3-2001

Mrs. General Pickett and Marshall

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by Max S. Lale

How "Mrs. General Pickett" was mistreated when she spoke in Marshall, Texas, on her favorite subject; The Battle of Gettysburg – and incidentally added polish to the new persona of her defeated husband, dead for thirty-three years – seems clear.

But who was to blame? W.D. Allen, through whose influence with a Chautauqua association the booking was arranged, or the Chautauqua association itself? Was Allen's censure a year later by Camp No. 621, United Confederate Veterans, justified by events a year earlier?

Complete answers to these questions must await further investigation.

Footprints of the controversy appear in the minutes of a meeting of the veterans group, but the details are missing. Now in the possession of a great-granddaughter, Mrs. Bill (Joan) Jones of Marshall, the minutes were recorded in a commercial-type ledger by Thomas Ashford Elgin (pronounced with a hard "g"). He kept the minutes as adjutant and “scribe” from January 1907 through March 1910.

In 1908, Marshall still swelled with pride over its two Confederate governors of Texas, Edward Clark and Pendleton Murrah, its U.S. and Confederate senator, Louis T. Wigfall, and the companies of troops it and Harrison County contributed in whole or in part to the Confederate armed forces.

Still an icon in the community was Walter Paye Lane, Irish immigrant, veteran of San Jacinto, Indian fighter, major in the Mexican War, and Confederate brigadier general.

Marshall wore its pride on a gray or butternut sleeve.

UCV camp adjutant Elgin had been a member of the W.P. Lane Rangers, a Confederate company from Marshall whose place in history was fixed when W.W. Heartsill, another member, self-published his Fourteen Hundred and 91 Days in the Confederate Army: A Journal Kept for Four Years, One Month and One Day or Camp Life, Day-by-Day of the W. P. Lane Rangers, from April 19th, 1861, to May 20th, 1865.

With sixty-nine references to Elgin, this work is avidly pursued by Civil War bibliophiles. Both Al Lowman and the late John Jenkins, experts each, recorded superlatives in commenting on the Heartsill volume. Lowman has written that “What Heartsill wrought has been deservedly characterized as ‘probably the most unique book in the entire field of soldier narratives’.” Jenkins called it “the rarest and most coveted book on the American Civil War.”

His Civil War service and subsequent veteran activities were not Elgin’s only footnote in history, however. It was in his cotton broker father’s Elgin Hotel, located near the railroad tracks in Marshall where the noted thespian Maurice Barrymore was shot and nearly killed by a railroad tough. Now gone, the Elgin and its role in the affair often and erroneously are credited to the still-standing Ginocchio Hotel, a separate and distinctive hostelry also located near the tracks.

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The story of Mrs. George Pickett's lecture appearance in Marshall began innocently enough, as recorded by Elgin in the minutes of the UCV Marshall camp for its meeting on Sunday afternoon, July 5, 1908: "It being announced that Mrs. General Pickett would lecture on the battle of Gettysburg where her gallant husband led one of the most brilliant charges in the annals of history, our camp resolved to attend in a body, and that those who were not able financially should be furnished tickets for attendance."

"On account of the lecture of Mrs. Pickett (sic)." he added, "the Daughters had no programme this once, though there was a goodly number of Marshall Chapter No. 412 present to encourage and cheer the old vets in their proceedings, which is appreciated most highly by the Camp."

Modestly, Elgin did not mention his wife as among those Daughters attending, though for many years she had been a stalwart among that sisterhood and on January 19 two years earlier had been principal speaker at the dedication of the Confederate statue on the courthouse grounds. Of Llano granite, this statue had been commissioned by Frank Teich of Llano and cost $2,500. It faces east, of course.

For the statue's dedication, K. M. VanZandt, originally from Marshall, had returned from Fort Worth to visit with old friends and to remember the war. A son of Isaac VanZandt, a leading candidate for governor of Texas until his death, K.M. VanZandt had long since migrated to Fort Worth, where he became a banker and pillar of the community. He had commanded Company D, 7th Texas Infantry, during his combat years.

Curiously, W.D. Adair's Evening Messenger reported neither Mrs. Pickett's forthcoming appearance nor an account of the lecture itself. Previously the paper had plugged the various Chautauqua attractions and announced prices for individual and season tickets. In his issue for July 3, two days before Mrs. Pickett's appearance, Adair carried a small story announcing that "the [new], city hall will be ready; seats and lights are now being placed." In another story in the same issue, the newspaper noted that the opening day program would include a male quartet in the afternoon and a reading in the evening by Meredith Thompson from her role in "Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm" "...one of the most delightful and fascinating readings ever heard on the platform."

Previous to construction of the new city hall at the southeast corner of the Marshall square, the Chautauqua series had been staged in "The Tabernacle." A rambling frame structure of plank construction, still unpainted at the time of its razing after World War II, it had been built at the corner of North Washington and Grand Avenues for an original incarnation as the site of religious revivals. After the war it housed a tire retreading operation, a chili joint, and other dissimilar enterprises.

A month after Mrs. Pickett's appearance - at its first subsequent meeting - the UCV camp voted the "Thanks of the camp ... to Prof. W.D. Allen, whose influence with Mr. Ayers of the Chautauqua, and who generously passed free those members of this camp at the rendition of Mrs. Pickett's lecture on Gettysburg."

In the absence in 1908 of radio, television, tape recorders, and camcorders, we shall never know what Mrs. Pickett said, of course. However, given Elgin's
comment in July about her gallant husband’s “brilliant charge” – along with LaSalle Pickett’s thirty-three year campaign after his death to create a new persona for the dead general – it seems safe to say that no mention was made that George Pickett had been dismissed from the army on General Robert E. Lee's personal order only days before the end at Appomattox.

Only in recent years has Mrs. Pickett’s effort at “spinning” her husband’s reputation – including changing her own name from Sallie to LaSalle – become a serious study by modern historians. Among these are Edward Longacre, Richard Selcer, Gary Gallagher, and Lesley J. Gordon, all of whom generally agree that the modern George Pickett is a creature of her mission-determined campaign.

Selcer, in one of two books about the Confederate general, has written that “It was LaSalle Pickett who largely created the George Pickett we know today … her decades-long writing and speaking campaign on her husband’s behalf was a “public relations juggernaut.” Indeed, one reviewer of Gordon’s new work on the general declares that “practically every word, whether about George’s life or her own, was a fabrication.”

Neither LaSalle Pickett’s efforts nor the modern study of her husband’s life diminishes the pivotal event at Gettysburg, it should be said. Scholars long have held that it was the watershed from which could only flow an ultimate surrender by the Confederacy’s armed forces. Indeed, television documentarian Ken Burns, critically acclaimed for his “The Civil War,” has installed July 3, 1863, and George Pickett’s failed charge, as one of the five most important dates in American history, along with the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the Emancipation Proclamation.

Still conscious forty-one years afterward of its old soldiers and their investment in history, along with an untainted affection for Mrs. Pickett, Marshall apparently had been simmering for several months over something in connection with her appearance in the city.

Adjutant Elgin noted this concern in the minutes of a meeting of Camp 621 on March 3, 1909. After a report from the mortuary committee by Chaplain Hudgins on the death of A.B. Corley - “A good citizen & soldier” - he recorded that “the adjutant was called upon by the commander to read the correspondence of this camp in regard to the mistreatment and discourtesy shown Mrs. General Pickett while in her lecturing tour at this place last summer … .”

The upshot of this proceeding was that the vets adopted a resolution condemning the “unjust and discourteous treatment” of the “widow of the lamented ‘Hero of Gettysburg’ and the ward of every true Confederate Veteran in our Southland.”

Then came the first clue in the minutes to the discourteous treatment Mrs. Pickett had suffered. In the second paragraph of the resolution it was “Resolved, That the mistreatment of Mrs. General Pickett by Col. Ayers, manager of the Chautauqua association of McAllister, Okla., in refusing at this place, and failing to recompense her for her services and lecture, was a gross outrage and unbecoming of a true gentleman, and that the W. P. Lane Camp of Confederate Veterans unanimously censures and condemns his acts.”

The resolution stipulated that “a copy of this resolution be given to the
Evening Messenger, Dallas news and Houston Chronicle for publication, and that this correspondence be filed away within the archives of this camp."

The next volley in the escalating war was recorded in the minutes of the Lane Camp on April 4, 1909. Elgin recorded that a letter had been received from Mrs. Pickett asking that "the resolution of censure upon Mr. Ayers be not published in the papers, as she did not wish the world to know how she was mistreated among her own people." After the reading of her letter, the camp members voted to rescind that portion of the resolution, "the balance of the censure to stand upon the records of this camp ... ."

Several non-members were present at the meeting to learn more about the controversy, and the commander, according to the minutes, decided to allow a free discussion of the "whole disgraceful affair." Elgin recorded that this opportunity "was taken advantage of by several of our leading citizens, who expressed themselves very forcibly on the transaction. The battle raged hot and furious for a time and in the wind up the Adj. offered" ... another resolution!

This resolution, in turn, "brought out a hot discussion, and was laid over until our next regular meeting upon the condition suggested by Mr. W.D. Allen, which was to the effect he would get the contract or a copy of the contract between Mrs. P. and the Chautauqua Association or the Slayton Lyceum bureau, and whatever the contract price as shown, he would pay the same to Mrs. Pickett less the $40.00 already paid."

At the next meeting, on May 2, Allen was called upon by the commander to read letters he had received from Mrs. Pickett in answer to his offer to pay the balance of her speaking fee, even if, as Elgin recorded, "he had to go down in his own pocket or sacrifice property to get it."

In substance, Mrs. Pickett replied that she "would accept the money only from the one who is justly due her — that she considered Mr. Ayers justly indebted to her and would not look to Mr. Allen for reimbursement under any circumstances."

Dr. E.B. Blocker took the floor and "gave a lengthy diagnosis of the evidence before the Camp, and moved that the resolution offered at our last meeting be passed, with the proviso, That the question be dropped by this Camp." Thereupon, a Mr. Pace made some "pointed remarks" and said Mr. Allen "should have paid the amount at the time out of proceeds of the lecture, as he would have done."

The final resolution as passed declared that "it is the sense of W.P. Lane Camp, UCV No. 621 that the actions of Mr. W.D. Allen toward Mrs. General Pickett, during her Chautauqua tour last summer in this city was unjust and wrong and meets with the disapproval and censure from this Camp."

With that action, the controversy over the $100 fee due "Mrs. General Pickett" disappeared into the mists, or at least from the meeting minutes of the old vets. A.D. Allen, whose influence with the Chautauqua association apparently brought Mrs. Pickett to town and who "generously passed free" the members of the camp who could not pay, was censured by the recipients of his generosity, all for the sake of Southern honor. "Colonel" Ayers of the Chautauqua Association in Oklahoma escaped censure. And who, if anybody, paid the balance of Mrs. Pickett's lecture fee will remain unknown until other evidence appears.
NOTES

1Walter P. Lane, Adventures and Recollections of General ... A San Jacinto Veteran, Containing Sketches of the Texian, Mexican and Late Wars, with Several Indian Fights Thrown In (Marshall, Texas, 1928); Max S. Lale, "Walter Paye Lane: An Appreciation," an address delivered in part before the Texas State Historical Association at its Ninety-Sixth Annual Meeting in Austin, Texas, on February 28, 1992; Jimmy L. Bryan, "‘More Disastrous Than All:’ The Surveyor’s Fight, 1838," East Texas Historical Journal (Vol. XXXVIII, Number 1, 2000), pp. 3-14.


5Elgin vertical file, Harrison County Historical Museum, Marshall.


7Richard F. Selcer, "Faithful and Forever Your Soldier": Gen. George E. Pickett, CSA (Baltimore, 1995); also, Lee vs. Pickett: Two Divided by War (Gettysburg, Pa., 1998).
