

Reconstruction In York Vicious

By LOUISE PETTUS

In the dark days of the Reconstruction era, it was easy for the unscrupulous to take advantage of the situation to line their own pockets and to advance in political office.

Two men of totally different backgrounds happened to find their opportunity to profit in the county seat town of York. Their lives crossed in a strange way.



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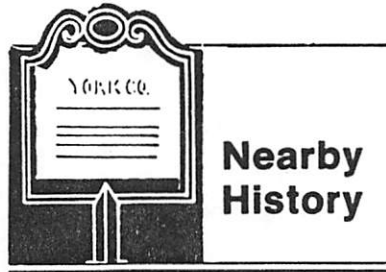
The first man, Samuel B. Hall, a native of New York with a good classical education, married, a father, and politically ambitious, joined the Republican Party's radical branch, as he frankly admitted, "to make money out of it."

Hall joined the Union League in March 1870 in an initiation ceremony with a half dozen other whites and blacks who he thought shared his motives and "had no scruples as to how the money was made."

The radical Republicans saw to it that Hall became probate judge of York County in the fall 1870. Part of Hall's eligibility was that he had not served in the Confederate forces.

The second man was Maj. Lewis A. Merrill, a graduate of West Point, where he earned the nickname "Dog" Merrill, had led a Union cavalry unit during the Civil War and came to York in 1871 to direct federal occupation forces and to subdue Ku Klux Klan activity in a nine-county area.

Merrill and Co. K, Seventh Cavalry, soon were rounding up anyone suspected of being a Ku Klux Klan member. The arrests were generally made after midnight with the head of the household routed from his bed and taken away without explanation to the terrified family. Later it was written that "even Merrill's subordinate officers were ashamed of his ruffianism in 1871."



During the August political campaign of 1872, Samuel B. Hall spoke to about 500 York citizens from the courthouse steps. He was defending himself against Merrill's charges that Hall had used the probate judge's office to line his own pockets. Indignantly, Hall struck back with the accusation that Merrill was guilty of the

"most infamous lie that was ever told on the streets of Yorkville, even in the State House of Columbia."

Hall charged that Merrill, "by the use of money and having men swear lies, thought he could go to work to have the Writ of Habeas Corpus suspended," but that instead, Merrill was thwarted by President Grant's pardon of Merrill's chief intended victims. Hall contended that Merrill, nevertheless, threatened the innocent and extorted money from them.

To press his charges further, Hall wrote a little book titled, "A Shell in the Radical Camp" in which he gave an account of York's Union League members and their behavior. Hall also recounted stories he had heard of Merrill's cowardice during the Civil War.

Hall's shocking little book didn't help his own cause. He was

arrested by the party he had lately been a part of, tried and convicted of "official misconduct." He was sentenced to one year in the county jail and was ordered to pay a \$1,000 fine.

Merrill, who had recently passed the S.C. Bar examination and become a practicing lawyer, persuaded the S.C. legislature to award him \$15,000 for his "services."

While Hall was in jail, a Union

officer named Benner who was drunk at the time, "foully and grossly" approached Hall's teenage daughter. Infuriated, Hall wrote a letter to a Charlotte, N.C., newspaper, Southern Home, which was owned and edited by the Civil War general, D.H. Hill, a York County native.

After the newspaper printed the "insult," Benner, thinking that Hill was to be the speaker at a Sunday School convention at York County's Bethel Church, sent a posse to arrest Hill for libel. Hill did not appear (and said he was not invited), but word got around of Benner's intentions and he was soon transferred.

When Benner and his Union detachment left, Southern Home editorialized that it was good ridance of "the herd of a band of roughriders as ferocious and unfeeling as the dragoons of Cleverhouse."