

# Perspectives in HISTORY

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**JOURNAL OF THE ALPHA BETA PHI  
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**Perspectives  
in  
HISTORY**

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# FOREWORD

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While an editor's job is never easy, it is always a rewarding experience. In this, the sixth year of publication of *Perspectives in History*, I am proud to say that the high standard of our articles set forth in Volume 1, Number 1, has been maintained. The topics have ranged from the mainstream to the obscure, and from thought-provoking to politically volatile.

*Perspectives in History* is always supported by two very dedicated individuals — Alpha Beta Phi Chapter's advisor, Dr. James A. Ramage and the History and Geography Department's Academic Assistant, Ms. Shirley Raleigh. To them, no words can accurately express the Chapter's infinite gratitude. As well, I wish to thank Miss Sarah Beth Phillips, who volunteered to type several drafts of the articles.

# Kentucky Rural Schools in the 1930s: The Taylor County Experience

by  
Robin J. Bowen

By September 1930, Kentuckians understood the meaning of depression. A harsh drought, unstable market prices for agricultural products, and mounting bills brought the depression home to nearly every rural family in the state. Farm families struggled desperately to keep expenses down, meet the monthly mortgage payments, and satisfy their basic needs. By the end of the decade, one Kentucky farmer out of five applied for federal relief.<sup>1</sup>

As the nation's economic crisis increased, communities across America called for cooperation in improving economic conditions. Community business leaders in Taylor County sought to bolster the local economy and strengthen community pride and urged: "Let's be generous with our good will—realizing that the prosperity of the individual is directly reflected in an added prosperity to our community. Your home industries and merchants have adopted this creed. Will you co-operate?"<sup>2</sup>

In order to strengthen the nation's cultural fiber and commercial power, Americans sought to revitalize the communitarian ethos. A number of observers felt that the nation's public education system could best convey the importance of community cooperation. Education united youth and adult, haves and have nots, family and community; therefore, to effectively promote community spirit the country needed a progressive education system.

Educational systems varied from state to state and county to county. In many areas the schools, like the country, needed unification and reconstruction. Public education in Kentucky, for example, operated through a decentralized system of principally one-teacher schools in small rural settlements.<sup>3</sup> The quality of Kentucky education suffered from the system's divided organization, economic deficiencies, and inadequately trained professionals. Despite the Great Depression's depleting and demoralizing effect, the combined efforts of the General Assembly, the federal government, and local communities improved the educational opportunities available for Kentucky students.

One-teacher schools formed the backbone of Kentucky's education system. In 1929-1930, Kentucky had 7,950 elementary schools, 6,089 of which were one-teacher schools.<sup>4</sup> The state education code classified school systems as independent districts for urban areas or county districts for rural areas. In the 1930s, Taylor County contained an independent school district in its county seat, Campbellsville, and a county school district. The Campbellsville independent district included one

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Robin J. Bowen, a member of Nu-Delta Chapter, graduated from Transylvania University in May, 1990. She delivered this paper at the Regional Conference at Centre College on April 21, 1990 and was co-winner of the best paper award.

white elementary, one black elementary, and one white high school. Sixty-two one-teacher schools and five multiple teacher schools for whites plus seven elementary and one junior high school for blacks composed Taylor County's school district. In 1930, Campbellsville schools enrolled 565 white students while 2,563 students attended county schools. Both systems enrolled a total of 320 black students.<sup>5</sup>

The rural school term ran from July to December with students attending class Monday through Friday from eight o'clock in the morning to four o'clock in the afternoon. Children walked barefoot along well-worn paths to the local school until the first fall frost in October required shoes. The school building was a simple wood-framed structure with a metal roof and a rock or limestone foundation. Rows of double-seater desks filled most of the classroom space. The teacher's desk and chair, a chalk board, a long bench, and maybe a globe or some maps faced the students. Most days, sunlight illuminated the classroom, while coal oil lamps provided light during dark days or evening study sessions. In fall and winter, heat came from a wood or coal stove. Children satisfied their thirst with water drawn from the school well and visited the outhouses when nature required. Morning and afternoon recess and lunch at mid-day offered moments of relaxation from the chores of reading, writing, and "rithmetic".<sup>6</sup>

Administration of the county school system came under the direction of the school board and subdistrict trustees. Within each school district, county courts could establish a school subdistrict in areas where 20 to 100 children of school age resided.<sup>7</sup> Each subdistrict elected at least one trustee who interviewed and recommended prospective teachers and cared for the custodial needs of the building and grounds.<sup>8</sup> Five trustees elected from the school district formed the school board. The school board established school regulations, administered school funds, appointed the superintendent, supervised personnel, teachers, and other employees, and set the curriculum guidelines.<sup>9</sup>

Funding for Kentucky schools came mainly from local and state tax revenues. The superintendent formulated the initial school district budget proposal. After passage by the local school board and approval by the state board of education, the local fiscal court set the school levy on the county's taxable property according to the final budget's requirements. State law allowed independent and county school districts to set separate school levies. The county school tax could not exceed \$.75 per \$100 property valuation, while the independent school tax maximum fell between \$1.25 to \$1.50 per \$100 depending on the size of the city. In 1934-1935, for example, Taylor County's school levy was \$.60 in comparison to Campbellsville's tax of \$1.00.<sup>10</sup> Rural schools faced a bleak future due to low revenue generation. As a result of the unequal taxes, per capita allocations through the Kentucky Common School Fund played a key role in county school funding. Since more people lived in the county than the city, the county district received more state funds. Accordingly, state support composed nearly 19% of independent district monies and over 40% of county district receipts.<sup>11</sup>

From 1930 to 1933, Kentucky school revenues suffered a devastating decrease

of over \$3,000,000. Drops in property valuations and increases in tax delinquencies caused this severe decline. With property devaluation reducing local tax revenue, the state tried increasing per capita allotments to bolster unstable school funds. Despite these increases, Taylor County's receipts fell from \$46,294.85 in 1929-1930 to \$43,893.84 in 1931-1932. By 1932, the General Assembly reduced the per capita payment from \$9.00 to \$7.00 (\$1.15 below the 1929-1930 level) in order to save the Common School Fund from collapse.<sup>12</sup>

The decline of school levy revenue and the reduction of state allotments threatened the future of many schools within the county districts. Fewer students in a school meant higher operational costs. In Taylor County, instructional cost per student ranged from slightly over \$7.00 to \$40.00+ in the early 1930s.<sup>13</sup> Due to insufficient funds, some subdistricts lost the only educational facility their children could attend. Funding reforms were necessary in order to save Kentucky's rural schools from financial collapse. Otherwise, fewer dollars meant fewer schools, reduced teachers' salaries, poorer school facilities, and shorter school terms.<sup>14</sup>

During the early 1930s, teacher certification occurred through one of three avenues. First, the State Board of Examiners' teacher exam could be taken before or after completion of high school. The Director of Certificates sent state tests to the superintendent's office at least twice a year for local applicants. The state certification division graded the exams and returned the results to the applicant and the superintendent. According to test scores, the county school board could issue a renewable teacher's certificate which encouraged continued training.<sup>15</sup> Second, a high school graduate or a person with college experience could apply directly to the state for certification. Relative to the transcript and application, a teacher received a renewable or lifetime teaching certificate.<sup>16</sup> Lastly, the state teachers colleges- Eastern, Western, Morehead, and Murray- gave graduates their teaching certificate along with their diplomas.<sup>17</sup> In 1932-1933, most Kentucky elementary teachers received certification through application to the state, since 71% held high school diplomas and/or had one to three years of college training.<sup>18</sup> In order to receive a school assignment, one applied for a teaching position with the district superintendent. He referred the applicant to a trustee for a job interview. Upon his recommendation and the school board's approval, the superintendent assigned the teacher to a school for the academic term.<sup>19</sup>

What, when, and how teachers taught depended primarily on their preference. Considering the students ranged in age from five to eighteen and the number of children per school fell between 20 to 50, teachers developed a variety of teaching methods. A Taylor County teacher, Mrs. Vera Long, taught by calling each grade to a long bench at the front of the room, so she could lecture without disturbing the other children's work. Many times other students listened to the lesson and asked questions.<sup>20</sup>

The teaching profession demanded dedication and hard work in return for limited economic reward and career advancement. Many rural Kentucky teachers walked about a mile and one half to school, while a few enjoyed the luxury of driving or car

pooling. School assignments changed after one to three years and most teaching careers lasted between five and ten years.<sup>21</sup> Salaries reflected the uneven distribution of tax revenue and the overall wealth of the county. In 1930-1931, the average rural Kentucky teacher earned \$580 a school term, while an urban counterpart received \$1,239. With the decrease in school revenue after 1932, rural teacher salaries plummeted to \$459. Such limited earnings provided only enough money for room and board and basic essentials. Few could save money as two-thirds of the nation's rural teachers supported at least one dependent.<sup>22</sup>

According to Kentucky Statute 4399-9, "[e]ach board of education shall maintain separate schools for white and colored children residing in its district."<sup>23</sup> This forbade any mixing of the races in Kentucky schools and, as a result, each school system contained two educational branches. Blacks composed only 8.6% of Kentucky's population with almost half residing in rural areas. Because of the small black population, many counties did not have enough students to support a black school in several subdistricts. As the depression worsened, more blacks moved to urban areas further reducing the county student population.<sup>24</sup>

The majority of black Kentucky rural schools, therefore, were one-teacher schools widely dispersed within the county. Because of low student populations, some schools offered curriculums of only one or two years. In 1929-1930, black schools that offered over six months of class and eight of twelve grades were located in areas with large black populations and strong white schools.<sup>25</sup> Taylor County and Campbellsville occupied the healthier category of school systems by offering blacks a full school year and the opportunity of an eighth grade diploma.

The district school board administered both black and white schools; however, blacks could not serve on the school board.<sup>26</sup> Black schools received less funding than white schools despite a Kentucky statute requiring equal distribution of school district funds.<sup>27</sup> L.N. Taylor, state school agent in 1932-1933, attributed these problems to three reasons: only whites could vote in school district elections; several districts did not tax black property owners; and many districts distributed their revenue unevenly based on the idea of "taking care of one's own."<sup>28</sup> Selective taxation and uneven fiscal distribution hurt black students across the board. Less money meant cheaper educational facilities. During the early 1930s, the median spent on white independent school buildings approached \$6,000, while black school buildings received \$3,000.<sup>29</sup> More importantly, some black students could not attend school because no school existed within walking distance and the county provided no means of travel to the closest one.<sup>30</sup>

Discrimination limited career options for blacks within the nation's school systems. Because of restricted educational opportunities, most blacks taught with less than two years of college. Over 70% of the nation's black teachers taught in elementary schools, and very few ever reached administrative positions. Most minority teachers were female, taught an average of three years at each school assignment, and spent approximately eight years total in the teaching profession. Like rural white teachers, blacks most frequently boarded within walking distance



of their school. Salaries for blacks averaged about \$400 per year, 91% of which went toward living expenses. Any extra funds helped support two dependents on the national average.<sup>31</sup>

Women felt the sting of discrimination in the nation's schools as well. Fewer females than males obtained college degrees or gained college training. Men occupied the majority of higher teaching positions and administrative jobs within the national educational system. Women, therefore, predominated in lower level teaching positions. In 1931, women taught in over three-quarters of Kentucky's rural schools.<sup>32</sup>

Salaries for males and females within the teaching professions varied according to job status. Nationwide, both sexes received the same pay as elementary teachers.<sup>33</sup> In Taylor County during 1930-1931, women elementary teachers earned \$139 more than men, and statewide, females averaged nearly \$200 more than males.<sup>34</sup> In supervisory positions, though, men earned about \$1,000 more than women of equal job rank. Black women also received lower pay than their male counterparts as a \$100 difference separated their salaries.<sup>35</sup>

Employment discrepancies occurred between single and married women. Sixty-five percent of one-teacher school posts were filled by single women in comparison to 18.6% of married women in the same position.<sup>36</sup> Married women suffered the most from job discrimination. Many superintendents viewed the man of the family as the principle breadwinner and allotted more money to married men than women. Across the country, many superintendents denied employment to married women in order to hire single males and females.<sup>37</sup> In 1931, three out of four school boards in a National Education Association survey refused to hire married women and several dismissed those in service.<sup>38</sup>

Until the 1930s, most viewed education as a local concern. In conjunction with this perspective, state government took no action in correcting the inequalities of Kentucky schools. As the depression threatened their children's educational future, Kentuckians turned to the General Assembly for help.

The state legislature addressed the financial crisis of Kentucky schools first. In 1930, the General Assembly established the Equalization Fund in order to assist those school districts whose level of expenditure per pupil fell below the State Board of Education's standards. Eligibility for funds rested primarily on a system's ability to pay its teachers a minimum salary of \$75 per month for seven months.<sup>39</sup> The Equalization Fund ended in 1932 when the State Supreme Court declared the fund unconstitutional as the law required per capita distribution of state school revenue.<sup>40</sup>

The General Assembly then set out to reform and codify the state's school laws. The Kentucky Education Association, the Kentucky Negro Education Association and the General Education Board sponsored a state survey in 1933. This survey gathered information concerning what standards of instruction districts used, how much training and preparation teachers had, and how administrators handled the needs of their school systems. Recommendations from the 1933 survey included: the revision and simplification of state school laws, the reorganization of the State

Board of Education, the consolidation of one room schools within county school districts, and the formulation of state-wide qualifications for teachers beginning with a minimum of two years college training.<sup>41</sup>

With the New School Code of 1934, many of the education survey's recommendations materialized. It directed particular attention to teacher qualifications and certification. According to the New School Code, college students interested in an education career chose a course of study relative to their interest—elementary, secondary, or administrative. The code set the educational requirements for elementary teachers at two years and high school teachers at four years. In addition to coursework, students were required to student teach before they received their degree.<sup>42</sup>

The state modified teacher certification in 1934 by placing the process solely in the hands of the State Department of Education. The department issued certificates valid for a specified time for a selected course or study. Elementary certification came in two forms: a provisional certificate based on two years of elementary curriculum, valid for three years, and a standard certificate based on four years of completed elementary study, valid for four years. Recognizing that some teachers who needed certificate renewal might not meet the new requirements, the legislature passed the 1934 Emergency Act. The act allowed extension of certificates for one year, so training requirements could be met at the next renewal. Ninety-three percent of those with one year of college or less used this option.<sup>43</sup>

In 1933, the federal government offered its first direct assistance to states in educational crisis through the National Committee for Federal Emergency Aid to Education. Based on its recommendations, Congress provided 30 states with \$17,000,000 in federal aid, out of which Kentucky received \$316,000.<sup>44</sup> Two other important aid programs appeared in 1933-1934: the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) which set up work camps with vocation and education programs for unemployed young men and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) which operated an aid program for college students who could not afford to complete their degree. In 1935, the increasing need for such assistance resulted in the creation of the National Youth Administration (NYA).<sup>45</sup>

The NYA functioned according to three premises: decentralized administration of aid programs, active cooperation of all state and local agencies related to youth, and experimentation. The federal government defined a NYA project's purpose and qualifications, while state and local agencies planned and operated them to best meet community needs.<sup>46</sup> NYA programs then fell into three categories: work projects, school aid, and college aid. Those from the age of 18 to 25 earned money by working at assigned jobs and attending vocation and academic classes. This structure allowed students to earn their diplomas, contribute to the family income, and improve their communities.

By 1936, 112 of Kentucky's 120 counties operated 215 NYA work projects.<sup>47</sup> Work project guidelines stipulated that the work assigned must be real work, the work should provide experience in work routine and possibly employment in an

interested field, and the work should be beneficial to the community.<sup>48</sup> Kentucky youths participated in projects concerning home economics, vocational training, mathematics, science, construction skills, auto mechanics, and personal services. In 1938, 2,881 males and 3,493 females participated in Kentucky NYA programs. They worked an average of 47 hours per month at the rate of \$.27 per hour. A \$12.66 per month salary helped many households, since over 95% of the NYA youths' families received federal aid.<sup>49</sup>

NYA projects made clear distinctions between male and female work. Young men participated in work projects that focused on skilled trades. In Taylor County, NYA male work units built roads, paved streets, and repaired/maintained cemeteries.<sup>50</sup> Construction projects for boys also repaired and improved over 1,500 rural schools in Kentucky for school systems too poor to pay for the work themselves. Workshop projects provided the finishing touches for school construction endeavors with furniture and other needed equipment.<sup>51</sup>

Female work projects focused on aspects of homemaking such as home beautification, child care, and cooking. In Kentucky, a special emphasis on sewing developed with the establishment of sewing rooms across the state. Women received training in the production of sturdy garments and distribution of work unit clothing helped many families in the local area. In 1936, Taylor County had two women's sewing training centers in Campbellsville, one in Spurlington, and one in Mannsville.<sup>52</sup>

American education suffered from high student drop-out rates during the depression. Financial problems and an atmosphere of discouragement and apathy inhibited many students from attending school. While work programs helped youths learn to read and write, less than half of the NYA participants went on to high school after eighth grade. In 1935, the NYA offered school aid to students who wanted a high school diploma. This program boosted Kentucky high school graduates over the one million mark in 1937. The NYA also developed an aid program for college students seeking undergraduate or graduate degrees. Over 7,000 students from 338 national colleges gained assistance through NYA college aid in 1937. In both programs, participants earned money by working at jobs assigned by their school. In this manner students gained employment experience while earning their diplomas. In Kentucky, over 8,000 students participated in school and college aid projects, receiving \$5.90 for an average of 26 hours work per month. In 1938 alone, NYA programs provided Kentucky youths with \$1,500,000 in earnings.<sup>53</sup>

The 1933 education survey also listed consolidation as a reliable solution to the financial problems of rural school systems. Consolidation, however, required funding for new, larger schools and transportation for isolated students. As mentioned, NYA work projects helped build and renovate several Kentucky schools. In addition, the Project Works Administration (PWA) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) provided assistance through their school housing programs.

In 1934-1935 the PWA and WPA completed 639 school housing projects in Kentucky.<sup>54</sup> Work on one school in Taylor County reinforced the building's underpinning with limestone supports.<sup>55</sup> The Campbellsville independent school system built an elementary school in 1936 with funds from the city school board and a PWA lumber grant.<sup>56</sup> School construction also promoted the merger of independent and county school districts. By 1935, 24% of Kentucky's student population attended four-teacher or larger schools in comparison to only 19% in 1931-1932, while the number of school districts dropped from 382 to 299.<sup>57</sup>

Many Kentuckians felt the one-teacher school symbolized community spirit and strength. Various social groups and local events centered on the school. The Parent-Teacher Association encouraged community members to discuss issues that affected their children. Topics included state vaccination requirements, lack of adequate funding for education, and the need for parent-teacher cooperation to insure the proper growth of character in the district's students.<sup>58</sup> Through 4-H and Junior Clubs, students organized programs with music, lectures, or other entertainment and helped raise funds for community projects or groups.<sup>59</sup>

All gatherings and activities connected with the rural schools culminated in the annual fall school fair. Parents, teachers, students, and local citizens planned athletic, academic and talent contests, music, and additional entertainments for the fair. A parade of subdistrict school floats marked the height of the celebration. Residents worked long hours adorning a wagon or truck with brightly colored cotton balls, streamers, and other decorative materials. Teachers and students rode on their festive parade creation laughing and waving before family, friends and neighbors.<sup>60</sup>

Rural schools played a critical role in shaping their community's future. Because the times demanded that all able hands in a family work, schools needed to provide the basics of learning within the first three years of school attendance. Many felt "[p]reparation for life is the real function of the school," and life meant putting food on the table not grasping the concept of an acute angle. A truly successful teacher taught students how to apply the lesson of learning to the challenges of every day living.<sup>61</sup>

A teacher formed a variety of communication links with the students. Establishing discipline in the classroom represented the first step in teacher-student communication. Discipline meant mutual respect between student and teacher. In order to effectively teach all grades, teachers maintained order according to the social maturity and needs of their students. Younger children often required tender reassurance and stable guidance, while older students many times demanded firm, to the point, direction.<sup>62</sup>

Creating and maintaining enthusiasm in learning served as a teacher's main duty. Few young people enjoyed sitting on hard benches trying to comprehend the difference between adjectives and adverbs all day. Teachers, themselves, cared little for the rigors of meeting the daily lesson plan week after week. As a result, rural schools possessed a quality of creative freedom. At least once a year, one room schools designed a special entertainment program for parents and students. Chil-

dren sang, recited poetry, told stories, and performed comedy acts and plays before family and friends.<sup>63</sup>

The rural school's liberty to experiment resulted in other fun activities. After-noon recess periods might lengthen for a baseball series. Teachers joined students in play but made sure they served on both teams. Volleyball tournaments between local schools filled many warm afternoons. Children walked or parents drove the students to a nearby school for the games. During the fall and winter, teacher and students picked hickory nuts, hunted opossums, ice skated, and enjoyed more than a few practical jokes on each other.<sup>64</sup>

Role models, teacher to student and student to student, served as a critical factor in successful one-teacher schools. Teachers addressed a student's lack of basic essentials and weak self-image before directing attention to the books. Many students lacked money for clothing and food, much less the means to buy school supplies. Some rural school teachers shared their lunch with need children or purchased a treat the the local store for students. Others cut hair, cleaned ears, and bought clothing and school supplies for students. To avoid embarrassment, a teacher let the student know that help meant a belief in the child's potential—you are someone, and by attending school, you can help yourself and your family. Education of this brand gave a child self-respect and confidence in his or her abilities and, possibly, hope for a brighter future.<sup>65</sup>

Within the school group, children often found influential role models in other students. When a teacher noticed a child's admiration for another student, this bond was reinforced by having the older student assist the younger one. This partnership proved practical as the teacher's one-on-one instruction time was very limited. The most important benefit, however, rested in the humanitarian seeds it left in both children. By receiving attention from an older student, the younger child gained self-esteem and pride in being recognized as *somebody*. This increased the desire to "be like" one's "hero" and help another student. Such lessons in cooperation, confidence, and personal recognition strengthened social unity.<sup>66</sup>

By the end of the 1930s, Kentucky's rural school systems had improved. Federal aid programs and consolidation provided better facilities for Kentucky students. From 1930-1939, federal school housing programs under the PWA, WPA, and NYA completed 1,758 projects in Kentucky.<sup>67</sup> Because of the school housing projects, Kentucky reduced its one-teacher schools from the 1930-1931 high of 6,202 to 4,200 by 1939-1940.<sup>68</sup> Decreased funding encouraged school systems to budget more efficiently. From 1934-1935 to 1937-1938, Taylor County held its operational expenses down to about \$52,000 a year.<sup>69</sup>

By 1939, the quality of rural teachers rose nationally due to higher qualifications for teaching certificates and federal aid programs. Nationwide, over 50% of white rural teachers possessed one to three years of teacher training and 40% held college degrees by the end of the 1930s.<sup>70</sup> Federal aid programs contributed to the overall health of rural communities. Kentucky's NYA funding from 1935-1936 to 1937-1938 amounted to over \$9,500,000 and helped 14,952 children.<sup>71</sup>

Blacks made important gains in Kentucky education as well. The 1934 New School Code set forth that blacks held the right to vote in general elections, pay school tax, and educate their children with an equal share of school district revenue.<sup>72</sup> By 1936, the education statutes required all school districts to provide twelfth grade educational service for their black students. Additionally, fifth and sixth class cities with independent school districts had to provide schools for blacks along with the county systems.<sup>73</sup>

Several problems still plagued the Kentucky education system, though. Unequal funding between independent and county districts continued. In 1936, a difference of \$.80 in school levy revenue resulted in Taylor County spending \$18.80 on each student compared to Campbellsville's \$42.01 per student.<sup>74</sup> In order to reduce operational costs, school boards cut teachers' salaries. By the end of the decade, the mean annual salary for the education professions fell below \$900 nationally.<sup>75</sup>

Improved training did not guarantee women equal salaries or job opportunities with men. Three-fifths of America's female teachers taught in rural one-teacher schools, while one half of the nation's male teachers occupied this position. Women composed only 4% of the nation's school administrators. Single women continued to make more than married women, and both earned up to \$400 less than men.<sup>76</sup>

Black teachers continued to endure fiscal cutbacks based on racial discrimination. School superintendents justified unequal salaries on whites' higher cost of living, pressure from public racism, and lower quality of service rendered by black teachers. Though on the average, black teachers in Kentucky earned more college credit and taught longer than whites, "quality of service" became a favored loophole for denying equal pay to blacks.<sup>77</sup>

While problems with racism, sexism and sectionalism remained, national, state and local improvement in education did occur during the Great Depression. Successful education reform depended on legal revisions, government programs, and most importantly, what people did with the opportunities these actions provided. When citizens valued the local school as important, it fostered the cooperative spirit essential to a unified, healthy, progressive community.

## Endnotes

1. David Shannon, *The Great Depression* (New Jersey, 1960), 30. I extend my heartfelt appreciation to my parents for inspiring my subject with their "school days" memories and Dr. Paul E. Fuller for his instruction in quality historical research.
2. "One for All and All for One," *News Journal*, September 4, 1930, 7.
3. See the 1931, 1933, 1935, 1937, 1939 issues of the *Superintendent of Public Instruction's Biennial Report* (Frankfort, State Department of Education).
4. *Superintendent of Public Instruction's Biennial Report, for the Biennium Ended June 30, 1931* (Frankfort, State Department of Education), 6.
5. John Albert Jones, "History of Education in Taylor County," masters thesis, University of Kentucky, 1937, 71, 68, 70, 77.
6. Interview of the author with Mrs. Vera Long, October 7, 1989. See also: interview with Mr. Jerdon Robert Bowen, November 26, 1989; interview with Mrs. Myrtle Wise, October 7, 1989; interview with Mrs. Catherine Janes, November 18, 1989; and Jones, "Education in Taylor County," 68-69.
7. *A Study of Local School Units in Kentucky*, Kentucky Department of Education Project Staff, (June 30, 1937), 28.
8. Richard E. Jagers, *Administering the County School System* (1934), 11. See also *A Study of Local School Units in Kentucky*, 28.
9. *A Study of Local School Units in Kentucky*, 28, 34, 35, 70. See also: Jagers, *County School System*, 5, 11; *Administrative Organization of the Public Elementary and Secondary Schools*, (Kentucky Educational Commission, 1933), 6; Moses Edward Ligon, "A History of Public Education in Kentucky," *Bulletin of the Bureau of School Service*, (Lexington, 1942), 168-169.
10. *A Study of Local School Units in Kentucky*, 33, 70, 85.
11. *Ibid.*, 30. See also *Superintendent of Public Instruction's Biennial Report, for the Biennium Ended June 30, 1933* (Frankfort, State Department of Education), 10.
12. *Superintendent of Public Instruction's Biennial Report, for the Biennium*

- Ended June 30, 1933*, 10, 160. See also: *Superintendent of Public Instruction's Biennial Report, for the Biennium Ended June 30, 1931*, 76 and *Superintendent of Public Instruction's Biennial Report, for the Biennium Ended June 30, 1935* (Frankfort, State Department of Education), 11.
13. Jones, "Education in Taylor County," 73.
  14. Shannon, *Great Depression*; 94.
  15. *Administrative Organization of the Public Elementary and Secondary Schools* (Kentucky Educational Commission, 1933), 10. See also: *Superintendent of Public Instruction's Biennial Report, for the Biennium Ended June 30, 1933*, 58 and Long interview.
  16. Ibid.
  17. *Superintendent of Public Instruction's Biennial Report, for the Biennium Ended June 30, 1935*, 20. See also: Frank L. McVey, *The Gates Open Slowly* (Lexington, 1949), 175.
  18. *Superintendent of Public Instruction's Biennial Report, for the Biennium Ended June 30, 1933*, 58, 78.
  19. Wise, October 7, 1989. See also: "Supt. Sapp Reappointed," *News Journal*, (June 19, 1930), 1 and *A Study of Local School Units in Kentucky*, 34.
  20. Wise interview. See also: Long and Bowen interviews.
  21. Long interview. See also Wise interview; *Teachers in Rural Communities, a National Survey of their Professional, Social, Cultural, and Economic Status* (Washington, DC, National Education Association of the United States, 1939), 32, 33; Bowen and Janes interviews; and interview of the author with Mrs. Flossie Campbell, November 18, 1989.
  22. *Superintendent of Public Instruction's Biennial Report, for the Biennium Ended June 30, 1931*, 8. See also: *Superintendent of Public Instruction's Biennial Report, for the Biennium Ended June 30, 1933*, 12; and *Teachers in Rural Communities, a National Survey of their Professional, Social, Cultural, and Economic Status*, 9, 25, 27, 29; and Long interview.
  23. Leonard E. Meece, "Negro Education in Kentucky," *Bulletin of the Bureau of School Service*, (Lexington, March, 1938), 16.



24. Ibid., 23, 33, 78, 79. See also: Ligon, "Public Education," 255, and *Superintendent of Public Instruction's Biennial Report, for the Biennium Ended June 30, 1933*, 40.
25. Ligon, "Public Education," 254, 255.
26. Ibid., 263.
27. Meece, "Negro Education," 21.
28. *Superintendent of Public Instruction's Biennial Report, for the Biennium Ended June 30, 1933*, 39.
29. Meece, "Negro Education," 82.
30. Rolfe L. Hunt, (Nashville, 1939), 94.
31. *Teachers in Rural Communities, a National Survey of their Professional, Social, Cultural, and Economic Status*, 81, 82, 84, 86.
32. Ibid., 15, 17. See also *Superintendent of Public Instruction's Biennial Report, for the Biennium Ended June 30, 1931*, 9.
33. *Teachers in Rural Communities, a National Survey of their Professional, Social, Cultural, and Economic Status*, 46.
34. *Superintendent of Public Instruction's Biennial Report, for the Biennium Ended June 30, 1931*, 9.
35. *Teachers in Rural Communities, a National Survey of their Professional, Social, Cultural, and Economic Status*, 46, 101.
36. Ibid., 23.
37. Jagers, *County School System*, 144, 145.
38. Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience* (New York, 1984), 441.
39. James W. Cammack, Jr., *Equalization of Educational Opportunities in Kentucky* (Frankfort, 1939), 1, 18. See also: "Legislative Mill like that of the Gods-Slow," *News Journal*, (March 6, 1930), 6, 18, 19 and McVey, *Gates Open Slowly*, 252.

40. Ligon, "Public Education, 160.
41. McVey, *Gates Open Slowly*, 216, 217, 219.
42. *Superintendent of Public Instruction's Biennial Report, for the Biennium Ended June 30, 1935*, 9, 10, 19.
43. Ibid., 20, 21. See also: *Superintendent of Public Instruction's Biennial Report, for the Biennium Ended June 30, 1937*, 37.
44. *Superintendent of Public Instruction's Biennial Report, for the Biennium Ended June 30, 1935*, 10, 11.
45. *The Civilian Conservation Corps, the National Youth Administration, and the Public Schools* (Washington, DC, National Education Association of the United States and the American Association of School Administrators, 1941), 9, 10, 11. See also: Betty and Ernest K. Lindley, *A New Deal for Youth: the Story of the National Youth Administration* (New York, 1938), 3, 10, 11.
46. Lindley, *New Deal*, 14, 22. See also: *The Civilian Conservation Corps, the National Youth Administration, and the Public Schools*, 16.
47. McVey, *Gates Open Slowly*. 306.
48. Lindley, *New Deal*, 23.
49. Ibid., 17, 21, 274.
50. "New NYA Program in County Teaching Useful Vocations," *News Journal*, (December 3, 1936), 5.
51. Lindley, *New Deal*, 31, 41.
52. Ibid., 53. See also: "New NYA Program in County Teaching Useful Vocations," 1.
53. Lindley, *New Deal*,. 18, 19, 165, 184, 255.
54. *Superintendent of Public Instruction's Biennial Report, for the Biennium Ended June 30, 1935*, 22.
55. Long interview, See also: Bowen interview.

56. "Work on Walls at New Graded Schools—Work Begun on Graded School," *News Journal*, (March 4, 1937), 1. See also: Jones, "Education in Taylor County," 66, 72.
57. *A Study of Local School Units in Kentucky*, 24. See also: *Superintendent of Public Instruction's Biennial Report, for the Biennium Ended June 30, 1935*, 14.
58. "Parent Teachers Meeting," *News Journal*, (January 9, 1930), 7. See also: "PTA Met at CHS Monday Evening," *News Journal*, (April 10, 1930), 1; Miss Ena Jones, "TCHS Notes," *News Journal*, (October 9, 1930), 5; "PTA Holds Interesting Meeting Tuesday Eve," *News Journal*, (November 6, 1930), 8.
59. "Junior Club Notes," *News Journal*, (January 16, 1930), 4. See also: "Community Play Given at Knifley," *News Journal*, (March 13, 1930), 3; "Farm Gossip," *News Journal*, (March 13, 1930), 10; "Meadow Creek Program a Credit to Community," *News Journal*, (March 27, 1930), 3; "Meadow Creek Junior Club Goes to Summersville Next Friday," *News Journal*, (April 10, 1930), 2.
60. "Preliminary Plans Made for Rural School Rally to be held September 20," *News Journal*, (April 4, 1935), 1, 4. See also: Long, Campbell, and Wise interviews.
61. "Teaching Beauty in the School," *News Journal*, (January 2, 1930), 5. See also: Bowen interview.
62. Bowen interview.
63. Ibid. See also: Long interview.
64. Ibid. See also: Wise interview.
65. Ibid. See also: Janes interview.
66. Ibid.
67. McVey, *Gates Open Slowly*, 243.
68. *A Study of One and Two Room Schools in Kentucky* (Frankfort, 1969), 3.
69. Jones, "Education in Taylor County," 72.

70. *Teachers in Rural Communities, a National Survey of their Professional, Social, Cultural, and Economic Status*, 9, 18.
71. Lindley, *New Deal*, 274.
72. *Superintendent of Public Instruction's Biennial Report, for the Biennium Ended June 30, 1935*, 32.
73. *Teachers in Rural Communities, a National Survey of their Professional, Social, Cultural, and Economic Status*, 18.
74. Jones, "Education in Taylor County," 73.
75. *Teachers in Rural Communities, a National Survey of their Professional, Social, Cultural, and Economic Status*, 11.
76. *Ibid.*, 14, 15, 43.
77. Meece, "Negro Education," 107, 115, 117, 121.

# **Amateurs at War: The Lack of Effective Leadership in the Militia of the Northwest, 1782-1812**

by  
**Gary A. O'Dell**

In the early history of the United States, the initial settlement of the lands west of the Appalachian mountains was a period filled with conflict. From the time of the first organized ventures, commencing in Kentucky in 1774, to the conclusion of the War of 1812, potential settlers found themselves in bitter contest with the numerous Indian tribes that occupied and utilized these lands. Shawnee, Delaware, Miami, more than a dozen major tribal groupings, the Indians had been pushed westward for two centuries by an expanding country. They harbored no illusions concerning the aspirations of whites. These Indians of the northwest country were fighting for their homes and a rapidly-vanishing way of life, and most of the tribes were secured as allies by the British during the American Revolution. The Americans, who cleared the forests, eliminated the wild game, and built houses, were perceived as the greater threat. Having by necessity abandoned their beloved Kentucky lands to the whites following the 1783 Treaty of Paris, the tribes required little persuasion from the British to continue hostilities throughout the frontier. As the subsequent influx of settlers swelled enormously, some years of peace existed between the ending of the Revolution and beginning of the 1812 War, but it was an uneasy peace at best.

Great Britain had not entirely relinquished designs on the former colonies; many in that country felt that the issue of independence had not yet been fairly settled. The peace concluded in 1783 had provided that the British cede Detroit and other peripheral forts that were now designated to be on American soil. The terms, however, in an unfortunate phrasing, called for the British to evacuate the forts "with all convenient speed." The British were in no particular hurry. For an additional thirteen years they continued to occupy the northwestern forts, provide arms and sustenance to their Indian dependents, and covertly fan smoldering resentments among the tribes against the Americans. Not until July 1796, would American garrisons replace British at Detroit, Michilimackinac, and Niagara.<sup>1</sup>

The settlers of Kentucky, Ohio, and Indiana generally defended themselves. During the Revolution the action had focused upon the east and little if any armed force could be spared for the frontier. Following the Revolution, the United States military was small in number, so that only miniscule and underequipped forces were detailed for defense of the interior. The settlers of the northwest were organized into

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militia units to serve their own protection.

These men were undoubtedly brave, being in the first instance possessed of the fortitude to seek new homes in a wild and hostile country, but their boldness and independence hindered their military effectiveness. Discipline was almost wholly lacking, and they were often led by men unskilled in warfare, outstanding as they were in other ways. Expeditions into Indian country were, for many militia officers, something of a lark and unfortunately conducted more with dash and esprit than sound military tactics. This was a weakness sometimes compounded by ineptitude or even apparent cowardice on the part of expedition commanders.

In expedition after expedition against an elusive enemy aided, equipped, advised, and often led by regular British officers, the volunteer American soldiers were usually at considerable disadvantage. From the devastating ambush at Blue Licks in August 1782, to the unguarded camp and defeat at Raisin River in January 1813, the frontier militia repeatedly ignored common sense and military discipline to plunge into disaster. On those expeditions when victory was claimed, it was frequently the result of the absence of Indian warriors, who had gone away, leaving the village essentially undefended. In such cases, too often the volunteer army was content with looting and burning, and capturing such women and children and elderly villagers as were unable to remove themselves promptly from the vicinity, returning home with their spoils rather than pressing onward to achieve meaningful objectives. In the art and science of war, the militia and its officers, with few exceptions, were rank amateurs.

Only when controlled by dynamic and capable leaders, men such as George Rogers Clark, Anthony Wayne, Isaac Shelby and William Henry Harrison, were the frontier militia capable of acting in a decisive manner. With such leadership, the volunteers were able to execute such eminently successful campaigns as those of Kaskaskia, Cahokia and Vincennes in 1778, Fallen Timbers in 1794, and Mississinewa in 1812.<sup>2</sup> Balanced against these must be the opprobrious accounts of not only Blue Licks and Raisin River, but also Josiah Harmar's Defeat in 1790, and the slaughter of Arthur St. Clair's expedition in 1791.

Josiah Harmar was a regular officer of the fledgling United States Army, and the inadequacy of his leadership led Kentuckians to distrust such officers. A direct effect of Harmar's Defeat was the formation of the Board of War in Kentucky in that same year, by directive of President Washington, giving Kentuckians the right to command expeditions north of the Ohio River.<sup>3</sup> The distaste of the militia for the regular army was further increased by the ineptness of St. Clair and James Winchester, commander at Raisin River. Even so, the Kentucky militia commanders fared little better in the field; men such as John Todd, John Bowman, and Benjamin Logan, while deservedly admired and respected by their fellow Kentuckians, performed indifferently as expedition commanders. Even bold George Rogers Clark, despite several brilliant victories, was an inconsistent leader.

Perhaps typical of the amateur campaigns were those led by Benjamin Logan in 1786 and Josiah Harmar in 1790, revealing the effectiveness of the militia both on

their own and under a regular army commander. In both expeditions, the commander failed to give necessary guidance to subordinates and to unskilled and undisciplined troops.

In October, 1786, Logan led an expedition of Kentuckians against the Shawnee villages of the upper branches of the Miami River in Ohio, siphoning off volunteers to a similar proposed expedition of Clark up the more distant Wabash River in present-day Indiana. Among Logan's senior officers was James Trotter, who with the rank of lieutenant colonel commanded the volunteers from Fayette County.<sup>4</sup>

James Trotter was a wealthy and influential citizen of Augusta County, Virginia, during the Revolutionary War, having been appointed a Commissioner of Peace in 1778, and Tax Commissioner in 1780.<sup>5</sup> He migrated to Kentucky with his family in 1784 and soon settled in Lexington, then still essentially a frontier town. Having been a man of means in Virginia, he quickly acquired land and opened a large mercantile business. On December 22, 1785, he was appointed one of the justices of Fayette County, serving with such men as Robert Todd, Daniel Boone, and Robert Patterson. Trotter became an officer in the Kentucky militia, commissioned mainly by virtue of his prominent station, rather than experience in military affairs. He was thirty-two years of age and had been in the western country two years.<sup>6</sup>

Trotter and the Fayette County men rendezvoused with Logan's army at Limestone (Maysville) and had crossed the Ohio River by September 30, 1786. By noon of October 6, they had marched to within striking distance of several of the Shawnee villages along the Mad River in Ohio. Logan split the eight hundred-man army into three wings to attack several towns simultaneously. Little resistance was expected, and little was encountered. The greater part of the Shawnee warriors had traveled to the Wabash in anticipation of Clark's campaign there. By day's end, seven of the Indian villages had been plundered and destroyed. Ten warriors were killed, and thirty-two prisoners taken, mostly women and children.<sup>7</sup>

Among the prisoners was the elderly Shawnee chief Moluntha, often called the "Shawnee King," though it was a title more honorary than actual; he was revered by his people for his great age. Moluntha had voluntarily surrendered, having taken cover during the attack beneath an American flag that had flown over his village. He had been one of the major signatories of a peace treaty with the United States earlier that same year. As the army finished looting Mackachack, the village to which all the prisoners had been taken, the old chief was talking to his guards when Lieutenant Colonel Hugh McGary, commander of the Mercer County militia, rode up and dismounted. McGary bluntly questioned the old man as to whether he had been present at Blue Licks, where in 1782 many men from the Bluegrass had lost their lives in the Indian/British ambush. McGary had been present himself and had been accused of having rashly spurred the Kentucky volunteers into the trap.<sup>8</sup>

Taking the elderly chief's mumbled reply as an affirmative, McGary snatched his own tomahawk from his belt and with the blunt end, clubbed the Shawnee patriarch to the ground. Before any of the startled men could interfere, McGary stepped forward and buried the blade in Moluntha's skull. In the next instant, he

removed the old man's scalp with his knife.<sup>9</sup>

Most of the other men were outraged by McGary's cold-blooded slaying of the Shawnee chief. Trotter in particular castigated him severely for the act, and during the course of a heated argument, McGary threatened to kill not only Trotter but any other man "who was so much a friend to Indians." Though some of those present favored an immediate court-martial for McGary, Logan sensibly postponed the trial until after their return to Kentucky.<sup>10</sup>

Logan's expedition was severely criticized, particularly by Harmar, commander of the regular army forces in the Army of the Northwest. Harmar was especially critical of the murder of Moluntha. He noted that, according to the reports he had received, Moluntha had not only boldly displayed the American flag over the village to indicate peaceable intent, but had also shown his copy of the Miami treaty of January 1786. To add further insult, the American flag captured at Moluntha's village was now being proudly displayed as a war trophy at the courthouse in Lexington. The brutal slaying had also angered several tribes who had not formerly been particularly hostile.<sup>11</sup>

Nor had the expedition been remarkable in its other accomplishments. Though casualties had been light among the Kentucky volunteers, this had resulted from lack of forces opposing the army. More than 200 Indian homes were destroyed; 15,000 bushels of corn were burned; and assorted livestock were killed. Personal possessions of the Shawnee estimated at \$2,000 were divided among the militia. Some vindictive satisfaction was a motive in striking back at the Indians, as the Shawnee had long tormented the Kentucky settlers, but the expedition overall had accomplished little save to provide some vigorous exercise, pad the pockets of the volunteers, and impoverish a number of Shawnee villagers. This was typical of the warfare carried on during the period, more a war of attrition than actual combat between large groups of adversaries.<sup>12</sup>

Hugh McGary, when it came time for his court-martial, had brought countercharges. Consequently, two more of Benjamin Logan's officers were brought before the court at Bardstown on March 20, 1787. James Trotter and Robert Patterson had been accused by McGary of having distributed a barrel of rum among the men and delaying the Ohio crossing, and slaughtering twenty cattle without orders. Levi Todd, the county clerk of Fayette and commanding officer of the Fayette militia, indicated where his sympathies rested in a letter that accompanied a summons delivered to Patterson:

It is disagreeable to me that positive instructions have made it my Duty to Inform you that you are from the Receipt of this to Consider yourself under Arrest...I flatter myself an Enquiry into your Conduct will not by any means reflect Dishonor to yourself or Officers who with pleasure serve the same County with you."

The countercharges were heard first. The court determined that these offences, while not serious, were somewhat irregular and wasteful and sentenced Colonel Patterson to be reprimanded. Additionally, McGary claimed that Trotter had given



orders to the troops to shoot any man who killed an Indian prisoner. All charges against Trotter were dismissed for lack of evidence.<sup>13</sup>

On the following day the bench heard the case against McGary, presented by Trotter and Patterson. The charges were:

Indictment One — The murder of a Shawnee Indian, Chief Moluntha, who had surrendered as a prisoner of war and was under the protection of General Benjamin Logan at the time.

Indictment Two — Disobedience of orders, "which were to spare all prisoners, which orders were never countermanded."

Indictment Three — Disorderly conduct as an officer, "insulting and abusing Lt. Col. Trotter," who did not approve Captain McGary's act, as well as swearing "by G— he would chop him down..."

Indictment Four — Abuse of field officers for the same reason, "in a public manner," and for conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman.<sup>14</sup>

Testimony soon established that some confusion at the scene had existed regarding the treatment to be afforded prisoners. Initial orders had been posted well before the villages were approached, stating that if "any person, under any description or any color, attempts to come to the army, all persons are forewarned to receive them in a friendly manner." Logan had not been motivated by concern for the Indians, for indeed Blue Licks had not been forgotten and numerous more recent incidents had kept the inhabitants of Kentucky in a state of antipathy toward Indians in general and the Shawnee in particular. Rather, two of the volunteers in his army had lost sons kidnapped by the Shawnee and it was feared that they might be mistaken for Indians and killed, should they escape and approach lines of the army. Logan testified that his orders were "not in favor of any Indian on earth." Evidently, Logan later decided that the prisoners of the Indians were not at risk and verbally countermanded the original order just prior to the attack, declaring to McGary's battalion, "Boys, whatever you do, spare the white blood," and indicating that they could do as they pleased concerning the Indians.<sup>15</sup>

McGary was found guilty of the first charge, the murder of Moluntha, but not guilty of the second, which had referred to orders to spare all prisoners. McGary was also found guilty of threatening Colonel Trotter and using abusive language, but only part-guilty of Indictment Four. His sentence was light; McGary was suspended from the militia for one year.<sup>16</sup>

Trotter had demonstrated a keen sense of honor during this engagement, sufficiently outraged by the senseless murder of a helpless prisoner to bring charges against a fellow officer of high rank. Even before the trial at Bardstown, he was officially confirmed on October 27, as lieutenant colonel in the Fayette County militia, third in command under County Lieutenant Levi Todd and Colonel Robert Todd.<sup>17</sup>

Four years later, Trotter again set out on an expedition against northwestern

Indian tribes. In the fall of 1790, authorized by President Washington in response to frequent skirmishes with Indians on both sides of the Ohio, Governor Arthur St. Clair of the Northwest Territory directed General Josiah Harmar to organize a punitive expedition against the Miami and Shawnee Indians gathered under Little Turtle (Michikiniqua) and Blue Jacket. Harmar's 320 regulars were supplemented by Kentucky militia to create an army of over 1,400 men. The Kentucky militia rendezvoused in mid-September at Fort Washington at newly-christened Cincinnati. Trotter, as lieutenant colonel, was placed in command of three battalions led respectively by Majors Hall, McMullen and Ray. On September 24, five hundred Pennsylvania militia arrived to supplement the volunteers from Virginia's Kentucky counties, of which the greater part were organized into four battalions under command of Colonel John Hardin. The combined militia force departed Fort Washington on the 26th, followed by General Harmar and the regular troops on September 30. On October 3, the army merged, and though poorly armed and under-equipped, made good progress.<sup>18</sup>

By October 15, an advance detachment under Hardin located several deserted Indian villages on the Maumee, at the junction of the St. Marys and St. Joseph Rivers. When joined by Harmar and the main army two days later, the first order of business was to burn the Indian towns. A trail left by the fleeing villagers was discovered, heading in a northwesterly direction. On the 18th, General Harmar sent Trotter with 300 men to scout the countryside around the army's encampment. A mile out, an Indian on horseback was discovered, and Trotter led the light horse cavalry, about forty men, in a short pursuit that ended with the killing of the Indian. They had not yet returned to the main body of the detachment when another was spotted, and Trotter, accompanied by his three majors, set off after this lone horseman. It was a rash act, for the bewildered troops were left with no one in command and no orders. The second Indian was also killed, after a chase that lasted nearly a half-hour, and the officers returned to their abandoned commands. At nightfall, Trotter led the detachment back to the encampment.<sup>19</sup>

There the militiamen fell to plundering the village, and unhindered by their officers, were in such disorder that at last General Harmar ordered the cannon to be fired. He subjected all the officers to a severe tongue-lashing, and posted orders concerning the orderly division of plunder. It was not an auspicious beginning for the expedition.<sup>20</sup>

On the morning of October 19, Harmar sent a detachment of 600 men under Colonel John Hardin on a forced march to scout to the northwest in the direction taken by the fleeing villagers. Though far more popular with the troops than Hardin, Trotter had lost favor with the general due to the debacle of the preceding day, and a substantial portion of his former command had been sent with Hardin. By mid-afternoon, Colonel Hardin's force had reached a crossing of the Eel River, about fifteen miles from Harmer's camp.<sup>21</sup>

Harmar moved the main army, including the remaining volunteers under Trotter, immediately after Hardin's departure about two miles to an abandoned Miami

village on the Maumee. In the meanwhile, Hardin's detachment became inadvertently split, and the advance party under Hardin walked unsuspectingly into a forest ambush set by Little Turtle with a large force of warriors. In complete panic, all but nine of the militia broke and fled for Harmar's camp; all nine were slain along with twenty-two of the regular troops that had held position. Harmar inexplicably took no action and began to prepare a retreat. In the dark of early morning on October 22, Hardin led a detachment of 340 militia and 60 regulars back to the battle site, to seek and engage the enemy and to bury the bodies of those killed earlier. Reaching the junction of the two rivers, Hardin discovered a large force of Indian present, at least double their own numbers. An attempt to ambush the Indians failed, and the detachment was quickly embroiled in a hot engagement.<sup>22</sup>

Hardin's forces became scattered and were unable to support each other, so that losses were heavy, and a retreat began by the survivors. Hardin and the remains of his detachment rejoined Harmar already on the move, shortly before noon, and urged the general to set out with the entire army to attack Little Turtle's forces. General Harmar refused to do so, and on the next morning, commenced a full retreat to Fort Washington. One hundred and nine men of Harmar's command had been killed and many more were wounded. Harmar subsequently resigned his commission.<sup>23</sup>

Of the three senior officers present at this disaster, Trotter alone was not condemned for his role, though it was probably due to sheer chance that he had not blundered into a similar ambush prior to Hardin's encounters. Trotter had commanded the Kentucky troops that had remained under Harmar's authority, during Colonel Hardin's two engagements. Trotter returned to Lexington, resumed operation of his store, and embarked upon a political career in the state legislature. He was fortunate to miss, in November 1791, the butchery of St. Clair's defeat. Of a mixed force of Kentucky militia and regular troops commanded by General St. Clair, nearly half were killed or wounded. Hostilities with the Indians intensified throughout the region, culminating in the decisive American victory by General Anthony "Mad Anthony" Wayne at Fallen Timbers in July 1794. After the Treaty of Greenville was signed by the Indian chiefs in 1795, peace generally prevailed on the frontier until just prior to the outbreak of the War of 1812.<sup>24</sup>

James Trotter was an honorable man, and unquestionably courageous, but in a common failing with so many of the militia commanders, he was unable to maintain military discipline in himself, let alone the volunteer troops under his command. This deficiency strongly affected the course of events in the Northwest, resulting not only in lost lives but in lost opportunities. Not until the part-time soldiers came under the leadership of William Henry Harrison (a protege of General Wayne) in the summer of 1812, were the militia capable of effectively fighting a prolonged conflict. In August of that year, Harrison wrote, rather in despair, to Secretary of War William Eustis: "The troops which I have with me and those which are coming on from Kentucky are perhaps the best materials for forming an army that the world has ever produced. But no equal number of men were ever collected who knew so

little of military discipline.” His observation showed an astute knowledge of the men he commanded; however, the rigors of the coming campaigns and able leadership at nearly all levels would quickly shape the volunteers into an effective fighting force. Following a massive buildup of troops and rallying to the memory of comrades fallen at Raisin, the battle of the Thames River in October, 1813, forever eliminated the threat to the Northwest from the British and their Indian allies.<sup>25</sup>

## Endnotes

1. J. Leitch Wright, Jr., *Britain and the American Frontier 1783-1815* (Athens, Georgia, 1975), 20-22, 105. The author expresses appreciation to Dr. Charles G. Talbert of Lexington for his assistance in the preparation of the article.
2. Lt. Col. John B. Campbell commanded a successful expedition against the Miami and Delaware villages on the Mississinewa River, culminating in the battle of Mississinewa, December 18, 1812. See Harvey Lewis Carter, *Little Turtle: First Sagamore of the Wabash* (Urbana, 1987), 240.
3. Federal Writers Project *Military History of Kentucky* (Frankfort, 1939), 55-56.
4. The Lyman Copeland Draper Collection, Wisconsin State Historical Society Library, 10S:125.
5. Lyman Chalkley, *Chronicles of the Scotch-Irish Settlement in Virginia*, 3 vol., 1 (1912: Baltimore: 1966): 201, 216, 217, 219, 228, 229, 236, 447. Trotter had received a commission as Captain of a Virginia company in November, 1782, but saw no action during the closing period of the Revolution.
6. Draper MSS, 10S:125.
7. Charles G. Talbert *Benjamin Logan: Kentucky Frontiersman* (1976), 211.
8. *Ibid*, 211-212. The Indian Village is also variously referred to as Macocheek or Mequashake.
9. Draper MSS, 12S:134, 139.
10. *Ibid*, 12S:134-135; Talbert, *Benjamin Logan*, 212.
11. General Josiah Harmar to Arthur St. Clair, December 10, 1786, Harmar to Richard Butler, December 16, 1786, Harmar Papers, Letter Book B, 23-24, 27-29, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan; Harmar to Secretary of War Henry Knox, November 15, 1786, in William Henry Smith (arr.) *The St. Clair Papers* (Cincinnati, 1882), II, 19.
12. Talbert, *Benjamin Logan*, 212.
13. *Ibid*, 213-214; Draper MSS, 12S:139, 2MM:5.
14. Draper Mss, 12S:134.

15. Ibid, 136-139.
16. Ibid, 140.
17. Draper MSS, 10S:125.
18. Wallace A. Brice, *History of Fort Wayne* (Fort Wayne, 1868), 124; Carter, *Little Turtle*, 90-91.
19. Michael S. Warner "General Josiah Harmar's Campaign Reconsidered: How the Americans lost the Battle of Kekionga," *Indiana Magazine of History* (March 1987), 47. Brice, *Fort Wayne*, 125; Carter, *Little Turtle*, 92.
20. Brice, *Fort Wayne*, 125, Harmar's orders, Camp at the Miami Village, October 18, 1790.
21. Brice, *Fort Wayne*, 126; Carter, *Little Turtle*, 92-93.
22. Brice, *Fort Wayne*, 126-128; Warner, "Harmar's Campaign" 51-54.
23. Ibid, 129-130.
24. Gary A. O'Dell, "The Trotter Family, Gunpowder, and Early Kentucky Entrepreneurship 1784-1833," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 88 (Autumn 1990) In press.
25. William Henry Harrison to William Eustis, August 28, 1812, in Logan Esarey, transcriber, *Governors' Messages and Letters: Messages and Letters of William Henry Harrison* 2 Vols. (Indianapolis: 1922) 2: 98-101. Individual discipline remained a problem throughout the War of 1812, although the frontier militia learned to fight effectively as a group when provided with leadership and example. See Perry Le Roy, "The Weakness of Discipline and It's Consequent Results During the War 1812," Richard C. Knopf, ed. *Papers on the War of 1812 in the Northwest* (Columbus, 1958).

# **A Black Face Lie: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures**

by  
**Susan Claypool**

Between 1902 and 1915, motion pictures became one of the most important forms of mass entertainment in the United States, and the stereotypes and caricatures of African-Americans in the minstrel and vaudeville shows became larger than life on the silver screen.<sup>1</sup> At first the detrimental stereotypical roles were played by white actors in burnt cork. Such one-sided views depicted blacks as scary, stupid, slow, lazy and ever-so-faithful to "Massa." Such caricature was base. Uncle Tom, the coon, the tragic mulatto, the ever-smiling mammy, and the brutal black buck were among the most prevalent. Later, when black actors broke into the movies, they were unable to cast aside the roles set for them by Hollywood; they were not allowed to play parts which suggested intelligence and diversity of character. Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Stepin Fetchit, Nina Mae McKinney, and Paul Robeson brought to life characters that contributed to the thesis that blacks were inferior and reinforced ideas prevalent since the days of slavery.<sup>2</sup>

Many talented actors became discouraged and disillusioned with the industry and abandoned the profession altogether. Others went on to star and direct in what became known as the black cinema, a less popular but at least artistically true cinematic option. A handful went abroad and became stars.<sup>3</sup>

During the last thirty years, black caricatures were modernized by stars such as Sidney Poitier, Sammy Davis, Jr., Dorothy Dandridge, Harry Belafonte, Lena Horn, and Jim Brown. Black actors often could not get past the traditional mythic character roles that had long towered over them.<sup>4</sup> By the early 1970s, it became evident that exploitation of blacks in film was still alive and well; it had simply taken a different form. The old stereotypes were there, but not so easily identifiable. These new films became known in the black community as the "blaxploitation films." They included such movies as "Superfly," "Shaft," "Cotton," "Foxy Brown," "Willie Dynamite," and "Trouble Man."<sup>5</sup>

Motion pictures became popular entertainment and important to the development of the attitudes that shaped the 20th century in America. The cinema provided cheap and thrilling amusement for the American people. During the 1890s, black performers began to change the minstrel and vaudeville formula, having some success in all-black musicals. Then, the step forward took two steps backward with the advent of motion pictures. Extremists of southern racism reached a wider

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audience within their region and in the nation, more so than ever before. Words like “nigger,” “negro,” “darky,” “colored,” and “coon” were used indiscriminately. Literature of the day fortified the plantation tradition, rationalized lynching and explained the inequitable treatment of blacks. Depictions of blacks was likely influenced by the treatment of blacks on stage, in the minstrel show, and vaudeville.<sup>6</sup>

Naturally, stereotypes of the stage were carried over and became popular as early as the first “peek shows.” Movies prior to 1915 were crude, with uneven lighting and jerky, melodramatic movements by the actors. To a modern audience, these early films are amusing, but audiences of the era took these first films quite seriously, delighted by this new and quickly progressing technology. Among the popular favorites was the Rastus series — a black character portrayed as slow, shiftless, childlike, lazy, and scary. Two well-known Rastus films were “How Rastus Got His Turkey” and “Rastus in Zululand.” The titles themselves even convey the prejudices of the time. One scholar called the years before “The Birth of a Nation,” which premiered in 1915, the period of an “unformed image” and since some of the stereotypes overlap, this criticism has some merit.<sup>7</sup> In 1914, the first black performer played a lead role: Sam Lucas was cast in the lead as Uncle Tom in the fourth version of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” by Universal Pictures. Whether the character was played by a white actor in burnt cork as in the case of Rastus, or played by a black performer, the character was always a composite opposite to the qualities and values treasured by white society.<sup>8</sup>

“The Birth of a Nation,” a three-hour melodrama directed by D. W. Griffith was highly promoted and well-received. According to Thomas Cripps, author of *Black Film As Genre*, “The film was an illiberal racial tract that celebrated southern slavery, the fortitude of the Ku Klux Klan, and the fealty of ‘good negroes.’”<sup>9</sup> “The Birth of a Nation” was based on Thomas Dixon’s poisonously racist novel, *The Clansman*. Dixon was described by a contemporary magazine as a “preacher, lecturer, novelist, and southern country gentleman long known for the earnestness, we might say fanaticism, with which he deals with ... the Negro problem.” The novel begins with the end of the Civil War and continues through Reconstruction. The plot deals with two families, the Camerons of South Carolina and the Stonemans of Pennsylvania.<sup>10</sup> The prologue of the movie opens with blacks being sold into slavery, conveying to the audience one of Griffith’s beliefs that bringing Africans to America planted the first seed of the nation’s disunion. Throughout the film, Griffith argues that the presence of blacks in this country serves as a barrier against the firm establishment of a strong unified nation.<sup>11</sup> Representatives of blacks in “The Birth of a Nation” include the Cameron slaves who are happy and content despite the long harsh work on plantations, and the black freedmen pushing whites off sidewalks, grabbing whites’ possessions, preaching inter-racial marriage, attempting to rape a white teenager, and flogging the good blacks that stay on the plantation with “Massa.”<sup>12</sup>

Griffith’s “The Birth of a Nation” has been dubbed the most controversial, slanderous, anti-black film ever released. This multi-dimensional film swept



audiences off their feet. President Woodrow Wilson exclaimed, "It's like writing history with lightning!" The truth is that "The Birth of a Nation" was not a true depiction of history. It was, however, a genuine account of the director's philosophical belief of universal as well as his own personal racial bigotry.<sup>13</sup> The film ends with a battle between young Ben Cameron and the rebelling blacks. Cameron leads a stampede of Klansmen and magnificently defeats the rebels, becoming the defender of white womanhood, white honor, and white glory, restoring the South to everything it once was. Hence the birth of a nation and the birth of the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>14</sup> It was by no mistake that on December 8, 1915, the advertisement announcing "The Birth of a Nation" appeared beside an advertisement for the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan in the *Atlanta Constitution*, for the intent of "The Birth of a Nation" was the same as that of the Klan — to denigrate blacks and elevate whites to a superior status.

It is also interesting that the black roles in "The Birth of a Nation" were primarily played by white actors. Only a few blacks were used in the crowd scenes. Griffith, when asked about this, said that "the matter was given consideration, and on careful weighing of every detail concerned the decision was to have no black blood among the principals." Griffith went on to reveal that he believed that any type of work that blacks had done in the past was too limited for the screen.<sup>15</sup> Daniel Leab, author of *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures*, states that one social scientist contended that "the white man in blackface serves the psychological function of reducing audience anxieties that might occur if real Negroes were used, especially in scenes of overt and covert sexual nature or when the Negro gets the upper hand over the white man."<sup>16</sup> This concept is supported by the action Congress took after the Jack Johnson - Jim Jefferies fight for the heavyweight championship in 1910. Johnson, a black, defeated title holder Jefferies, and Congress passed a law prohibiting footage of actual fights to be shown in movie theaters.

The black reaction to "The Birth of a Nation" was less than tolerant. Griffith's picture produced nationwide protests, more direct action than black leaders had anticipated. Griffith professed his shock at the resentment of his work stating, "That is like saying I am against children, whom we loved and cared for all our lives." A puzzled Griffith listened to his black maid say, "It hurt me, Mr. David, to see what you do to my people."<sup>17</sup> Blacks never contemplated whether to fight — the question was how. After a spring and summer of protests and litigation, black leaders realized that little would be done legally. The solution in many black protesters' minds was to create a black cinema in response to "The Birth of a Nation." An NAACP committee, a Tuskegee Institute group, and the Lincoln Motion Pictures Company in Los Angeles made the first steps toward creating an authentic black film portraying blacks with human dimensions, presenting dramatic conflict based on the American racial conflict, and speaking the needs of blacks. These groups represented the first black effort to challenge white monopoly over cinema. A script composed by professional writer, Elaine Sterne, and notable historian, Albert

Bushnell Hart, was chosen. The script was entitled "Lincoln's Dream," and the film was to be the black effort for peace and progress. Universal Studios was to match the funds of the NAACP to finance the picture that would be showcased in a prestigious premiere. Carl Laemmle of Universal Pictures backed out, causing E. J. Scott, Booker T. Washington's secretary who was heading the project, to call upon his contacts with the National Negro Business League to raise funds from the black middle class through the sale of stock.<sup>18</sup> The result of his effort was "The Birth of a Race" in 1919. "The Birth of a Race" took three years to film, with locations ranging from Chicago to Florida, but the film lacked a strong black voice. In the end, Scott was forced to rely on white backers to complete the film. The final film could only be termed a failure. The intent of "The Birth of a Race" had been lost, and became a pathetic contrast of beautiful sets with pitiful backdrops, and live battle scenes with cheap stock footage. The lesson was hard, but black producers had learned about over-zealous production goals, runaway shooting costs, and the necessity of avoiding white backers and their control over the film.<sup>19</sup>

Although the first attempt failed, it inspired other black producers to create all-black films. By the end of the 1920s, about seven hundred black movie houses were in black communities across America. These theaters were not the picture palaces of downtown, but at least blacks were not restricted to the balcony area.<sup>20</sup> About thirty film production companies were operating in the early days of black theaters, but only three main film directors. Oscar Micheaux was without a doubt the most influential. A novelist turned scriptwriter, he produced, directed, and distributed films. His work always dealt with the racial problems and reflected the dualism within black lives, although he rarely portrayed ghetto life. Micheaux hoped that by portraying middle-class blacks he would get away from Hollywood's stereotypes, and give blacks a favorable picture of themselves. Micheaux's career lasted from 1918 to 1948, during which he produced an estimated thirty films.<sup>21</sup> Two other prominent filmmakers were the Johnson brothers of Lincoln Pictures, but in 1923 Lincoln Pictures was forced to close because of the high cost of sound films and the white monopoly over the industry.<sup>22</sup>

Outwardly, it appeared that the development of a black cinema — complete with recognizable black stars such as Lorenzo Tucker, Ethel Moses, Sheila Guyse, Stepin Fetchit, Nina Mae McKinney, and Bill Robinson, chains of black movie houses, black directors, and financiers — supported the principle of separate but equal. This idea was no more true in the black motion picture industry than it was in black education. The truth was that the films were not properly financed; black theaters could not charge as much as their white counterparts, and the market was only ten percent of the population. The films had limited potential. They were not reviewed in white newspapers nor nominated for Oscars, the actors and actresses were not known by the general public nor would any photographs of the black stars be sold to the public, and endorsements were only made by white stars. No matter how good the black films were, and many were good, they were not equal.<sup>23</sup>

Realizing the economic potential of black audiences as early as 1912, white

movie producers allowed blacks to appear in occasional roles. Later, a series of musicals was filmed which combined black musical talents with non-controversial subject matter that white audiences could accept. The first two large all-black musicals were "Hearts in Dixie" in 1929, and "Hallelujah," in the same year. These two films were later followed by two other all-black spectacles, "Green Pastures" (1936) and "Porgy and Bess" (1959), all of which fell miserably short of truly depicting blacks.<sup>24</sup>

By the 1930s, black actors Stepin Fetchit and Bill Robinson became increasingly popular and began to appear in film more and more. Fetchit became the first black film millionaire, sometimes making \$10,000 per week. Fetchit's career lasted thirteen years, but in 1944 his extravagant lifestyle forced him into bankruptcy.<sup>25</sup> In 1936, Margaret Mitchell's book *Gone With the Wind*, was published and David O. Selznick produced the film for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. "Gone With the Wind," released in 1939, proved that the longing for the nostalgic South was not dead. Hattie McDaniel received an Academy Award for best supporting actress for her role as Mammy, becoming the first black film artist to win. Not everyone who saw the film approved, however. The NAACP declared that it only added to the negative portrayal of blacks in film, and pressure groups sought to eliminate more offensive characterizations by McDaniel.<sup>26</sup> Other films distributed in the late 1930s and early 1940s presented common stories that illustrated the lives of well-known black dancers, musicians, and athletes, introducing more realistic portrayals of blacks. By the late 1940s, the American movie audience was preoccupied by World War II, and theaters were prosperous. The terrorism of the Axis powers was still fresh in the minds of American citizens, and wartime solidarity was heightened. The 1930s concept of "equitable treatment for all" was finally extended to blacks. Films of the postwar period began to recognize racial matters and the all-black spectacles became remote. Audiences asked for realism and were more willing to accept controversy causing the radical change in the portrayal of blacks in the movies.<sup>27</sup>

In the 1950s, even though many blacks had given fine performances in film, a handful of black actors were singled out for stardom. Sidney Poitier achieved this status on excellent dramatic ability. Poitier, once a stage star, was given his first chance in J. Mankiewicz's "No Way Out" (1950). Poitier vowed to "never interpret any character who discredited his race." He found that this was easier said than done. In fact, many of the old stereotypes began to change and take different forms. The stereotypes of the past that had been so easily detectable were combined and integrated with some realism. While Poitier achieved stardom and critical acclaim in such movies as "Red Ball Express" (1952), "Blackboard Jungle" (1955), "Band of Angels" (1957), "Edge of the City" (1957), "The Defiant Ones" (1958), "Patch of Blue" (1965), "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" (1967), and "They Call Me Mr. Tibbs" (1970), his character was a black man in whiteface, who had achieved all the refinement valued by white society. Many blacks felt that he played the "Old Tom" dressed up with modern intelligence and reason, but still offering no threat to white society, always taking abuse in a dignified manner.<sup>28</sup>

Another recognizable black star of the 1950s was the calypso singer Harry Belafonte. In 1957 he appeared in "Island in the Sun," which also starred Dorothy Dandridge, a star of black film who broke into Hollywood in Otto Preminger's "Carmen Jones" (1954) and was the first black to be nominated for an Oscar for a leading actor role. After playing several tragic mulatto roles, Dandridge was cast as Bess in "Porgy and Bess" (1959), her last important role. Apparently America was growing tired of the tragic mulatto. "Porgy and Bess" had limited success, and much of the progress of the 1950s was nullified. Critics and gossip columnists were not kind to Dandridge, and after a disastrous marriage, career disappointments and the inability to cope with a racist society, Dandridge died at 41 from alcohol and drug abuse.<sup>29</sup> According to Donald Bogle, author of *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, this was not unusual for black film stars. Bogle contends that the disappointment of a racist society combined with the pressures of the industry caused many actors to self-destruct. After interviewing many black film artists, Bogle writes of actors ending their days as redcaps, pool sharks, hustlers, domestic workers or janitors while others drifted into alcoholism, drugs, suicide, or bitter self recrimination.<sup>30</sup>

By the late 1960s, Hollywood attempted to improve profits. Ignoring the positive and courageous images of the black liberation movement, producers made films that exploited the themes of violence and degeneracy.<sup>31</sup> These movies became known as "blaxploitation" films, a construct explored by psychiatrist, Alvin Poussaint. Poussaint insists that these films have the heaviest impact on black youths. Michael Washington and Marvin J. Berlowitz, authors of *A Field Study of "Blaxploitation" Films*, extend the thesis by stating that black youths, when subjected to the educational power of films, are vulnerable because of the oppressed state they live in, thus allowing for easy distortions in reality.<sup>32</sup> When the movie industry fell into an economic slump in the late 1960s, many white actors reverted to B-grade movies or television; but most black actors, writers and directors "did without," the exceptions being Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, and Sammy Davis, Jr. In the 1970s, black movies began to develop into what they are today with the advent of the experimental film "Cotton Comes to Harlem" (1970). Calvin Lockhart plays a phony preacher promoting a "back to Africa" swindle, and he becomes "the vicious criminal" when he socks a woman and pushes children around. Blacks began to be featured in film as the most degenerate and criminal elements of society completely excluding the proletarian majority of blacks.<sup>33</sup> New stereotypes were developed of the black hustler, the dope pusher, the black prostitute, and the emasculated black man under the wing of the powerful black female, all of whom would sell out the entire black race to the white man for the price of a movie ticket.<sup>34</sup>

Blaxploitation films are "a euphemism for a genre of tightly budgeted, poorly scripted and acted, and highly stereotypical films starring black performers and more often than not treating subjects related to black life and culture."<sup>35</sup> Although blaxploitation films were financially successful, blacks did not reap the benefits because directors, producers, and distributors of these films were predominantly

white. Black performers were starving for parts and accepted weak scripts where they played one-dimensional characters. Also, these movies lacked black writers, technicians, and directors, all important behind the scene roles. It also has been pointed out that blaxploitation films presented a one-sided image of black life, while transmitting undesirable values to adolescents and young adults. These movies were saturated with crass materialism, drug use, inhuman male/female relationships, social degradation, violence, and a general glorification of non-productive lifestyles. Many of the characters presented were drop-outs from the regular economy, choosing instead a life of violence, especially against women. Women were depicted as degraded dependents and participants in casual and irresponsible sex.<sup>36</sup>

While there were a vast number of exploitation films in the 1970s, there also were many well done motion pictures both in the 1970s and in the 1980s. These include: "Lady Sings the Blues," "Conrack," "The Color Purple," "Lean On Me," and "Glory," as well as the made for television movies such as "The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman," and "Roots."<sup>37</sup>

Recently the NAACP has taken direct action against Hollywood. In 1985, the organization initiated its campaign "to move Blacks from janitors to actors." A march on Hollywood that year was meant to expose the unfair treatment of blacks by the motion picture industry. Willis Edwards, president of the Hollywood NAACP chapter, said, "This is the first step in an effort of vital importance because the Black Community as a whole is one of the largest supporters of the motion picture industry."<sup>38</sup> Among the studios criticized was Columbia. Columbia later announced a three-phase plan to bring more blacks, other minorities, and women into the industry.<sup>39</sup> While the tide seems to be changing, blacks still have a long way to go to erase the stereotypes that have persisted since the days of vaudeville and minstrel shows. Blacks have been abused in the film industry since its inception and however hopeful these recent developments may be many whites and blacks still do not understand the damage done to the black image by directors such as D. W. Griffith and the movie industry in general. Hopefully, social action will heighten awareness against the detrimental stereotyping of blacks. Blacks, as well as whites, need to be able to see the importance of having an accurate portrayal of the variety of cultures in the United States.

## Endnotes

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# My Lai: Causes and Consequences

by  
Mary Elaine Ray

Although the entire Vietnam Conflict was riddled with controversy and dissent at home and abroad, the My Lai Massacre exposed the Army and United States policy to an abundance of questions including the myth of the truthful, moral American fighting man. My Lai was an atrocity which violated all preconceived ideas as to the role of the American soldier in Vietnam. Although the actual investigation into this event occurred approximately one year after the fact, it brought attention to the military and United States policy which is today incorporated into policies regarding training of soldiers in this area as well as into military law.

My Lai 4, which was one of the subhamlets of the village Song My, was located in the Quang Ngai province of Vietnam. The people of this province had had a history of rebellion since the sixteenth century and the area was long regarded as a Viet Cong stronghold. Due to this history, it was known as the "cradle of revolution" in Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> Quang Ngai harbored the Viet Cong's 48th Local Force Battalion, which was notorious for its ability to strike, disperse, then join forces to strike again. This rich history was one factor which brought fear and anxiety to the members of Charlie (C) Company of the Americal Division's 11th Infantry Brigade when they were given the assignment to clear the Viet Cong out of Quang Ngai province. Their anxiety was compounded by the fact that C Company had never been tested in direct combat with the enemy. They had been trained in Hawaii and had been in Vietnam only since December 1967.

Prior to the actual mission to My Lai 4, the ranks had been lessened by sniper fire, booby traps, and mines. Approximately one-third of the Americal Division's casualties had resulted from such incidents in and around My Lai.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the remaining soldiers had contempt for those people living in the Viet Cong stronghold, believing them to be either Viet Cong or Viet Cong sympathizers. This feeling continued to deepen as the soldiers witnessed the deaths and injuries of their company members. The frustration level was extremely high among the United States soldiers due to the nature of guerrilla warfare. These men were faced with an enemy who wore no uniform and looked like their allies; they were exposed to ambushes and situations where women fired rifles and a child selling soft drinks by day became a demolition expert by night.<sup>3</sup>

The nature of guerrilla warfare was confusing and frustrating to the soldiers. One GI, Terry Reid, who spent time in 1968 with the 11th Brigade, stated that he

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witnessed the indiscriminate slaughter of Vietnamese women, children, and old men routinely. In these assaults, no Viet Cong body was ever discovered. Reid stated, "If they don't clarify this—'No women are to be shot'—it is free game."<sup>4</sup> The soldiers' actions toward prisoners of war, from this account, seemed to stem from a combination of barbarism and ignorance. Ignorance, however, could have been eliminated though extensive briefings on the issue of treatment of prisoners. In 1968, the GIs supposedly had two hours of instruction on the rights of prisoners while in basic training. They were also to have had several lectures on the same subject upon arrival in country. However, this may not have been the case in all situations. Major Roy Berwick, who during his tour in Vietnam was an Air Force Staff Sergeant, did not recall having any briefing on the Rules of War and Geneva Convention during basic training although he did receive information on this topic once in Vietnam.<sup>5</sup>

Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry was composed of one-half black soldiers, a few Hispanic-Americans, and the rest mainly white. They were eighteen to twenty-two years old and part of the Army's project 100,000, which endorsed remedial education for those who could not pass the Army Intelligence Test and therefore, not qualify for service. Due to their low educational achievements, the men of C Company were known as the "GI Joes" of the military. These men took orders without asking questions and believed in the traditional role of enlisted personnel. In C Company was Lieutenant William Laws Calley, Jr., who had flunked out of Palm Beach Junior College with four "F's" in 1963. Calley enlisted in the Army and was selected for Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia. Opinion of the men in C Company concerning Calley's ability as an officer was described as total amazement that the Army had even considered him officer material.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the men followed his orders and looked to him for direction in combat. These soldiers had been trained to follow their superior officer and taught that in the military, orders were to be followed whether the soldiers agreed with them or not. (Little, if any, emphasis had been placed on the proper procedures to follow in the case of illegal orders during the briefings of soldiers.)

On February 25, 1968, Charlie Company lost six men and had twelve seriously injured in a minefield in "Pinkville." This area of Song My was shaded pink on Army maps due to the higher population density; thus, the nickname of "Pinkville" was given to My Lai. Tension and frustration was running high after this incident and undoubtedly was a major contributing factor to the massacre at My Lai 4. On March 15, 1968, C Company was briefed by Captain Ernest Medina on their upcoming mission for the following day. They were to enter My Lai 4 to eliminate the 48th Viet Cong Battalion and destroy My Lai. The Viet Cong had a predicted strength of 250 to 280 men and Medina claimed that the United States soldiers would be outnumbered two to one.<sup>7</sup> Medina stated that they would land in My Lai at 0730 hours since intelligence reports predicted that the hamlet's women and children would be gone to the markets in Quang Ngai City. One soldier reported that Medina told the soldiers to "kill everything in the village"; two other soldiers

said Medina ordered them to "go in and destroy the village; to make it uninhabitable," but they did not recall an order to destroy inhabitants.<sup>8</sup>

On the morning of March 16, 1968, the anxious company was split into three platoons, each with an individual component of the mission to perform. The central platoon led by Lieutenant Calley was to go directly into the village while the two other platoons were to flank positions and block the escape of any villagers. When the helicopters reached the landing zone, the soldiers were told the area was "hot," meaning that Viet Cong were in the vicinity. When the soldiers came out firing, however, they received no enemy fire in return. Charlie Company then launched its assault on My Lai 4. A few Vietnamese began to run through the open fields and were gunned down. These villagers were later discovered to be unarmed women and children. Most of the Vietnamese did not run, knowing that the Americans would fire at those who did and passively remained inside or in front of their homes waiting for the soldiers to pass through as usual. As the soldiers recalled the events, they described the shootings as a chain reaction. Soldiers began shooting into homes and torching the hootches while firing at the fleeing inhabitants. Some soldiers ordered villagers into bunkers and tossed in hand grenades. Rapes, destruction, and shootings were all a part of My Lai. Some villagers were out under guard and led away to a clearing. This group consisted of approximately fifty women, children, and old men. Paul Meadlo, one of the soldiers guarding the group, said Calley approached them and stated, "You know what I want you to do with them"; ten minutes later, he returned and added, "I want them dead."<sup>9</sup> Calley started shooting them and ordered the others to commence firing. Meadlo later reported using four or five M16 clips, each containing seventeen rounds, on the group.

Approximately forty-five minutes later, Calley approached a drainage ditch where an estimated 150 unarmed civilians, mostly women and children had been gathered. Calley began shooting. When some of the villagers attempted to crawl out of the ditch, he ordered to others to fire. All but one soldier dutifully obeyed. Some soldiers switched their rifles from automatic to single shot to save ammunition. They continued to fire until everyone appeared dead. After they ceased fire, a child of about two crawled out from among the bodies and began to run toward the hamlet. Calley grabbed him, threw him into the ditch, and shot him.

During this assault, a pilot of an observation helicopter, Warrant Officer Hugh C. Thompson, witnessed the killing of a wounded child by an American officer. He also had seen several groups of wounded women and children on the outskirts of My Lai and had dropped flares to mark their location for rescue. When he returned a short time later, he found all the civilians dead. Another incident involved a group of women and children east of My Lai 4 who were running from a group of American soldiers. Warrant Officer Thompson landed to rescue them and when on the ground, he ordered his crew to train their weapons on the American soldiers while he stood between the Vietnamese and Americans.<sup>10</sup> These people were eventually evacuated to safety.

Estimates of those killed range from 300 to 567 people, consisting mainly of

women, children, and old men. The official report stated that 128 Viet Cong were killed. However, only three weapons were found during this assault on My Lai. One American casualty was reported, and it was due to a self-inflicted wound. This soldier, Herbert Carter, saw what was happening and could not participate. He shot himself in the foot so he could “legitimately” refrain from the mass killings. With no Viet Cong killed or captured, Sergeant Michael Bernhardt, an enlisted member of Calley’s squad who did not participate in the killings, found it odd that they met no resistance, captured only three weapons, and did not see one military-age man among the dead. Upon receiving a report on the assault in My Lai, General William Westmoreland, Commander of United States Forces in Vietnam, issued the following statement:

Operation Muscatine [the code name for the My Lai 4 assault] contact northeast of Quang Ngai city on 16 March dealt the enemy heavy blow. Congratulations to officers and men of C-1-20 [Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry] for outstanding action.<sup>11</sup>

Following the events at My Lai 4, word spread among the soldiers as to what had transpired. Some reports were made to officials that unnecessary killings had occurred at My Lai. One such report came from Warrant Officer Hugh C. Thompson who had been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for disregarding his own safety and rescuing the Vietnamese women and children.

A coverup of My Lai occurred at various military levels. For example, during the mission, Task Force Barker (the name given to the unit) had borrowed helicopters to allow high-ranking officers to observe. Lieutenant Colonel Frank Barker observed from 1,000 feet, Major General Samuel Koster observed from 2,000 feet, and Colonel Oran K. Henderson, Commander of the 11th Brigade, watched from 2,500. Therefore, these men were witnesses to the events of My Lai and most likely would have noticed the odd severity of the mission in the death of large numbers of civilians. The Army defines the shooting of civilians as a “‘grave breach’ of the Geneva Convention...for the protection of war victims.”<sup>12</sup> A 1968 directive was published by the United States Command in Saigon stating:

It is the responsibility of all military personnel having knowledge or receiving a report of an incident or of an act thought to be a war crime to make such incident known to his commanding officer as soon as possible....Persons discovering was crimes will take all reasonable action to preserve physical evidence, to note identity of witnesses present, and to record the circumstances and surroundings.<sup>13</sup>

Colonel Henderson was notified of Warrant Officer Thompson’s report. This report specifically stated a captain (later identified as Captain Medina) shot a Vietnamese woman. Henderson, after speaking with Medina, dismissed this incident of an “unnecessary” killing because the woman Medina thought to be dead raised her arm as he walked away. Instinctively, he believed she had a hand grenade and his split-second reaction was deemed justifiable by Henderson. Henderson also added his further interrogation of troops found no truth to these reports.

While the Army failed to acknowledge such reports as legitimate, the South Vietnamese had direct evidence of an atrocity at My Lai 4. This evidence included eyewitness accounts, a long list of dead, and reports from their own intelligence units that estimated 500 villagers were executed as a group by American soldiers. Even though they had documented verification, they chose to suppress the information to avoid displeasing the United States by promoting a formal investigation. Not all Vietnamese were so concerned with American approval or ideology. One survivor of My Lai, Nguyen Bat, said that after the shooting, the remaining villagers became Communists.

The uncovering of My Lai was due mainly to Ronald Ridenhour, and ex-GI who had served in Vietnam in 1968. He had flown over My Lai 4 a few days after C Company's assault. He heard five eyewitness accounts of atrocities committed at My Lai 4 and continued to investigate. All information he gathered he kept in his head for fear of his own safety in the event notes were discovered. Ridenhour was discharged from the Army in December 1968 and returned to his home in Phoenix, Arizona. He had served his country well in Vietnam and earned a few medals. His record was marked with nothing that would classify him as antiwar. However, he was appalled at what he had discovered and wanted to reveal this atrocity. His ultimate aim was to see those responsible brought to justice. Only one, his former instructor in Phoenix, encouraged him to carry on with his plan. In March 1969 he composed a letter detailing the evidence that he had discovered and sent out thirty copies. Nine registered letters were addressed to President Richard Nixon, Senators Eugene McCarthy, J. W. Fulbright, Edward Kennedy, Barry Goldwater, Paul J. Fannin, and Representatives Sam Steiger, John J. Rhodes, and Morris Udall. Also, letters were sent to the Pentagon, State Department, joint Chiefs of Staff, thirteen additional members of Senate, three other members of the House, and to the House and Senate chaplains. Ridenhour's letter first sparked interest in the Armed Services Committee and Udall, from Arizona, wanted to get Representative L. Mendel Rivers' backing since military investigation would be more likely with his support. Pressure on the Army resulted from these inquiries, and they gave the impression that Ridenhour's letter was the first they had heard of such an incident. Such inquiries led to interviews over a period of five weeks with former members of Charlie Company to hear their accounts of My Lai.

On June 13, 1969 the inspector General's office staged a police line-up in which Lieutenant Calley was a part. Calley had previously put in a request for his third extension in Vietnam, but was denied. He was sent to Fort Benning, Georgia, overnight with orders to report to Washington, D. C. In the line-up, Warrant Officer Hugh C. Thompson picked out Calley as the officer in charge at the ditch where the civilians were massacred. Following the selection of Calley, interviews and interrogations were conducted all over the United States. Lieutenant Calley hired George W. Lataimer as his lawyer who stated Calley was "guilty of nothing more than following orders 'a little too diligently'."<sup>14</sup>

On September 5, 1969, Lieutenant Calley was charged with violation of the

Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), Article 118. Specifications were:

Specification 1: First Lieutenant William Laws Calley, with premeditation, murdered of an unknown number, not less than thirty, Oriental human beings, males and females of various ages in My Lai by means of rifle shots.

Specification 2: First Lieutenant William Laws Calley, with premeditation, murdered of an unknown number of Oriental human beings, not less than seventy, males and females of various ages in My Lai by rifle fire.<sup>15</sup>

Additional charges in violation of UCMJ, Article 118 were:

Specification 1: First Lieutenant William Laws Calley, with premeditation, murdered one Oriental male human being in My Lai by shooting him with a rifle.

Specification 2: First Lieutenant William Laws Calley, with premeditation, murdered one Oriental human being, approximately two years old, whose name and sex is unknown, by shooting him with a rifle.<sup>16</sup>

A military source stated that the military had to do something to resolve this matter in order to "save face" and decrease popular disapproval. Lieutenant Calley offered a solution to this dilemma.

The press released the first information about My Lai on September 5, 1969, with news about the murder charges against Lieutenant Calley. Initially the press tended to be cautious in printing follow-up stories in regard to My Lai. This was due to the conflicting reports on events at My Lai and the lack of information made available to reporters. Also, little investigative reporting was done in regard to the incident, perhaps because they did not locate former soldiers of C Company. But in Great Britain, the reports of the massacre made the front page of newspapers. Headlines read: "The Story That Stunned America" and "War Crime: If This Can Happen, America Has Lost."<sup>17</sup> The impact of My Lai was less profound in America, possible due to the inability of the American public to comprehend the full significance of My Lai. Approximately two months following the exposure of My Lai to the press, interest grew, and reporters began submitting stories about the shootings of civilians in Vietnam. The press then began making harsh judgments and described My Lai as "the kind of atrocity generally associated with the worst days of Hitler and Stalin and other cruel despotisms."<sup>18</sup>

Even though many Americans refused to believe such acts could be committed by "our boys", emotions stirred and posed a threat to President Nixon's policy of gradual withdrawal from Vietnam. Antiwar groups maintained that My Lai was the breaking point of public tolerance in Vietnam. To "tone down" this atrocity and place it in the context of war, the Army released information from capture Viet Cong documents stating that the Communists had killed 2,900 Vietnamese in Hue in February 1968. Their remains had been discovered in mass graves some time later. Opinions of Americans were varied, but at the onset of the uncovering of My Lai, many were sympathetic to the soldiers involved. Many blamed the war itself for My

Lai, some the Vietnamese, and others the military policy as a whole. Jerry Cramm, at that time an Oklahoma City student, stated, "Under no circumstances do I think a person placed in the situation of being required to kill should be punished because he killed the wrong people."<sup>19</sup> This sentiment was undoubtedly felt by many people who had either experienced war themselves or had children in the military. Many felt Calley was the scapegoat for the Army. Major Roy Berwick, however, stated, "Calley did it on his own."<sup>20</sup> While he could never condone the soldiers' actions, he said he could understand their frustration in that situation.

A public opinion poll in South Vietnam showed that only 2.8 percent of the people disapproved of the behavior of American troops in their country.<sup>21</sup> These feelings of the Vietnamese and Americans were seemingly based on the premise that "war is hell." Also, many perceived My Lai to be one of many similar incidents which occurred in Vietnam. For example, from January 1, 1965 to August 31, 1973, 241 cases, (excluding My Lai) which involved war crimes allegedly committed by United States Army troops were reported.<sup>22</sup> While this does not make My Lai acceptable, it reveals something about the nature of the Vietnam War. As a result, people began to ponder the question: If a GI makes an error in judgment in the extreme conditions of war, does that make him a murderer?

On November 24, 1969, a panel headed by General William Peers was organized to explore, in essence, why and how Ronald Ridenhour had learned what Colonel Henderson and other investigators had not in regard to My Lai. Extensive questioning took place during this inquiry to learn why no one had said anything about what had been described as indiscriminate killing. Many of the soldiers, after waiting a period of time, were fearful of prosecution under the 1968 directive. When asked why they obeyed the order to kill innocent human beings, they gave several reasons. First, the military's basic lesson involves instant obedience to orders. Second, the soldiers were in a free-fire zone, so they were authorized to use force. Third, under military law, a man who refuses to follow an order is presumed guilty of this offense until he proves that the order was illegal at his subsequent court martial.<sup>23</sup> Also, disobedience in combat may result in that soldier's execution as had occurred in the past. Finally, a subconscious need to get revenge for their dead buddies also influenced the actions of the soldiers.

At the conclusion of the interrogation, charges were brought against fourteen officers with offenses relating to cover-up, failure to obey regulations and dereliction of duty. Those accused were Major General Samuel W. Koster, Captain Ernest Medina, Colonel Oran K. Henderson, First Lieutenant Thomas K. Willingham, Major David C. Gavin, First Lieutenant Kenneth W. Boatman, Major Frederic W. Watke, Lieutenant Colonel Robert B. Luper, Major Charles C. Calhoun, First Lieutenant Dennis H. Johnson, Captain Eugene M. Kotouc, Brigadier General George H. Young, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Barker, and Major William D. Guinn. Only four of the officers were actually tried and they were acquitted due to reasons such as "lack of evidence" and "in the interests of justice."<sup>24</sup> Nine enlisted men were also accused of crime, but later all charges were dismissed for similar reasons.

Lieutenant Calley was tried in a military court since he was still on active duty. During the entire investigation, Calley had remained loyal wanting to take full responsibility for all crimes laid on Charlie Company. He had not wanted to embarrass the Army in light of My Lai. He was convicted of murdering at least 22 civilians on March 29, 1971, and was sentenced to life imprisonment. He was stripped of two Bronze stars and was relieved of a training command and assigned a meaningless clerical task job at base headquarters. On August 20, 1971, Calley's sentence was reduced to twenty years by the Third Army Commander, Lieutenant General Albert O. Conner. He concluded that Calley's conviction "...was correct in law and fact and that the reduced sentence was appropriate for the offenses for which he was convicted."<sup>25</sup> On September 24, 1974, Calley's conviction was overturned by a federal judge, partly on the grounds that pretrial publicity had prejudiced his case. Calley actually served only forty months of his sentence with thirty-five spent in the confines of his own quarters.

My Lai raised many questions about military policy and the American soldiers but answered few. Debates as to the difference between killing civilians with bombs as compared to rifles have continued; the outcome of their usage is the same. The frustration of not knowing why they were fighting, and in many cases, who they were fighting, led to the My Lai massacre. The American fighting strategies were useless in Vietnam and they could never completely eradicate the enemy, regardless of how many shots were fired or how many bombs were dropped. One doctor stationed in Vietnam stated, "The land belonged to the VC. You couldn't kill them unless you found them, which for the most part meant they had to find you."<sup>26</sup> The contempt for the Vietnamese, who many soldiers believed were inferior "gooks" and were not doing enough to defend themselves, contributed to the atrocity. This animosity simmered and exploded as they watched their buddies die next to them. My Lai was the culmination of the policies of counterinsurgency warfare in Vietnam. Also, My Lai was not an isolated incident, and it is estimated that 300,000 South Vietnamese civilians were killed during the war, due mainly to United States air strikes.<sup>27</sup>

When My Lai is mentioned, a first response is to automatically condemn those involved. To give a fair assessment of the incident, all sides must be considered in regard to the circumstances which preceded My Lai. Since some evidence is obviously contradictory, it is imperative to look for consistencies in the various accounts through careful research and study. Through this method, when a conclusion is reached it is usually a secure objective opinion. My Lai was not an incident solely based on Calley "going berserk." My Lai was the result of poor military leadership, an uncertain military policy, but mostly fear and frustration on part of the weary, confused GIs. Herbert Carter, the soldier who wounded himself at My Lai, stated, "My Lai 4 was not a massacre, but a logical result of the war in Vietnam: 'The people didn't know what they were dying for and the guys didn't know why they were shooting them'."<sup>28</sup>

After the My Lai Massacre, the people of the United States were faced with the

question: Can we learn from our mistakes? The facts set down in the Peers report led to speculation as to why those involved got off so lightly. General Peers was troubled by the public response toward Lieutenant Calley. He said, "To think that out of all those men, only one was brought to justice. And now he's practically a hero. It's a tragedy."<sup>29</sup> However, Calley, even though he may have been guilty of murder, was not alone in his crime. He was what the Army calls "expendable" and offered the easiest way to show the American public that action was being taken. While making an example of Calley might pacify public outcry—which was surprisingly mild in light of such an atrocity—such action could not dispel the actions committed at My Lai. To say that Calley should not be punished would be unreasonable, but for him alone to suffer the repercussions of My Lai would certainly be unjust. All of those who were aware of the events at My Lai, did nothing to stop them, and tried to hide the facts were also guilty.

Since My Lai, the Army has worked to increase and improve the instruction every recruit receives on the treatment of civilians and prisoners of war. This came only after many soldiers reported that they had not received adequate, if any, briefings on the Rules of Conduct in War and the Geneva Convention. The effectiveness and success of this improved program is yet to be seen as reports of military conduct in the recent Persian Gulf War are yet to be revealed. United States troop conduct depends on a variety of factors including maturity, training, and moral values. These qualities were lacking in the leadership in Vietnam and were a primary cause of the numerous Vietnamese civilian casualties.

Due to My Lai, the dilemma of individual responsibility under military orders resurfaced and caused debate. The Nuremberg precedent was used to rebuke the defense that the soldiers were just following orders. During the Nuremberg proceedings, war criminals were prevented from using such a defense and were prosecuted for their actions. This precedent stated "that the plea of superior order is no defense to an illegal act."<sup>30</sup> With the arguments being the same in the instance of My Lai, one wonders if the outcomes should be the same. Obviously they were not. As previously stated, My Lai left such questions unanswered in the minds of the American People. Perhaps because the "guilty" were American soldiers and not Nazis, the people chose to justify the soldiers' actions as "a harsh reality of war." The leadership, as well as American foreign policy, are to blame. My Lai has left a dark blot on American history, and only the future will tell if the United States learned from this mistake.



## Endnotes

1. "My Lai: An American Tragedy," *Time*, 94 (December 5, 1969), 24. I would like to express appreciation to everyone who helped me in various stages of this research and writing. First, my husband has been there during all stages of this process and has helped with the "military lingo" as well as going to different libraries with me while I did research. He has devoted a great deal of his time to this paper also and has waited for me at Northern Kentucky University on several occasion so that I would not have to walk to my car alone after dark. Thanks also to my parents for allowing me to turn their dining room into a writing lab where I had total privacy. Finally, thanks to the staff in the Education Department for their cooperation and for allowing me access to the word processor and other equipment needed to complete this project.
2. Seymour M. Hersh, *My Lai 4* (New York, 1970), 11. This author received a Pulitzer Prize for this work, and all book reviews consulted agreed that this work was solidly documented and was well-written with an abundance of facts and figures.
3. "My Lai," *Time*, 32.
4. Hersh, *My Lai 4*, 13.
5. Interview with Major Roy Berwick, November 5, 1990.
6. Hersh, *My Lai 4*, 20.
7. Hersh, *My Lai 4*, 40. Only seventy to seventy-five GIs from Charlie Company took part in this mission. Therefore, they would have been outnumbered four to one.
8. Hersh, *My Lai 4*, 42.
9. Clark Dougan, Stephen Weiss, and Boston Publishing Company (editors), *The Vietnam Experience: Nineteen Sixty-Eight* (Boston, 1983), 79.
10. Hersh, *My Lai 4*, 168. Thompson changed his version of the story when questioned by House Armed Services Subcommittee members. He gave another reason for having his men aim at the Americans: to ensure that no Viet Cong could sneak up behind the Americans and attack.
11. *Ibid.*, 80.

12. Ibid., 91.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., 122.
15. Joseph Goldstein, Burke Marshall, and Jack Schwartz, *The My Lai Massacre and Its Cover-Up: Beyond the Reach of Law?* (New York, 1976), 497.
16. Ibid., 498.
17. Hersh, *My Lai* 4, 138.
18. Ibid., 141.
19. "Americans Speak Out on the Massacre at My Lai," *Life*, 67 (December 19, 1969), 47.
20. Berwick, November 5, 1990.
21. "There Have Been Few Offenders," *U.S. News and World Report*, 67 (December 15, 1969), 10.
22. George S. Prugh, *Law at War: Vietnam 1964-1973* (Washington, D.C., 1975), 74.
23. "My Lai," *Time*, 28.
24. Goldstein, *The My Lai Massacre and Its Cover-Up: Beyond the Reach of Law?*, ix, x.
25. "A Reduction for Calley," *Time*, 98 (August 30, 1971), 20.
26. Charles E. Martin, "'A Good Soldier Is a Dead One': The Combat Soldiers' View of Vietnam and The Indian Wars," *Kentucky Folklore Journal*, 26 (December-January 1980), 114-129.
27. Richard A. Falk, "War Crimes and Individual Responsibility: A Legal Memorandum," *Trans-Action*, 7(3) (1970), 38.
28. Hersh, *My Lai* 4, 187.
29. "Closing the My Lai Case," *Time*, 104 (November 25, 1974), 19-20.

30. Raymond B. Marcin, "Individual Conscience Under Military Compulsion," *American Bar Association* 57 (December, 1971), 1222-1224.

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#### 3. Contemporary Magazine Articles

"A Reduction for Calley." *Time*, 98 (August 30, 1971), 20. (A brief article describing Calley's sentence reduction and the justification for it.)

"Americans Speak Out on the Massacre at Mylai." *Life*, 77 (December 19, 1969) 46-47. (A survey of American opinions in regard to My Lai. It was beneficial to get "real" people's views on this event.)

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"Calley Conviction Overturned." *Senior Scholastic*, 105 (October 31, 1974), 20. (A brief report on the overturning of Calley's conviction.)

"Calley Paroled." *Time*, 104 (November 18, 1974), 35. (The article briefly examined why Calley had been paroled and gave predictions of further Army appeals in regard to the overturning of Calley's conviction.)

"Closing the My Lai Case." *The Nation*, 104 (November 25, 1974), 19-20. (The article reexamines My Lai after Calley's release. It states that My Lai seemed to be ordained from the start of the mission and cannot be blamed on one individual's actions.)

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"The Legal Dilemmas." *Time*, 94 (December 5, 1969), 32-34. (An inquiry into the effect of My Lai on U.S. policy in regard to Vietnam as well as its training of soldiers.)

"Massacre Trial—A Shift in the War." *U.S. News and World Report*, 67 (December 15, 1969), 23. (This article stated that while the war still went on after My Lai, it could be the spark to start a more serious look at national policy.)

"My Lai: An American Tragedy." *Time*, 94 (December 5, 1969), 23-32. (Extensive coverage of My Lai from beginning to the afterthoughts of participating soldiers. A major source of information.)

"Official U.S. Report on My Lai Investigation." *U.S. News and World Report*, 67 (December 8, 1969), 78-79. (The article not only gives background information on what happened at My Lai, but also tells of how the investigation took place.)

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##### 1. Books

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Falk, Richard A. "War Crimes and Individual Responsibility: A Legal Memorandum." *Trans-Action*, 7 (3) (1970), 33-40. (The article examines the possibility that the military tried to suppress rather than investigate war crimes in Vietnam. Some theories, some outrageous, are given as to the feasibility of punishing soldiers accused of war crimes in My Lai.)

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Schwartz, Gerald, ed. *A Woman Doctor's Civil War:  
Esther Hill Hawks' Diary*  
(Columbia, South Carolina, 1989).

by  
Sarah E. Phillips

If women are expected to do the same work as men, we must teach them the same things.<sup>1</sup>

If I were asked . . . to what the singular prosperity and growing strength of that people [Americans] ought mainly to be attributed, I should reply: to the superiority of their women.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the years, many women have come forward to lead the others of their gender to new heights of awareness and realized potential. While some of these women are very well known—Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Virginia Woolf, Sojourner Truth—many others who have left their indelible mark on today have been almost forgotten and allowed to remain in the past. One of these great figures is Esther Hill Hawks, who served as a doctor for black soldiers, their families and the families of other free blacks in the Civil War. She was a motherly woman who fought to educate and protect all children equilly and fairly; and above all, a reformer who fought to improve conditions for any person willingly to seek her assistance. Esther Hill Hawks was a pioneer in equal education for adults and children, equal medical opportunities, particularly for women and negroes, and progressive reforms, such as women's rights and the preservation of history, that would touch the lives of those with whom she came into contact.

*A Woman Doctor's Civil War* is the diary Hawks kept while she worked with the National Freedmen's Aid Association during and directly after the Civil War. The Association's primary goal was to stabilize and to help establish the lives of freed blacks as new members of American society. The editor, Gerald Schwartz, chose to preface the book with an extensively well-researched and well-documented forward detailing the lives of both Dr. Esther Hawks and her husband, Dr. Milton J. Hawks. The preface is as interesting as the diary itself. Schwartz describes the major achievements of both, before and during the Civil War, including their combined extensive education at the New England Female Medical College and the Eclectic Medical College of Cincinnati, respectively. He summarizes their involvement in progressive movements after the war and successfully chronicles their lives both in and out of the reform movement. Schwartz gives great insight into the relationship of the two, presenting a picture of the partnership which was necessary

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Sarah E. Phillips is a Sophomore History Major who has nobly volunteered to assist in the production of *Perspectives in History*.



to sustain two such dynamic people and the understanding which must have been present in order for them to work so compatibly in the same fields of medicine and reform.

The Hawks' diary begins with her assignment by the Freedmen's Association to the Sea Islands and surrounding areas along the South Carolina coast and northern Florida in October 1862. The majority of her diary addresses her involvement with United States Colored Troops and neighboring people of the Carolina coast. During this time she saved many lives while establishing "free" schools for adults and children recently freed by the national struggle. Later in the war, these schools often extended their influence to soldiers in black regiments, offering basic education in subjects ranging from reading to hygiene. As Schwartz explains, this desire to educate in a more fair manner began before the war when, risking imprisonment, she taught a small school for black children in a Methodist Church, and continued as her primary goal through the turn of the century as she served as an administrator on the Lynn School Board in New England.

Of her many experiences during the war, one of the more poignant was her encounter with the 54th Massachusetts Infantry. After the disastrous assault on Fort Wagner, 150 wounded men from the 54th were brought to the encampment in the Sea Islands where Dr. Hawks was living and working. She was touched by their strength of heart and their desire to heal so they could continue to fight, touched by their questions of the whereabouts of their commander, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and their utter sadness upon hearing of his death. Of her co-workers and herself she recognized that, "The only thing that sustained us was the patient endurance of those stricken heroes lying before us, with their ghastly wounds cheerful & courageous, many a poor fellow sighing that his right arm was shattered beyond hope of striking another blow for freedom!" (51) During those frequent times when her husband traveled with black troops in the field, Dr. Hawks would often assume her husband's role in the camp, assisting in surgery and, once, serving as the unofficial commander of a military hospital for black troops for nearly three weeks.

After the war, Hawks remained in the coastal regions where she worked another two years before returning to New England to open her own practice. For a time she served as the Acting Assistant Commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau and Abandoned Lands in Jacksonville, Florida, a position mainly concerned with settling disputes between freedmen and their previous owners, who were trying to reclaim their old property from the blacks. Many of her entries toward the end of the diary deal with the establishment of schools, building and managing of freedmen's homes, and her attempts, and those of others, to rebuild or improve the conditions under which the freedmen were now forced to live.

Unfortunately, as the war became more remote and more distant from Hawks' immediate vicinity, the interest generated by her writing seems to wane. The end portion of the diary has many accounts of picnics and rides on horseback, with many more occasional mentionings of the work of reform and aid to those in need. This could be due to the fact that Hawks, as a doctor first, no longer had as vital a role

to play, giving her the opportunity to return to the more traditional roles of women of the time. Nevertheless, when the opportunity to improve a situation arose she responded.

It is refreshing to read a book which portrays the women of nineteenth century America as more than object decorations. Dr. Hawks' vibrant and detailed account of life during this era, her willingness to speak her mind on those subjects which she felt were inappropriately or unfortunately left to the men of her time makes her diary a rare gem. She is quick to criticize the "Southern" mentality of intolerance in regard to slavery as she is to criticize Northern male doctors for refusing to help black troops simply because of their color. Perhaps her willingness to speak her mind was a result of the privacy she sought in her diary; whatever the reason she was successful in portraying an image of a woman of who was strong and feminine, educated and matriarchal.

*A Woman Doctor's Civil War* is extremely useful in exposing some of the myths of nineteenth century women. It is a graceful approach to the Civil War as told from a women's perspective, more immersed in the war and its effects than most women of the time. She faced daily the horrors of war—disease, hunger and ignorance—and fought to overcome them, not just for herself but for all. This book is a valuable approach to the Civil War in light of the many volumes of information published on the military aspects of the war. In the end, Dr. Hawks, as well as myself, seem to be in agreement that while the men were preoccupied with the peculiar institution of war, it was the women of the country who were attempting to hold the shreds of civilization and humanity in perspective.

## Endnotes

1. Rawson, Hugh and Margaret Miner, ed. *The New International Dictionary of Quotations* (New York, 1986), 413. This is a quotation from Plato's *The Republic*.
2. Ibid., 411. This is a quotation of Alexis De Tocqueville from his *Democracy in America*.

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Lawrence R. Borne  
John P. DeMarcus  
J. Merle Nickell  
W. Michael Ryan  
Louis R. Thomas  
H. Lew Wallace  
Michael H. Washington

Leon E. Boothe  
James C. Claypool  
Tripta Desai  
James A. Ramage  
W. Frank Steely  
Robert C. Viz  
Richard E. Ward  
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