

Trust preserved valuable swords

■ At soldier's request, Civil War refugees hid them in Yorkville from Union army.

Toward the end of the Civil War, especially after the burning of Atlanta, civilians sought refuge in towns they thought would be out of the path of the Union armies.

Upcountry South Carolina offered few towns of any size but soon every town was to have many unfortunate women and children seeking shelter. The refugees caused a drain on already strained resources, but few were turned away.



Nearby history

LOUISE
PETTUS

The most fortunate had kinfolk in the towns and sought them out — sometimes from great distances.

Leora Sims and her three younger sisters lived on a plantation on the banks of the Mississippi River. Her father was in the Confederate army. In 1863 their plantation was destroyed and they fled to Columbia to stay with relatives.

The war came still closer and when Atlanta fell there was fear that Columbia would be next. There were relatives in Yorkville (now York). In February of 1865 the four Sims girls, with their friends Sallie Pelham and Annie Robertson, purchased railway tickets to Rock Hill, the closet depot to Yorkville.

With frequent stops either for passengers or repairs, it took all day for the train to cover the distance from Columbia to Rock Hill. At Rock Hill they found good accommodations (probably at Gordon's Hotel) with other refugees and soldiers from the front who shared news from the battlefields.

Word had been sent of their coming to their aunt, Ann Witherspoon of Yorkville, and a carriage was promised for them the following morning. About midnight, as the party broke up, a nice-looking young soldier asked Leora to step aside and talk with him. He was a stranger but Leora felt it safe enough to talk.

The young soldier told her that he was carrying with him handsome and valuable swords belonging to Gen. Lovell. He had been charged with their care but now he was ordered to report to camp and must find someone trustworthy to take care of them. He had picked out Leora as a sensible and honorable person and asked her if she would take the swords to Yorkville with her.

Leora agreed and the soldier gave her the swords. "The hilts were set with jewels and the scabbards finely engraved." The encased swords joined Leora's baggage ready for the trip to Yorkville the following morning. The soldier never told her his name.

When they were in the carriage on the way to

Yorkville, Leora told the other girls about the swords. They laughed and teased her about them and the penalty she would have to pay if they were captured by a roving band of Union soldiers.

It took all day to get from Rock Hill to Yorkville in a carriage — as long as it had taken by train to come from Columbia to Rock Hill.

A few weeks later, Leora's cousin, Capt. Isaac Witherspoon, was in Yorkville on business for a few days. She told him about the swords in her possession. He advised her to bury them.

Witherspoon had no hope of victory. He told Leora that Union soldiers were already invading the state and that they would enter private homes and take any valuables they found. Following the search the house was often burned. Upset, Leora did as Capt. Witherspoon suggested.

In 1896 Leora Sims, now Leora Sims O'Neal of Chester, concluded her tale with the statement: "(The swords) . . . there remained until sometime after the war, when a trusty messenger came with letters to get them for the rightful owner. They were examined and found in perfect keeping, and then delivered."

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