

The Mysterious Death of John W. Stevens

By John S. Mayfield, Washington, D. C.

(NOTE.—The story which follows is an excellent example of the thoughtfulness of some people. In this case it was the North Carolina Historical Commission, in obtaining statements and stories from those of the past generation who participated in notable events at one time or another during their lives. It is impossible to estimate the innumerable stories of interesting episodes which remain untold, and which in fact belong to the printed page. It therefore behooves everyone to be on the lookout for those old-timers who have a story and are willing to tell it. Some day they will all be gone and their stories with them.—J. S. M.)



HOSTS of the Ku Klux Klan of the dark and dreary days that followed the Civil War were roaming again the other night in the old state of North Carolina, when an incident which has remained a deep mystery for over sixty-five years, was finally cleared up after the one man who held the key to the secret had passed on to the last Great Konklave.

This individual was Capt. John G. Lea, who died early Sunday morning, September 29, 1935, at the little town of South Boston, Virginia. Following Captain Lea's death, the North Carolina Historical Commission immediately released an affidavit he had made for it several years ago regarding the execution of the infamous and notorious carpet-bagger, John W. Stevens, in the Caswell county, North Carolina court house away back in 1870. Cap-

tain Lea was the last surviving witness to the killing, and had made the lengthy deposition on the provision that its contents would not be made known until after his death.

The details of this most exciting episode which made spectacular North Carolina history have been kept secret all down the intervening years until finally death has overtaken all of the seven men who lured the carpetbagger to his mysterious end. Six of the men preceded Captain Lea in death, and the story goes that one of them was always present during the last moments of another to be sure that he did not make a death-bed confession or reveal any facts concerning the historical incident.

After reciting dramatically how he and several other men organized the Ku Klux Klan in Caswell county for the protection of the rights of men and women who had lived through the disastrous ravages of the Civil War, Captain Lea declared in his statement that Stevens was the agent of the reconstruction Governor Holden, who had engaged him to get the negroes of the county out to the polls to participate in the elections and to take an active part in county and state politics.

Although the bulk of the black population of this part of the state cared little or nothing about exercising their newly acquired rights, they allowed themselves to be led blindly along by the white agitator and his cohorts. Of course, a situation of this kind always breeds trouble, and it was not long un-

til Stevens' work of "educating" the ignorant negro in assuming his new social and political status resulted in the endangerment of life and property and frequent outbreaks between the white people and their former slaves.

With the advent of the Ku Klux Klan in Caswell county, Stevens immediately became their common enemy, and before long he was aware of an organized effort to stop his sinister activities. Warnings were accordingly sent to him to leave the state, but he disregarded them, and continued to preach equality for the negroes, ever reminding them of their obligations to the Republican governor to vote solidly in the elections which were to be held in August, 1870.

On the day of his death Stevens was in the Caswell county court house at Yanceyville, a town which is now little more than it was then. In the large court room a mixed crowd of white people and negroes was jammed, listening to the bombastic campaign speeches of the Congressional candidates, when a messenger was seen to make his way through the audience to Stevens, and then to whisper a few words into the carpetbagger's ear. Republican friends downstairs were anxious to confer immediately with him, and so he arose and followed the messenger from the court room. He was on his way to meet his death, but little did he suspect what was to follow in a few short minutes just a dozen or so paces from where he had been a prominent listener to the proceedings. At the foot of the stairs Stevens was informed by a stranger that Frank Wiley, a Democrat, who once had been sheriff of the county, had at last shifted over to the Republican party and was ready to run again for his former office under its banners. Stevens was pleased to hear

the news, for he had urged Wiley to do this, and he rushed on to confer with his Republican friends about Wiley's candidacy. He was accompanied by the seven men who had gathered about him in the meantime. The group hurried into a room used for storage on the first floor, and there the surprised Stevens was faced by the seven grim and determined men, who took no time in recalling to his mind the several warnings he had been given previously. Stevens, frightened as he had never been before in his life, made a rush for the door, but the seven men were too quick for him, and pounced upon him before he could make an outcry. In the hallway outside the door other Klansmen were cautiously waiting in case any sounds came from the storage room where Stevens was closeted with Captain Lea and the others. If they heard any, they were to engage in a noisy fight among themselves in order to drown out the outcries which Stevens might make. But none was heard, and while they waited, Captain Lea and his fellow Klansmen strangled and stabbed the much-hated Stevens to death. Presently the seven men emerged from the room into which eight had entered just a few minutes before, and from the expressions on their faces the guarding Klansmen knew that Caswell county would no longer be disturbed by its most dangerous agitator. By the time Stevens' body was found some time later all of the men present had successfully made their escape.

The killing, of course, created a great deal of excitement, and Governor Holden was so angered by this direct attack on his administration and authority that he declared Caswell county in a state of insurrection, and ordered troops to occupy the vicinity. Nearly

two hundred men of Caswell county were arrested and placed in jail, but when they were later tried at Raleigh they were all freed. These actions did not in any way improve the people's opinion of Holden, and the upshot was that he was soon impeached, convicted and removed from the office of governor. One of the counts on which Holden was convicted was for recruiting and using troops of his own to force the people of Caswell county to submit to his authority, and another was for the false arrest and imprisonment of the Caswell county men, among whom was Captain Lea.

The removal of Holden from office ended the carpetbag rule in Caswell county, and although the Republicans won the election and sent one of their number to Congress, it is said that there was never any very general exercise of the negro vote in the county. It was not long, though, before Caswell county was on its way to recovery and soon the stalwart and determined North Carolinians were enjoying the kind of prosperity they had had before the war.

THE "TWIN SISTERS."

Where are the "Twin Sisters" of blessed memory? Were they buried, burned, or carried far from Texas?

The Texas Centennial state publicity department at Dallas, delving into the remote archives of Texas history, has issued an appeal to old-timers throughout the State to plumb the recesses of fading memory to solve the mysterious disappearance of these "heroines" of the Texas revolution.

The "Twin Sisters" were not girls. They were guns—two six-pound cannons donated by the city of Cincinnati to the struggling Republic of Texas a century ago. They were all the ar-

tillery Houston had at San Jacinto, and they were used, history records, "with terrible effect."

The "Twin Sisters" remained in Texas until the Republic became a State, when the Federal government sent them to Louisiana and they were later sold for junk. But an appeal from the Texas people for the historic guns, which were called the "little darlings of the revolution," caused Louisiana, fifteen years later, to contribute \$700 to remount the cannons and restore them to Texas. They then spit "grape and cannister" through the War Between the States.

Late in the war, when the federal forces landed at Galveston and demanded the surrender of men and arms, three Texas soldiers and a negro cook are said to have slipped away under cover of night and buried the "Sisters" near Harrisburg. That much is legend, to be sure, but it was substantiated years later when one of the group "confessed" his part. But those whom he named as his confederates had passed away, and their stories with them.

There are many who believe that the rusty cannons now standing guard before the state capitol in Austin are the famed "Twin Sisters," but historians are uniformly agreed that they are not the San Jacinto pieces.

So now, nearly a century after that warm April afternoon at San Jacinto when they became immortal in Texas history, the "Twin Sisters" are again the objects of a State-wide search. Are they in truth buried in Texas soil? What old-timers still live who can supply the answer? Write and tell Frontier Times what you know about them.

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