – the story of Theophilus and Harriet Person Perry, a Marshall couple who corresponded with great regularity when he served in the Confederate Army from 1862 until his death at the Battle of Pleasant Hill in April 1864. I had found the Perry letters in the Duke University Library, and Max had purchased copies for my use. Please add benefactor to the list of sponsor, host, and research associate.

I gave the luncheon address in Marshall but did not have time to stay overnight and accompany Max on an expedition to the restaurant at Big Pines, leading him to write the following: “The catfish at Caddo Lake will miss you, for which, I am sorry. I’ve been needing an excuse for myself, so now I’ll have to find another reason to deplete the supply.” Our time together in East Texas was not all work.

In the meantime, I submitted the manuscript on Harrison County from 1850 to 1880 to the Texas State Historical Association, and Max showed almost as much concern as I about its fate. “Probably it’s too soon to have any kind of a commitment from him” (Tuffly Ellis, then director of the TSHA), Max wrote in October 1981. “In any case, my fingers are likely to remain permanently crossed as a result of the strain.” Five weeks later I received another letter. “So far, so good, then, on the manuscript?” Max wrote. “Sixty years ago I waited impatiently for Christmas, but now I’m waiting even more impatiently for Tuffly’s decision. I suppose, I imagine, that we are looking at 18 to 24 months for publication, at best.”

As usual, Max was correct. A little less than twenty-four months later, in late 1983, *A Southern Community in Crisis* appeared. Sadly, Georgiana Lale, Max’s wife who had patiently supported our Harrison County history mania for so long, died after a brief illness in the summer of 1982 and did not see the book’s dedication. It read: “To Max S. Lale and The Memory of Georgiana, Marshall, Texas.”

In the years that followed our collaboration on the Harrison County study, Max remained an active friend and supporter. I returned to work on slavery in Texas, eventually published on that subject, and served as president of the

Texas State Historical Association. Max continued his effective work with the East Texas Historical Association, wrote on subjects such as the career of the Harrison County soldier/adventurer Walter P. Lane, and also spent a year as president of the Texas State Historical Association. Happily, Cissy Stewart of Fort Worth became Max's wife and enthusiastic fellow traveler on the byways of Texas history during the last decades of his life.

When Max's health failed this past spring, he met that final crisis in a manner befitting the gentleman I had always known. There is a time for everything, he told me in our last conversation, and I accept death without complaint or fear. I tried to compliment his courage, but he changed the subject. All historians of East Texas will miss Max S. Lale, but no one can match my debt of gratitude to him and his memory.