

# A PAGE OF LANCASTER COUNTY HISTORY, DURING CIVIL WAR TIMES

By Hon. A. G. Seyfert

What I am about to say is largely a forgotten page of Civil War history.

In the literature of the thrilling four-year tragedy, from 1861 to 1865, there is nothing more interesting to the historian than the enemies in the rear that confronted the government in its stupendous effort to preserve the Union.

More than three score years have passed, and the majority of those who took part in the great drama have gone never to return.

To those of us who were living then, it may seem like resurrecting that which had better be remembered no more. All the same, it is part of the history of the time, and that which relates directly to Lancaster county I wish to discuss tonight.

Due to the fact that the incidents and conspiracies all took place remote from the seat of war, historical writers have paid but little attention to this feature of war history. It was a sort of "side show" to the main exhibition, and as in the circus, queer objects are to be seen more often in the little tent than in the big one.

The Revolutionary War had its "Tories"; the Civil War had its "Knights of the Golden Circle."

For the former there was some justification, inasmuch as many of the so-called Tories were born in the mother country and could not forget their debt of gratitude to native land and home.

In the war to save the Union there was no such excuse, and the "Knights of the Golden Circle" were deadly enemies of the flag, and there is but one word to signify their proper title: "Traitors."

Much of it may be forgiven, if not forgotten, at this late day, as the order was made up of about equal parts of ignorance, hypocrisy and treason. From a local viewpoint we know that many were not responsible for what they did unknowingly, and were it not for the serious side of the mischief they performed, the whole affair could be viewed now as one of the most humorous and grotesque comic operas ever put on the stage in American history.

The "Knights of the Golden Circle" was a secret society, first established in the United States in 1855, which took the place of a previous organization known as the "Southern Rights Club" in existence since 1834.

The real objectives in view were to set up a powerful southern republic independent of the federal government; to resist by every possible means the abolition of slavery, and to promote the trade of the principal southern articles of commerce—cotton, sugar and tobacco—in opposition to the general commercial policy pursued at Washington.

The idea was also to make Havana the headquarters of the new confederacy, which was to include besides the southern American states, Cuba, Mexico and Central America. This part of the movement, however, was interfered with by the outbreak of the Civil War.

During the Presidential contest of 1860, the society contributed materially to the defeat of the Democratic party by dividing the vote of that party. That same year lodges were established in some of the states north of the Ohio river, where subsequently many members were secured from among those who were opposed to the prosecution of the war.

After an armed rising of the Knights at Indianapolis, in May, 1863, had been prevented, the society was disbanded in the west. Its name was eventually changed to the order of "American Knights", which in the following year became fused with the "Sons of Liberty".

This change of names for the organization was only a blind, since the purpose of the new title stood for the same as the old: to oppose the Washington government in prosecuting the war, and to give aid and comfort to the enemy.

It now sought to hinder the carrying on of war by denouncing draft-aiding deserters and supplying arms and explosives for use against Federal officers.

The order gained a strong hold in Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri, and undoubtedly supplied much moral and material aid to the south.

A plot was even formed to proclaim a Northwestern Confederacy, by liberating the Confederate prisoners, but through the intelligence obtained by the Secret Service it was frustrated. The leaders were arrested, tried, and sentenced to prisons, where they remained until the war was over.

The number of adherents claimed by the order during the war is said to have been as many as half a million.

The most influential member of this unpatriotic order, and one who did more mischief than any other, was Clement Vallandigham of Ohio. He was a graduate of Jefferson College, a lawyer by profession, and noted for his eloquence. From 1857 to 1863 he was in Congress and a bitter opponent of the government, denouncing the policy of coercion. When his term expired as a member of the House he returned to Ohio and made violent attacks upon the administration.

He was arrested by order of General Burnside in charge of the Department of The Ohio, tried by court martial, and sentenced to imprisonment in Fort Warren.

President Lincoln commuted the sentence to deportation to the rebel lines. The Confederates helped him to the coast, where he sailed for Quebec and made his headquarters at St. Catherine near Niagara Falls. Here he carried on his propaganda against the government until 1864, when he returned to Ohio and became the Democratic candidate for Governor. He was defeated by Governor Brough with a majority of over one hundred thousand. After this the authorities paid no more attention to him, and he subsided.

His end was tragic. In 1868 he was one of the attorneys taking part in a murder trial at Lebanon, Ohio, and was killed by the accidental discharge of a pistol with which he was attempting to show the jury how the shooting has been done.

So much for the origin and history of this infamous and disloyal order. Now let us see how it came to southeastern Pennsylvania, and especially to upper Lancaster county and the adjoining townships of Berks county.

The leader of the Knights of the Golden Circle in southeastern Pennsylvania was Philip Huber. He was born near the Black Horse Tavern in East Cocalico township, this county. There he lived until the breaking out of the war as a farmer and apparently without any ambition for notoriety.

He was then about thirty years of age, of medium size, with a florid complexion, sandy hair and bright, blue eyes. He had a keen desire for dollars and cents. His command of the Pennsylvania Dutch language was perfect, and he could very clearly state what he desired to convey to the men of his own type who understood no other language than this "patois".

Besides, he knew his people thoroughly, and was thus enabled to gain their confidence and wield a tremendous influence among them. That many of them held him in high esteem is shown by subsequent events.

Regarding his motives there has been a great deal of difference of opinion. Some have believed him perfect sincere; others have attributed his entire course to greed. That he made much money out of the formation of lodges of Knights is unquestioned.

Early in the summer of 1862, Huber went to Indiana, and was there initiated into all the dread mysteries of the "Golden Circle"

Then back he hurried to his native county, to tell of what was taking place in the Hoosier state.

A short time after his return from this western trip, Huber riding upon a steed which would well become a monk under a vow of perpetual poverty, rode into the village of Bowmansville in the interests of Golden Circleism.

A call had gone out some days before that a public meeting would be held at the village hotel on Saturday afternoon. When the time came, some three hundred persons gathered in and around the tavern.

Many of them came from Berks county—some to hear what the king of the Knights had to tell them in order to keep out of the war; others out of curiosity; and some few to learn how disloyal the redoubtable Knight would be.

Among the boys who are always present on such an occasion was myself. Being only ten years old at the time, I had no understanding of the significance of such a meeting, yet I knew that it was not just the right thing for the elders to participate in.

My father was a Douglas war Democrat and frowned upon such reprehensible efforts to hinder the government. He, of course, refused to go near the meeting.

Samuel Eshelman, one of the old time country hotel keepers, kept the village inn. His political inclinations were toward the cause that opposed the war.

On this particular day, whether it was the gain from the barroom or the honor—or rather dishonor—of becoming a Knight, I do not know, but one thing I do remember: he did a land-office business over the bar, since many realized that the gathering was under the eyes of a loyal community, and the hundred people of the little village who always stood by the flag that floated from a high pole on the green, visited the barroom quite often to boast their courage.

The old stone inn had a porch on two sides, running the entire length of the house. For that matter, it still exists, and I never look at it without having that Saturday afternoon of sixty-five years ago come to my mind.

Upon this porch, facing south toward the sheds that opened on the hitching ground of the Mennonite meeting house, the meeting was organized, and Huber was introduced as the great prophet who had come to tell them how to evade the war by resisting the draft and stay at home.

Just opposite the porch and across the road stands the home built by the late John B. Good, Esq.

Squire Good had sold his home to Squire Becker a year or so prior to that time, and had moved to Lancaster. This house also had a porch, and on it were a dozen or more men with the young squire, who could see and hear all that was taking place on the outside, and the disloyal remarks uttered not only by the speaker but by many in the crowd, who were fighting the government, backed by Eshelman's rum.

On the southeast corner of the village stands the Bowman-Musselman store. It also has a porch, and on it at this time were many who could likewise hear the address, which not only fell upon ears of those in sympathy with the speaker, but upon many loyal men as well.

From these I secured much information later in life, when I understood what it all meant. Then I was but a child and thought as such.

Huber faced his hearers with a very proud and self-conscious look. What he said, as I afterwards learned, was somewhat like this, when boiled down to a few sentences:

"These are evil times that have come over us. Who knows but this may be the last time you will be permitted to gather as freemen.

"Who will forbid you? Abe Lincoln and his hirelings.

"Here you have got nice homes and cattle, but how do you know you will have them tomorrow?"

"Who'll take them? Abe Lincoln—the cattle to feed his hirelings, and the horses for the niggers to ride on.

"Here are your strong, healthy sons, but a week from now they may be down south starving.

"Who'll take them from you? Abe Lincoln. He has ordered the draft to come before the election, and all of you boys will be compelled to free niggers and can't vote on the second Tuesday in October.

"Your daughters are your pride. None can work better than they, and none are handsomer.

"But what will their fate be unless something is done very soon?"

"Abe Lincoln is bound to free all the niggers, in spite of the Bible and the constitution.

"There are ten million of these awful people—little better than your hogs. If they are made free, they will come up here in big swarms, and then you will know what becomes of your daughters."

And much more of like argument he used with his fluent Pennsylvania German, which they all understood and were moved to excitement.

That his other audience on the nearby porch was also moved is putting it mildly. Teeth were set and fists clenched. Now and then one could be heard saying most emphatically, "Donnerwetter!"

• His sympathizers were in a receptive mood, due to the spirits of the bar-room and the fact that about all they read in the rural home at that time was the "Reading Adler"—the "Berks County Bible."

Its policy at the beginning of the war was a vicious one, bordering on the narrow line that divides loyalty from disloyalty. Its propaganda had prepared a rich soil for such detestable utterances as the speaker used to enthuse his hearers.

During the afternoon some of the leaders held many whispered conversations, the subject of which was when and where to meet in secret for the purpose of organizing a lodge.

The time and place selected for the meeting, Huber would then tell much more than he could say in the public meeting, thus creating new excitement.

When the date for this secret barn meeting arrived, a goodly crowd was present, all anxious to become Knights. Guards were posted, and none admitted but the faithful. But before the search for intruders was made, a soldier who was home on furlough hid himself under the straw.

When the initiation ceremony was over he knew all that had happened, and in a few days Washington also knew it. From that time on, unknown to the Order, the government had a secret service agent at most of the meetings, who furnished the War Department with information as to what was going on in the rear.

These reports now in the secret files of the War Department archives, are very interesting and grotesquely humorous as to details of what took place in some of the barns in eastern Pennsylvania.

Some of the ring leaders of the Knights of Brecknock were taught patriotism at Fort Delaware later, where Huber also finally landed, as we shall see.

The following winter a secret meeting of the Knights was held in a school-house in West Cocalico township. An amusing incident occurred after the meeting, which is well remembered by some still living in that locality.

While the lodge was in session a light snow fell, through which the men had to make their way home. The next morning the tracks left behind were investigated, and a shrewd old farmer remarked, "I know one who was there."

When asked to explain he said, "That track belongs to—naming the man—for he has the biggest feet in the township."

This incident created much merriment, and is a story that has not been forgotten to this day.

Huber transferred his efforts in organizing lodges to Berks county, as he well knew the townships of Brecknock, Caernarvon, Robinson and Cumru, on the northern border of Lancaster, were full of material.

He also knew that this was his harvest time to accumulate many a dollar, for that was the fee he charged to make a new Knight.

The summer of 1863 he devoted to gathering them in in this locality, and to allay suspicion he also secured employment in a Reading foundry.

Late in the fall an important lodge meeting was held in a barn, where Huber gave explicit orders as to how the Knights were to resist the draft.

The preliminary public meeting held in the afternoon in a farmer's orchard was attended by a stranger, dressed in the garb of a farmer. He was quite tall and very spare, but evidently wiry and lithe as a catamount. His eyes were as sharp as a lynx, and they seemed to look in every direction at the same moment. He was exceedingly friendly toward all with whom he came in contact. He denounced the effort on the part of the administration to free the negroes.

When he disappeared after the meeting was over, he was considered one of the most loyal members among the Knights.

When the evening meeting took place in the barn, a thorough search was made for spies. Men went through the hay, jabbing it viciously with forks, to find out if someone were hidden there, but no one was found.

Two were there, however, and they heard all that was said and done. The young man who attended the afternoon meeting as a farmer and Knight, crept into the barn and hid himself under huge bundles of rye straw.

As he afterwards told it, he had a narrow escape from being killed, and the only thing that saved him from the jab of the fork was the thickness of the bundle under which he was hidden.

He was no other than William Y. Lyon, better known later in life as "Bully Lyon", Reading's famous detective who at that time was employed in the government secret service to keep an eye on the "enemies in the rear."

A disabled soldier who was at home recovering from a wound, had also hidden himself in the windmill of the barn, and the report made by these two men of the night's proceedings brought orders from Washington to arrest Huber and the ring leaders at once.

Huber was located the next day at the foundry, arrested and taken before the provost marshal. As soon as the others were rounded up—about a half dozen in all—they were taken to Philadelphia.

The authorities saw that Huber's illiterate companions were but tools of his in the conspiracy, and they were soon released. Huber was held for trial in Fort Delaware.

When the report of Huber's arrest reached the township, consternation reigned among the Knights. That same afternoon half a dozen soldiers and detectives came out and arrested the leaders.

A few of them escaped to the mountain, but others were found and taken to Reading. That night they with Huber were sent to Philadelphia.

Now was the time to put into force what their leader had taught them. They should resist by an uprising, go to Reading and rescue Huber and his fellow-Knights.

A meeting was called, where it was agreed that all Knights should march to Reading and show the authorities there, as well as the government at Washington, what they could do.

When the morning came to march, instead of a thousand as expected, only about three hundred appeared. Each one was armed with a stout hickory club as a weapon.

"Huber is arrested, and we are going to bring him home", was their battle cry, and the refrain was, "Hurrah for Jeff Davis; we'll do it!"

Thus in local Berks county history came about the march of the Copton Brigade—the most ridiculous, motley crowd of ignorant men, outdoing even Coxe's army of tramps in later years.

By the time they got near the Schuylkill, half of the three hundred marchers were not to be seen, as they had dropped out along the way, either through a sense of fear or better sense.

The authorities at Reading were not unaware of this invasion. Near the old covered Harrisburg bridge a fire company was located. The firemen, always ready for an excuse to have some fun, ran a fire engine on the east end of the bridge as the brigade entered the west side. This frightened some of the more timid ones, and a panic ensued among the paraders. Some of them ran for dear life until they reached home.

About a hundred of them rallied, and when they discovered that it was only a fire company and not artillery as they at first thought, they marched over the bridge and up Penn street to the mayor's office.

The sidewalks and streets were full of men and women, with street Arabs hooting in derision, and many of the men shouting, "Let's hang them to lamp posts."

When they reached the city hall, Mayor Hoyer, who knew many of them by name, asked them what they wanted. The reply was, "We want Huber." The mayor then made a speech to them, telling them that Huber as well as their neighbors had been arrested and taken to Philadelphia for safe-keeping.

They refused to believe it, and became more violent in their abuse of the authorities.

There was now a howling mob surrounding them, bent on vengeance, and there was great danger that a riot would be the result. In the meantime, a fire company had attached a hose to a fire plug nearby and turned a stream of water on the marchers, who dispersed in every direction and in great disorder.

Some of them ran to the Plow and Harrow hotel near the Lancaster bridge, thinking they would be protected, as this was their stopping place when they came to Reading.

Those who reached the hotel had to be taken out the rear door and hid in outbuildings until night, when they were escorted out of the city and returned to their homes, running the greater part of the way lest the mob would again assail them.

This was the inglorious end of the famous "Copton Brigade" as well as the "Knights of the Golden Circle". The government had squared the circle and no more secret lodges were organized or meetings held, for the Golden Circle was dead.

### No Apology

I have probably violated our rules of writing local history by leaving the county for what appears to me the most preposterous and absurd part of the whole affair of the "enemies in the rear."

I have done it because there were Lancaster county Knights who like Falstaff's army marched up the hill to the Berks county line, down to Reading, and then ran home denouncing and forswearing Huber and the Circle forever.

The eventful 7th of April, 1863, the date of the march of the "Copton Brigade", was the end of breathing defiance to the government, and to the day of their death many of the members vigorously denied ever having belonged to it.

Huber was finally liberated from Fort Delaware and went back to his home in East Cocalico, but his former friends made it so unpleasant for him that he went west, where he lived in obscurity and died in poverty.

I must conclude my page of unwritten Civil War history in Lancaster county with the question, "Why were the members of the order called 'Copper Heads'?"

That odious word was a bitter stigma that haunted the memory of many an otherwise honest man to the grave.

The best information I could obtain by tradition or research was this:

Someone in the order knew enough about history to inform the members that during the early days of the Revolutionary War a rattlesnake flag with the motto "Don't tread on me", under the snake, was carried by a certain regiment. To paraphrase this, the Knights suggested that the same motto under a copperhead snake would make a good and appropriate symbol for them, since a copperhead snake always strikes from the rear.

This offensive term might have been forgotten, but the members of the order wanted a sign or emblem by which they could be recognized as members of the Golden Circle.

The large copper cent had a liberty head on one side, and from around this head the copper was cut away, or in other words, the head was stamped out of the cent, a hole punched in it, and the copper head hung on the lapel of the coat of the member who was a Copperhead.

This page of Lancaster county history of Civil War times I have written so that the present generation may know and not forget how the government was attacked by enemies in the rear as well as in the front, by those who were willing to destroy the Union.

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