VARDRY MCBEE: SUMMER CONVERSATIONS

*Roy McBee Smith**

Vardry McBee described his habit of learning from others by listening as having "a surveying and engineering disposition to learn."[1] He chuckled about men who had "the disease of not listening."[2]

In the village there were often a number of men especially worth listening to. On summer evenings they sat outside the Mansion House under an elm tree, or on the piazza of Crittenden's Hotel, smoking and talking. As the sun went down, they would take their chairs, and there would be wreaths of white smoke from pipes and cigars. The political discussions would begin, or a discussion of a trial at the courthouse that day, such as the one in which the jury convicted a woman of the village of infanticide, to the astonishment of everyone. The consensus was "that she would be pardoned beyond doubt."[3]

Some nights Henry Middleton would be there, five years Vardry McBee's senior, whose father had signed the Declaration of Independence, and in whose footsteps Henry had followed to be Governor and Congressman. Like the late Joseph Alston, Henry Middleton had discovered the beauty and healthfulness of this mountain community when it was hardly a village, and in 1813 had built there Whitehall, a Charleston style summer house, with double piazzas on three sides and chimneys on each end. When President Madison appointed him minister to Russia in 1820, he sold that house and its small farm to George Washington Earle. When Middleton came home from Europe and Russia after ten years, he began again bringing his family to Greenville for longer and longer visits. Even though he had been educated in Europe and was married to an English wife, he was unpretentious and modest. He could tell them of the Court of St.

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James and the English aristocracy, or about Napoleon, whom he had known from the time he was a General until he was the Emperor of France, and of Josephine, his mistress. As a boy, Henry Middleton accompanied his father to sessions of Congress in Philadelphia and had known George Washington, and others of the founding fathers. He told of how Washington could have seized imperial power at the close of the Revolution but instead hastened to Annapolis, where Congress had assembled, and resigned as commander-in-chief of the armies. Middleton told about the one time that Washington was known to curse, during the Battle of Monmouth, when General Charles Lee was late in moving his troops. In a burst of anger, Washington called Lee "a damned poltroon."[4] Middleton told the summer gatherings of how Madison had proposed in the old Congress that the Carolinas be abandoned to the British during the Revolution. He explained why he had concluded that Jefferson was "a hollow-hearted man, not sincere in his professions." He told anecdotes about John Randolph's instability, Aaron Burr's intentions, and John Marshall's and Cotesworth Pinckney's experiences as ministers to France. Middleton was a close friend of Andrew Jackson. His devotion to the Union and opposition to nullification reinforced Vardry McBee's own opinions on those matters. In 1839, Vardry McBee and Middleton would serve upon the steering committee for the stockholders of the Louisville, Charleston and Cincinnati Railroad, as would Daniel and Alfred Huger of Charleston, who also joined the sessions under the elm tree of the Mansion House or on the piazza in Greenville.[5]

Judge Daniel Huger was four years older than Vardry McBee. He usually stayed at Crittenden's Hotel when he was on the circuit in Greenville. He graduated from Princeton and married Henry Middleton's sister. He served in the legislature and as circuit judge and would later defeat Robert Barnwell Rhett for the United States Senate. He was a noble looking gentleman, courteous and kind in his manners, and pleasant in conversation. He staunchly supported the Union and opposed nullification. He told his evening audience that Calhoun would have made "the greatest metaphysician in the world." Judge Huger and the late

William Lowndes as young men had read law together, and served with each other in the legislature. Lowndes had gone on to be elected to Congress, was Speaker of the House in 1820, and was nominated for President in 1821, just before his untimely death. "Mr. Lowndes," said Judge Huger, "was one of the purest and best men I ever knew. He was endowed by nature with the very highest intellectual qualities and was capable of filling and adorning any public station in the world. He was a man of perfect fairness in debate, as well as in all the relations of life." When Judge Huger's daughter had married he gave her this advice on leaving his house: "If any difficulty should ever occur between me and your husband, remember you are to take sides with your husband against your father." It was told of Judge Huger that when he served in the legislature a young member alluded sarcastically to the judge's age. He replied: "I have been brought up in a school which knows no age for dishonor." Judge Huger was a man of strong religious feelings. He told his Greenville listeners of "the infidel notions of Dr. Cooper" President of the South Carolina College, and that no one should entrust the education of his sons to such a man. Judge Huger amused the younger members of the sessions in Greenville by describing the manners and customs of a past age in South Carolina, and by the anecdotes he told of the public men of those times. He had great affection for his cousin, Alfred Huger.[6]

Alfred Huger told his Greenville listeners about the time on the circuit when Judge Huger discovered his black coachman asleep, as he was driving from one courthouse to another. Instead of reproving the coachman, the judge exchanged seats with him and told him to lie down in the carriage and finish his nap. It was said by all that Alfred Huger was "the grand type of the American gentleman." He was tall, slender, and courtly. In his manners he was dignified but cordial and simple. He also opposed nullification. The parish which elected him to the Senate for many years, undertook to instruct him how to vote upon a particular question in the Senate, and when he did not follow those instructions, requested that he resign his seat and let them elect someone who would carry out their political views. He re-

sponded to them that he would just as soon think of resigning as commanding general on the eve of a battle. Those sitting under the elm tree or on the piazza enjoyed listening to his stories.[7]

Joel Poinsett told of his experiences in England, France, Switzerland, the Italian states, Germany, and Sweden, as well as Cuba, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and other parts of South America, for he was the most widely traveled and versatile American of the day. He was admired by the best minds in the nation for his knowledge of science and technology. The matter of slavery was usually discussed in most every gathering in the state or country. He saw it in its world setting and predicted to his friends in Greenville that its passage was sealed. Always a Unionist, he was a close friend of President Jackson. He knew Napoleon, as well as the Russian Tsar Alexander I. He had served in the legislature, and as Chairman of the Board of Public Works, and succeeded Charles Pinckney in Congress. He was appointed the first Minister to Mexico and served as Secretary of War under President Van Buren. He was four years younger than Vardry McBee. When he purchased a small farm near Greenville, Vardry's agricultural advice helped him turn the "Homestead" into an outstanding farm. He would give Vardry McBee letters of introduction on his trip to the North in 1847. Poinsett was reticent. His personality was not one to attract, but he told the Greenville gatherings of his friendship with President Jackson, his visits to the Hermitage, how he had joined the President in New York, and traveled with him through Connecticut to Boston. He described how he was once shown to President Jackson's bedroom, not long after Mrs. Jackson's death, and found him seated by the fire with his Bible and his wife's miniature on a small table beside him.[8]

James Petigru stayed at Crittenden's Hotel on his visits from Charleston and was regarded as one of the most able lawyers in the United States. He was the most devoted Union man in the state, and throughout his life would never waiver in his stand against secession and nullification. He had been born in Abbeville District. He was fourteen years younger than Vardry McBee, had served as Attorney General of the State, and had served in the House of Representatives. He was short and stout with a full

face, a rather long head, and low forehead. Everyone loved him down to the servants who waited on him at the hotels. He always started his drinking early and continued it throughout the day, without noticeable effect of appearance or speech, to the amazement of his Greenville friends.[9] Even Robert Hayne would have chuckled at Petigru's quip that South Carolina was "too small to be a nation and too large to be a lunatic asylum!"

If Baylis Earle was the most handsome man in the country, he was also one of the most able. He had been first in his class at South Carolina College at the age of sixteen. He was twenty years younger than Vardry McBee. He had been elected Solicitor of the Western Circuit in 1822 and Judge in 1830. He was a conscientious man, despising meanness, deception, and flattery. His friends said no man ever lived who had less of the tricks and arts of demagoguery about him. He would seldom drink but only a small amount would affect him noticeably. Perry said this was because he was too honest to conceal it. He never married and would quote Solon who was asked whether it was better to marry or live single? The old philosopher replied, "Do which you will, and you will repent it." However, Judge Earle was so handsome that few women could have refused him. He had inherited from his father, Samuel Earle, an uncanny but highly ethical talent for making money. He came of one of the strongest bloodlines in the history of the country for leadership, personal magnetism, sociability, and success in business and the professions.[10]

Some summers Robert Y. Hayne would visit Greenville, staying at Crittenden's. He was sixteen years younger than Vardry McBee. He had first married Governor Charles Pinckney's daughter, Henrietta, and upon her death William Alston's daughter, Rebecca. He was Speaker of the House in South Carolina, Attorney General, and served in the United States Senate as the youngest man ever to represent South Carolina there. His debate with Daniel Webster would be considered this country's finest parliamentary effort. He resigned as Senator to serve as Governor during the nullification crisis. He was full of anecdotes about the members of Congress and the passing scenes in Washington. Waddy Thompson called him "the Prince of Common Sense."

His magnetism was always felt in a group.[11]

Retired Chancellor Waddy Thompson would be there, six years older than Vardry McBee. The rumor was that Colonel Toney had recently won from the Chancellor in a card game the purchase money for a valuable tract of land. With the Chancellor would be his son, Waddy Thompson Jr., and neither father nor son would be without his dram. Waddy Thompson Jr. had served in the legislature, had become a Brigadier General in the South Carolina militia, and had been elected Solicitor and then Congressman. President Tyler would appoint him Minister to Mexico. He defeated Ben Perry for Congress but differed in Congress with Senator Calhoun. Calhoun took the stump throughout the district in an effort to prevent Thompson's reelection. However, the people were more pleased with the humor and anecdotes of Waddy Thompson Jr. than with the dry logic of Calhoun. In one of his speeches, Thompson told of how Calhoun would not tolerate any independence of thought or action and said that Calhoun was like a client of his who in drawing up an agreement with his overseer inserted the clause: "When I say go, you are to go; when I say trot, you are to trot; and when I say run, you are to run." The audience howled its approval. He had graduated from South Carolina College in 1814 and married Emmala Butler, the sister of Andrew Pickens Butler. They had taken her orphan niece, Harriet Butler, as an infant and were rearing her.[12]

State Senator Wade Hampton Jr. often visited Greenville, sometimes on his way to Cashier's Valley, North Carolina, where his family spent summers. He was related to Judge Earle. As a colonel he had been an aid to General Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans. He was known for his magnificent entertainment at his estate "Millwood," four miles from Columbia, when the avenue leading to his house was lighted at night by huge pine torches, making it bright as mid-day. He looked forward to accompanying Vardry McBee on a ride over his fields in Greenville. "You are the neatest agriculturalist I have ever seen," he told Vardry McBee.[13]

Charles T. Lowndes stopped at the Mansion house with his wife Sabina Huger and his son Rawlins, on the way to Flat Rock

from their Combahee River rice plantation.[14] Vardry McBee would have been interested in the rice growing process, the dyking which made it the rich man's crop, and which won it prizes in Paris. The rice region of South Carolina could almost claim a world monopoly.

Jeremiah Cleveland joined them, the only one of the group, other than Middleton and Chancellor Thompson, who was older than Vardry McBee. Vardry McBee's father had fought along side Jeremiah Cleveland's father, Robert Cleveland, at King's Mountain. But Vardry McBee did not mind suing Jeremiah Cleveland now and then when they disagreed on accounts, and Jeremiah returned the favor from time to time.[15]

Vardry McBee's friend, Judge John Belton O'Neall, would not have favored the group with his high intellect and his experience as Speaker of the House and Judge of the Court of Appeals, for he was an avid leader of the temperance movement and would not continence the inbibment by any of the group.[16] Vardry McBee disapproved of drinking and would not abide intoxication, but would not proselytize his opinion.

Vardry McBee would he the first to leave the village sessions because of his habit of retiring early and rising early in the mornings. Turning his horse west from Main Street into the avenue which led to Prospect Hill, he would see the white walls and square white columns of the old house in the darkness with a candle burning in the downstairs hall. There was only the sound of crickets, and perhaps a barking dog, until he reached the dip in the avenue. Then he would hear the croaking of the frogs from the river blending with the crickets. He brought back interesting things to tell his family and guests at the Sunday dinner table and usually a feeling for trends in the district, state, and nation. He always looked forward to Sunday dinners.

Either Alexander or Martha could set the dinner table into a roar of laughter. They had inherited the ready wit of the Alexanders and were more apt to find a humorous viewpoint in a situation. Alexander was more plucky in dealing with his father than his brothers were. He called him "the Esquire," and "the Chief," and "the Chief in Command," and poked fun at his

father's difficulty in giving up control of his enterprises. Vardry McBee, in turn, was not as careful of Alexander's feelings as he always later wished he had been.

Endnotes

[1] Duke, May 30, 1852.
[2] RMS 1, 2.
[3] U.N.C., November 30, 1851.
[4] Perry, *The Writings*, v. III, p. 345.
[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 108-113. Also see references in that Index.
[6] *Ibid.*, v. II, pp. 381-389. Also see its Index.
[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 375-380. Also see its Index.
[8] *Ibid.*, v. III, pp. 204-208. Also Rippy.
[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 158-164. Also see its Index.
[10] *Ibid.*, v. II, pp. 194-201.
[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 352-357. Also see its Index.
[12] *Ibid.*, v. III, pp. 314-323. Also see its Index.
[13] *De Bow*, p. 5.
[14] *Chestnut Diary*, Feb. 18, 1861, June 2, August 1, 1862.
[15] Perry, v. I, p. 250; v. II, p. 118.
[16] *Ibid.*, v. III, pp. 127-132.