

A lost doll from Civil War times becomes a memento of history

Chet Callero



Eight-year-old Lula McLean was not important enough for history to make note of her life. But the innocent Southern youngster suffered her own personal anguish as a result of the Civil War.

The tragic event in her life took place in the living room of her home in Appomattox Court House, Virginia. The war ended at her house. It was there that Robert E. Lee, commanding general of the Army of Northern Virginia, surrendered his men to Ulysses S. Grant, general-in-chief of all United States forces.

On April 9, 1865, Appomattox Court House was a small village. A coach stop. An assortment of homes, stores and offices. It is now a Historic National Park. It was a fateful place to be. The last battle of the Civil War was fought there.

Lula's father, Wilmer McLean, offered his

house to Army soldiers. They had come to the village to find a suitable place to hold the surrender ceremony. The two generals and their staffs met in McLean's parlor to sign the surrender documents.

Children who visit the park have a special treat in store for them. Ranger Cynda Carpenter tells the story of Lula and her doll. Carpenter talks to children on their own level. She tries to express the feelings that Lula must have endured on that fateful day. The South had lost the war, but Lula had lost something very precious to her.

Carpenter relates: "A young girl forgot to put her toys away. She leaves her rag doll in the living room. All of a sudden, on one Sunday afternoon, all of these generals come to her house to talk about the fighting.

"After General Grant and General Lee leave, there are lots of Union soldiers who come in the house to see where the surrender took place. They want to tell relatives and friends back home that they had been where history took place.

"One of those soldiers was Robert Todd Lincoln. He has a very famous dad, the president of the United States. Another soldier took

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DOLL

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Lula's doll as a war souvenir.

"History just doesn't happen to only famous people. It happens to people just like you and me. Eight-year-old Lula McLean has lived half of her life in a country fighting a war. Lula grieved over the loss of her doll.

"Now the rag doll stayed in that soldier's family for a long time. They were proud of it. They cherished the doll. They kept it in a glass case. They passed it down from father to son. Even though it's a doll, they treated it as a war trophy that only men could own.

"The rag doll on the sofa in the McLean house is a reproduction made to look like the real doll. We do have the real doll now. It was returned to us 128 years after it was taken by that Union soldier.

"In 1993, the park received a call from a woman relative of the Union soldier who took the doll. She said that she had visited the park and had seen the copy on the sofa. She told us that there were no more men in her family to inherit the doll. She said that the ladies of the family finally possessed it. They wanted to return it to the park where it belonged. They felt it should be where it would be shared by everyone."

! The real doll is now safe in a glass

case on the second floor of the visitor's center. It looks pale, pasty and forlorn. It's about 8 inches high. Is it any wonder it looks that way for all it's been through?

Carpenter tells about an incident that happened a few years ago, when she was telling Lula's story to a group of visitors.

"There was an older woman standing in the rear. She kept nodding her head and tapping her foot when I talked about Lula's unfortunate adventure," she says.

"After my talk, the woman came up and spoke to me. The woman told me that Lula McLean was her great-grandmother. She said that Lula never got over the hurt caused by the loss of her doll. She said that Lula told her "The yankees stole my doll."

Chet Callero of Mount Dora writes about "whatever he finds, wherever his nose takes him." His column appears weekly in The Daily Commercial.

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grandson of Thomas William Channing Moore, who was at the McLean House when Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant on April 9, 1865.

In his book "Campaigning With Grant," Union Col. Horace Porter wrote of the scene: "A child's doll was found in the room, which the younger officers tossed from one to the other and called the 'silent witness.' "

According to legend, two of those doll-tossing "younger officers" were Robert Lincoln (son of the President) and George Armstrong Custer.

Williams, a historian at the Appomattox National Historic Site, isn't so sure.

"It makes a nice story," Williams said, "but there is no evidence to suggest that. Most accounts place Robert Lincoln in the room, but I've also read that Custer didn't arrive until after Lee had left."

And Marjorie Moore (for the record, she preferred "Mrs. Richard Moore," but that's not our style), would rather there had been no tossing at all.

"I'd hate to think of those men being so rough with a child's toy," she said.

The child was Lucretia (Lula) McLean, age 7. Her family had left the house before the surrender ceremony, and a number of household items left along with the soldiers. Thomas Moore, who was then a captain and aide-de-camp to Gen. Philip Sheridan, took the doll as a souvenir.

Nearly a century later, the incident was immortalized in a 1951 Saturday Evening Post Article, "The Lost Rag Doll of Appomattox," by Dorothy Kunhardt.

The story began: "Eight-six years ago a little girl lost her rag doll. It was a very much hugged and slept with and beloved rag doll, homemade; no china head and kid-glove fingers and lacy dress, but stumpy burlap arms and legs, clothes assembled from the family rag bag and a small, potato-shaped head with not much stuffing on it."

Kunhardt also wrote, "The story of the doll is a humble story within a great one, yet it is inescapable, for the small stuffed figure existed and her curiously wistful photograph may be examined, and the playing of her appointed part is recorded."

For decades, though, that photograph was all the Appomattox Historic Site had to show its visitors.

"Periodically, the Park Service would call and ask if the family had changed its mind about donating the doll," Williams said. "They never did, but they did send a photograph and the doll's dimensions."

It wasn't until Richard Moore died last year that his widow decided to send the doll home. Before making that decision, however, she took a trip to Appomattox to tour the park.

"She just signed in as a regular visitor, without telling anyone who she

■ LAURANT

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was," Williams said. "I think she wanted to make sure this would be a good place for the doll."

Satisfied, Marjorie Moore called Williams last December.

"I understood why my husband wanted to keep it in the family," she said, "but I was an outsider. I was afraid that the doll would get lost somehow, and I knew they (the Park Service) would take good care of it."

Ann Jordan, a former Appomattox park ranger now working at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Historic Site not far from Moore's home, was asked to pick up the doll. She brought it to Harper's Ferry, where some minor restoration work was completed be-

fore Williams drove up earlier this week to pick it up.

After all, you don't trust the silent witness to one of America's definitive moments to a parcel post truck.

This weekend's exhibit will also include four display cases of Confederate artifacts owned by Rusty Hicks of Altavista, includ-

ing photographs and memorabilia from a number of Lynchburg-area soldiers.

"Memorial Day is always one of our busiest weekends," Williams said, "so we were really pleased we could get all this together by then."

Ensuring that Virginia's oldest — and tiniest — POW will have a crowd to greet her.

Description of Officers obtaining Souvenirs from Parlor

“Generals Grant and Lee were scarcely gone from the house when the craze for mementoes of the occasion seemed to spread among officers and privates. Large sums were offered Major Wilmer S. McLean for the chairs in which the generals sat during the meeting- for the tables on which the writing was done- for substantially every article of furniture. There were two tables in the room. On one of these the minutes of the meeting were first made out. This table Gen. Custer obtained for twenty five dollars, and his widow still has it in her possession. The other table was the one at which Grant and Lee sat when they affixed their signatures to the final notes which completed the surrender. This table Gen. Ord purchased for fifty dollars; and it is still in possession of Mrs. Ord. There has been much sharp contention between the families of these distinguished officers, as to which of them owned the celebrated table used on the day of the surrender.

Numerous offers were made for the chairs in which Grant and Lee sat, but Major McLean steadily refused to part with them. It seems that a couple of cavalry officers, finding they could not obtain the chairs by any other means, seized them by force and carried them away. They tried to induce McLean to accept pay for them; but he flung the ‘greenbacks’ on the floor indignantly. Sometime after the chairs were carried off a cavalryman rode up, thrust a ten dollar ‘greenback’ into McLean’s hands, and exclaimed as he rode away: “This is for the Major’s chair.” Search was made for the chairs, and the officers who confiscated them, but neither could be found.” (An excerpt from Three Years with Grant as Recalled by war Correspondent Sylvanus Cadwallader edited by Benjamin P. Thomas Copyright 1955 by Benjamin P. Thomas)

“Mr. McLean had been charging about in a manner which indicated that the excitement was shaking his nervous system to its center; but his real trials did not begin until the departure of the chief actors in the surrender. Then relic-hunters charged down upon the manor-house, and began to bargain for the numerous pieces of furniture. Sheridan paid the proprietor twenty dollars in gold for the table on which General Grant wrote the terms of surrender, for the purpose of presenting it to Mrs. Custer, and handed it over to her dashing husband, who galloped off to camp bearing it upon his shoulder. Ord paid forty dollars for the table at which Lee sat, and afterward presented it to Mrs. Grant, who modestly declined it, and insisted that Mrs. Ord should become its possessor. General Sharpe paid ten dollars for the pair of brass candlesticks: Colonel Sheridan, the

general's brother, secured the stone inkstand; and General Capehart the chair in which Grant sat, which he gave not long before his death to Captain Wilmon W. Blackmar of Boston. Captain O'Farrell of Hartford became the possessor of the chair in which Lee sat. A child's doll was found in the room, which the younger officers tossed from one to the other, and called the "silent witness." This toy was taken possession of by Colonel Moore of Sheridan's staff, and is now owned by his son. Bargains were at once struck for nearly all the articles in the room; and it is even said that some mementos were carried off for which no coin of the republic was ever exchanged." (An excerpt from Campaigning With Grant by Horace Porter - Copyright 1897 - The Century Company)

"As soon as Grant left the McLean House, a souvenir craze swept over the Federal Officers who were present at the surrender. Maj. Gen. P.H. Sheridan is supposed to have paid \$20.00 in gold for the table on which Grant drafted the terms of surrender. It is said that a "spirited auction" was held, and that Sheridan, given first choice, paid two ten dollar gold pieces for the table. . .

. . . Maj. Gen. Edward O.C. Ord is supposed to have paid \$40.00 for the table with the marble top...

. . . Other officers either appropriated or purchased virtually all of the furnishing in the McLean parlor. Even little "Lula" McLean's rag doll, was carried away by Sheridan's aide-de-camp, Lt. Col. Thomas W.C. Moore, although it is said that a Union soldier tried to console her with a French china doll.

By the time that Matthew Brady and his assistant arrived from Petersburg there was little in the surrender room to photograph but emptiness. Souvenir hunters had carried away practically everything.

Members of the McLean family have denied indignantly that any kind of sale took place and have said that the Union officers simply plundered McLean's home and stole what they wanted. They have resented the statement of Mrs. George A. Custer that McLean was glad to sell his furniture, and have considered the conduct of the Federal officers especially reprehensive after McLean graciously permitted the conference to be held in his home." (An excerpt from - Biography of Wilmer McLean by Frank P. Cauble. Copyright 1987 by H.E. Howard Incorporated)

THE SILENT
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The Lost Rag Doll of Appomattox (excerpt) Dorothy Kunhardt

The Saturday Evening Post April 7, 1954

All in an instant, the McLean house became a whirlwind of excitement. Swarms of new officers arrived from nowhere. Sheridan, in a dashing cavalryman's gesture of appreciation, grasped the saber he had worn all through the war and hurled it across the room to his fearless, redheaded young aide-de-camp, Tom Moore, crying that he had earned it. Mr. McLean had been tiptoeing about uneasily for the last few hours and now became positively wild-eyed. Someone had looked at his parlor and cried, "Everything in here is valuable from now on! Every single thing here is a relic!"

And suddenly the whole crowd was bargaining with McLean for his possessions; his cherished "company best" room was being swept bare, and objects that no one had bought were quietly vanishing as well. Colonel Porter had recovered his own pencil, the one with which Lee had tap-tapped. Sheridan paid twenty dollars for the small oval table on which Grant had written the surrender terms. He insisted on giving it to Custer, to take to Mrs. Custer, and hurried to buy the surrender pen for himself, as next best. General Ord paid forty dollars for the marble-topped table at which Lee had sat. Someone bought—for ten dollars—the candlesticks Lee had pushed back with his two hands, to get them out of the way while he wrote his signature. Sheridan's brother, Michael, drew a rather hollow prize, the McLean inkstand, which had been found to be empty, and was therefore not used. Someone else got the proper inkstand and its honored ink. Grant's chair went for ten dollars, Lee's for twenty dollars. The mammoth sofa at the end of the room was left, almost as though it were a present for the McLean family. Men in the yard were kneeling and picking the big blue violets—those that had not been trampled—to send away in letters that

night, and Custer was balancing his table on his head, in rollicking mood, his shoulder-length golden hair shining, as he prepared to gallop back to camp.

And what of the rag doll? She had been snatched up, in the first few minutes of the scramble, from the floor. All during the hubbub, high above the heads of everyone in the room, she had gone flying, flying back and forth, in a game of catch between the gay young officers. Such a poor little doll, so clumsily made. But use your wits, soldiers—you have at your finger tips the eighteenth member of the surrender party, a witness who has seen and heard things that the nation will be talking of for centuries to come. Why, the sights and sounds of that room will linger forever in the thread of her rags, will be imprisoned in her stuffing. And thus the limp little bundle, made in the image of a child, became a singular treasure among the trophies. That afternoon, in the lengthening shadows, Lula's rag baby left her home and her little mother forever—a sad doll, and a brave one, riding off without a whimper under the arm of the very same redheaded and red-sideburned aide-de-camp to whom Sheridan had given his saber, Lt. Col. Thomas W. C. Moore.

Even the next day Mr. McLean's troubles were not over. His house and front yard were overrun by greatly increased numbers of soldiers, this time Southerners as well as Northerners, for his abode had been chosen as a sort of club and meeting place where old-time friends could gather and ties be renewed. General Grant took a look at the happy assembly and said it seemed to him like a group of people all of whom had fought under the same flag, against some absent foe, so congenial were they.