Sigma Chi's Constantine Chapter

A true story of an event in the army of the Confederate States, taking place at a time and place famous by that remarkable novel "Gone With The Wind."

By Ralph McGill
Alpha Psi (Vanderbilt) '21
Pulitzer Prize Winner
Editor of THE ATLANTA CONSTITUTION
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It was Spring in Georgia.

And it was the Spring of 1864. The dogwood bloomed, splashing the hills with its whiteness.

But the sweating, swearing teamsters on the muddy clay roads did not see it, except perhaps briefly and with a nostaligic wistfulness.

And the tired, marching men did not see it. It rained much that spring. And the rifles were heavy.

In Chattanooga William Tecumseh Sherman, grimlipped and disliking the whole business very much, said "Forward."

From that day onward, though none of the weary men knew it, every road led toward Appomattox. But the long agony and the long dying was ahead.

There was feverish activity in the South. The trains rolled out of Atlanta. And the roads were choked with teams and men and guns.

There was one muddy road used more than any other. And today —

Today they call it the Dixie Highway. You may ride it for a thousand miles or more. The tourist cars use it in an annual parade down and up. Sitting back in the upholstery one may glance out at the little towns and their most curious names. Lost Mountain, New Hope Church, Ezra Church — and finally Calhoun and Cartersville and Marietta and Kennesaw Mountain. The land rises sharply on the right going South.

And then — in 1864 —

It was a dark mass of hill and tree and rock. And the white dogwood that had bloomed there in the early Spring was gone. And there was to be red on the hills soon, staining the leaves and rocks.

Joe Johnston and his men were there — on Kennesaw.

The Generals in Blue who opposed him said they never felt so worried as when Joe Johnston was in front of them.

And they never felt so alarmed as when they had him retreating. He was a stubborn man to fight. In retreat he was a running wolf.

But there he was on Kennesaw. His men were behind breastworks of logs and rock. He had retreated slowly, taking a heavy toll. And they never dislodged him until their flanks (they almost doubled him in numbers) were about to pinch behind him.

And while he held, Nathan Bedford Forrest ("Get there the fustest with the mostest men," was his formula for victory) slashed at the Blue flanks and raided outposts. He didn't have the mostest men. Not then.

The Twenty Eighth Mississippi Volunteer Cavalry was there with the Army of Tennessee.

And with them rode a young man in a faded uniform. On it gleamed a curious badge. A silver dollar had been carved and hammered into the shape of a white cross.

His name was Harry St. John Dixon. He was 20. Behind him were three years of war. The University of Virginia and his chapter of the Sigma Chi fraternity seemed farther back than just three years. There was a growing something in the air, the rush of brazen, invisible hoofs and somehow, though it was hot that summer, there was a chill now and then.

You may see his picture. His eyes look out from a face that is young. But even in the old picture there is something about the eyes which says they have seen men die and live. And they have seen defeat and victory. And they have gone back to the job when it was all over.

But that day before Kennesaw he was thinking. A few days before he had seen another Sigma Chi. He hadn't time to get his name. There was a deal of fighting. And there was a hurry. They had clasped hands at Cassville and he wondered what had become of him. He and Hal Yerger, a Sigma Chi from Eta (U. of Miss), had talked things over.

It was curious to them. They didn't hate the men on the other side. They knew there must be Sigma Chis there. But it was curious to see the old flag, the stars and stripes, flying over men who invaded their states. It was something to puzzle about. But they reckoned that every man who did his duty as he saw it was right — no matter if he wore blue or gray. Meanwhile there was the fighting.

There was a long try at Kennesaw. The blue lines charged many times there and fell back, cursing and grim, leaving their dead to carpet the hill side. The hail of lead from the barricades was too much.

And so, at last, William Tecumseh Sherman shook his head and muttered something about Joe Johnston. And he gave orders.

From the mountain Joe Johnston watched. He knew what it meant. He saw the troops move out. And next day his scouts brought the information he knew was coming. Sherman was opening his pincers again. The blue jaws were opening wide. And the nut they would surround and crack would be Kennesaw. So, the next morning the Federal troops inspected the deserted ditches on the mountain. Joe Johnston was gone.

The boy of 20 was at Ezra Church. He was there with the silver cross on his breast on July 28. They were holding a hill with a thin line. Both flanks were turned and a terrible infilade of fire was turned on them. But they clung there. They poured their amunition on the ground and so did not have to reach for their pouches to load. They were relieved at last. And he wrote in his diary:

"Which brigade relieved us I never knew; but I can never forget how it acted. I never saw a body of men more precise on dress parade. They came at double quick from our rear and at that step and by regiments formed, cast away their blankets as they moved into line, under fire that seemed like fury from Hell to us, and went on to the carnival of death beyond —

(He was 20 years old. And he wrote like that. And reading it, and the rest he wrote, one may understand why Sigma Chi endured in the South.)

Joe Johnston was gone. Atlanta was gone. Hood was in command. And the troops, wishing for Joe Johnston, were near Jonesboro, some 20 miles South of Atlanta. The last chapter of Sherman's march to the sea was about to be written.

The tired armies rested, like tired prizefighters on their stools in their corners between rounds of a long, hard fight.

And that night Yerger and Dixon talked.

They felt, somehow, the end was inevitable. There were many more months of the long agony, but they wanted to do something. The colleges were closed. There was no telling what might happen if they met defeat. Sigma Chis had been killed. The Fraternity in the South must be kept alive. There was no authority to which to turn. They would form a chapter in their regiment. Writing of it, after the war, he said:

"The death of many comrades, and the constant danger of being taken prisoner, a fate we thought worse than death, ripened an idea long in my mind. We felt cut off from all communication with the rest of the world, hemmed in and fighting for life. Every college in the South was closed. In the ruin at hand my sentiment was to preserve the White Cross. There was no means of outer communication. There was no central place to rally. I knew I had no authority to establish a chapter of Sigma Chi outside a college, or at all; but, isolated as we were, all of us in the army doubtless of Southern blood, I thought to raise the standard and fix a rallying point, which would preserve the existence of the order, whether we failed or not in our struggle for independence, as an institution in which we as Southern soldiers had participated, in order not only to subserve private benefit, but in order to have means of communicating with our brethren of the north, all of them, no doubt, in arms against us."

(Remember — he was a boy of 20.)

On the night of September 17, 1864, they met.

They found an old log cabin. Dixon writes that it was in a fearful state of dilapidation. There were cobwebs and dirt, but he wrote, "the spirit was there and shone brightly."

There was not much time. They slipped away from camp without permission.

And there, with the light of one guttering candle, they gathered. On rude benches sat the candidates. Not far away were the restless sounds of the camp. Dixon sent out a man to see no one was near this cabin. It was on the edge of a lonely field with branches and vines half covering it. He came back and shook his head.

Dixon was elected Consul. Yerger was Pro-Consul. They named their organization the Constantine Chapter. Reuben T. Pollard, of Mississippi, was there. He was Eta '61. Ivan J. Shelby, Eta '62, had helped make Dixon a Sigma Chi at Virginia. William H. Bolton, of original Sigma, was there in the cabin. Thomas N. Fowler and A. B. Raffington, of Company D, were there to be initiated. The latter did not live long in Sigma Chi. He fell in battle. Fowler survived. But that was later.

Before a crudely fashioned altar, oaths were taken, the charge was improvised, the mysteries explained. They clasped hands with the newly made brothers, fingers finding the grip, and closing tightly. They put out the candle, the poor one of tallow. But they had lit new lights that would go on and light more lights to make an immortal light in the lives of thousands of men.

That was the scene. The silent night and the lonely cabin, the solemn young men, dedicated to a great principle, standing there with the noise of battle still in their ears, bringing men to Sigma Chi that the great light in their lives might be transmitted to other men — that Sigma Chi should not perish in the Southland.

The shadows danced on the walls of rough logs, the September wind moved the vines and the pines behind them made a sound like surf afar off —

That candle light, flickering there in the lonely cabin that night in the autumn of 1864, comes down to us yet, stronger and stronger through the years.

A white light — a white cross in the Heavens — By this Sign Conquer —

As nearly as is possible the site of the cabin has been located.

It is perhaps significant and no mere coincidence that it is located on land which has long been in the family of Sigma Chis and is today in their hands.

It is a great nursery, one of the nation's greatest, and there bloom fields of flowers and evergreen shrubs and things of beauty.

And it is there that land will be dedicated to Sigma Chi, and a great White Cross shall be built to remain through eternity in memory of that one candle that burned there near three quarters of a century ago, in memory of Harry St. John Dixon, and his comrades of the Constantine Chapter.

- - - and so wrote Ralph McGill in 1939

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