

Carroll Yesteryears
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An Iconic Photo with an Intriguing History
By Mary Ann Ashcraft

Have you seen this photograph before? You probably have if you follow Carroll County history. It usually appears in newspapers every year or two on Memorial Day or in conjunction with a Civil War article. But do you know the intriguing story behind it?

An unknown photographer snapping shots about 1890 captured Mary B. Shellman, then approximately 40 years old, at the grave of a Civil War soldier named Robert H. Clark in Westminster Cemetery. The occasion was likely a Memorial Day observance. With quite a few Civil War veterans buried in that cemetery, why did she single out this particular grave?

On the last day of June 1863 when she was just 14 years old, Mary sat at the bedside of 24-year-old Robert as he lay dying in the City Hotel on Westminster's East Main Street very near her home. He had a raging fever, and she fanned him, likely for hours, before he died that day over 600 miles from his home in Presque Isle, Maine.

In a few short years, Mary would help organize Carroll County's first Decoration Day [now Memorial Day] parade and the remainder of her life would be spent honoring the lives of Civil War soldiers. Robert Clark's death, however, surely must have left a lasting impression on her.

Who was this young soldier who arrived in an ambulance, too sick to continue toward Gettysburg with the rest of his comrades in Company B, 7th Maine Volunteer Infantry? The men had been marching from Virginia for days in the summer heat after participating in battles in and around Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville in May. They knew they were chasing Confederate General Robert E. Lee and his troops who were headed toward Pennsylvania, hoping to shift future battles onto Northern soil. There was no time to lose.

Robert's medical record isn't clear whether he was suffering from typhoid fever, a constant scourge of all the troops, or sunstroke. His memorial in Westminster Cemetery, likely created by local tombstone carver Andrew Beaver, was inscribed as follows:

Sacred to the memory of R. H. Clarke, Co. B 7th Maine volunteer, who was sunstruck on the march from virginia to victory at Gettysburg. Brought in an ambulance to Westminster and unable to proceed farther, he here died June 30, 1863, aged 24 years. *Toil-worn and faithful to his country and her service to the last.*

Among the items in the Historical Society of Carroll County's photograph collection is another photograph, that of Henry Gilbert Clark, which reveals more of the story. On the reverse of the cardboard frame, Mary Shellman wrote, "Son of R. H. Clarke who was sun struck on the march from Va to Gettysburg and died at the City Hotel, Westminster. As I sat and fanned him he called me by a boy's name. He was a member of the 7th Maine Vols. U.S.A. Through Sen. James

G. Blaine I found he had a son who was adopted by a lumber man, his uncle, at Presque Isle, Maine. I wrote & told him of his father & he sent me his picture after he was grown.”

It isn't surprising to anyone familiar with Mary Shellman's life that she would make the effort to find out more about Robert Clark's boy. James G. Blaine became a Maine senator in 1876, so Mary likely contacted Henry Clark sometime after that. Henry looks like a young adult in the photo he sent. There is no evidence of additional correspondence between the two.

We do know something about Henry's parents, Robert and Mary Ann Clark. Robert was born in New Brunswick, Canada, about 1836 but lived in Aroostook County, Maine, by 1850. You can't get farther north in Maine than Aroostook County, famous for potatoes and lumber. Mary Ann Bell was a native of Maine. After their marriage in 1859, the Clarks lived in Presque Isle, Aroostook County, where Henry was born July 6, 1861.

Robert enlisted in the 7th Maine Volunteer Infantry in late August 1862 as a private and appears to have held that rank when he died 10 months later. Once she applied for pensions as a widow and mother of a minor, Mary Ann would receive payments from the date of Robert's death. Her pension would end if she remarried, but Henry's would last until he turned 16.

How Mary Ann's life changed in the years immediately after her husband's death is unknown. In the 1860 census, Robert's name appeared with no occupation or evidence the couple owned property. The pay for a Union private was \$13 a month. There is little doubt the young couple were relatively poor and Mary Ann probably didn't receive any pension money before 1864. She remarried in 1865 and by 1867, she and her new husband were living in New Brunswick Province, Canada, but Henry was living with his Clark grandparents in Presque Isle.

In January 1867, a judge of the Probate Court of Aroostook County, declared: “I Henry R. Downes, Judge of the Probate Court in and for the County of Aroostook and the State of Maine, hereby certify that satisfactory evidence has been produced before said court that Mary Ann Clark the widow of Robert H. Clark, late a private in Co. B, 7th Regiment of Maine Volunteers, has abandoned the care of Henry Gilbert Clark, the minor child of said Robert H. & Mary Ann Clark, and is an unsuitable person, by reason of immoral conduct, to have the custody of said Henry Gilbert Clark.” George F. Whidden, a Civil War veteran and likely a relative, became the recognized guardian of Henry, so Henry's \$8/month pension went to him. At one point in the legal paperwork, Whidden noted that Henry was an “invalid.” Henry was still living with his Clark grandparents in the 1870 census, but after his grandfather's death in 1872, he likely lived with the Whiddens in the Presque Isle area.

What occasion prompted Henry Clark to have a formal portrait made, the one he sent Mary Shellman? He is stylishly dressed and appears to be in his 20s but there is nothing on the photograph to date it. However, in 1883 there is a marriage record in Presque Isle for Matilda R. Campbell and Henry G. Clark, so perhaps the photo was taken around that time. A record of their divorce, rare at that period, is dated January 1889.

On February 18, 1897, Henry G. Clark, age 39, married Eliza Peach, age 50, both of Presque Isle. He was listed as a farmer and she as a housewife. It was her third marriage and supposedly

his first, but his age does not agree with his date of birth. And what about the earlier marriage although he was now divorced? Three years later, when the 1900 census was taken, Eliza Peach Clark appears living with her daughter by an earlier marriage and Henry was boarding in another county working as a “truckman.”

Henry Gilbert Clark’s life had a rocky beginning. Did it have an equally rocky ending? Tracing him after 1900 became somewhat difficult although he appears to be alive in 1924 and living in Auburn, Maine. Hopefully someone reading this article can piece together the rest of his life and share it.

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Image 1 – Courtesy of HSCC – In this iconic Carroll County photograph Mary B. Shellman was captured kneeling at the grave of Robert H. Clark(e), a Civil War soldier who died in Westminster on June 30, 1863, and was buried in Westminster Cemetery. In the 1880s, the Westminster Cemetery Company gave her the lot where he and four other veterans now lie. The full inscription on the stone is included in the article.



Image 2 – Courtesy of HSCC – Henry Gilbert Clark, son of Robert H. Clark, sent this photograph of himself to Mary Shellman likely in the 1880s. She had attended his dying father many years earlier as a 14-year-old girl just before the battle at Gettysburg.