

Reuben May Newspaper Article

8th Kentucky Volunteer Infantry

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Typical Southern Homestead Of Col. Reuben May Recalls Many Incidents of His Life

Interesting Character of Vernon County

By ROBERT C. DUNN

COLONEL REUBEN MAY, a typical southern gentleman, was, perhaps, never the toast of the south, but he became an acknowledged figure among the pioneers of Viroqua where he lived from the time the Civil war ended until his death in 1902. During all of those years he clung to those habits and customs so typical of the south, adapting them to this more northern clime. In the minds of men, who today remember him as they saw him when they were youngsters about Viroqua, Colonel May was a huge strapping fellow - a man with a bit of the dash of the south: a romantic figure. They remember him as they used to see him riding about his great 700 acre farm four miles west of Viroqua on what is now highway No. 56.

In our mind there is a bit of stirring oratory, first given by one who has already been forgotten, which gives a mental image of this man and his life. The opening words of that bit of oft repeated oration tells of Colonel May, for he was of the new south before it was born. If memory serves faithfully the name of the oration is The New South, and its start thusly: "There was a South of slavery and tradition. That South is dead. There is a South of Union and Freedom. That South, thank, God is living, breathing, growing every hour."

That was Colonel May, according to the picture given by relatives and friends who knew him well. He was living, he was breathing, he was growing every hour. There is romance in those words. Just so there was romance in the Colonel and his Wife.

Home Among Strangers

The oration goes on: "Dr. Talmadge has painted for you, with a master's hand, the picture..." and so today is an attempt to paint the picture of this man, practically driven from his home in the south, as he built and progressed in this a practically new country, among almost a strange people.

It is only fair to present the picture of Colonel May as he appeared most characteristically of the south. He wore a large-brimmed black soft felt hat, and coat and waistcoat were of fine material. The coat was a long black Prince Albert, hanging nearly to his knees. Riding breeches were what he wore for the most part about the farm, with

high leather riding boots. And he was always astride a fine thoroughbred horse he called Prince.

The story is told that he slept with a revolver under his pillow at night and that he somewhat feared reprisals from his Kentucky relatives. He had two large wolf hounds and wolf hunting was a favorite sport of his, for there were many of them about the neighborhood at that time. It is said that he was an especially kind master and treated his farm hands kindly. But he was dignified and a bit aloof of mein [sic]. He was near six feet in height and broad-shouldered though his sons were bigger than he.

His title of Colonel is not a sobriquet. He was fully entitled to it. He enlisted in the Union army and first served as Lieutenant Colonel of the 8th Kentucky Volunteer infantry and later as Colonel of the 7th Kentucky Volunteer Infantry. Colonel May's parents came to Kentucky from Virginia and the Colonel was born in Pike county, near Cattletsberg, June 23, 1815. On March 5, 1835, he was married to Miss Emma Honaker, whose family moved to Vernon county in 1857.

Neighbors Annoyed Him

It was his entrance in the war with the Union forces that led eventually to his coming to Viroqua. Relatives and neighbors degraded [sic] his property, killing and carrying off his livestock and burning his barns. His wife with her children set out for Viroqua, knowing she would find safe harbor where her family was already safely esconced [sic]. She bought the property that has ever since been known as the Colonel May property for \$1,000, so the story goes. She moved her little family, minus the head of the home, who was still away fighting for his country, to a little house on the place. There they have remained until shortly after October 5, 1864, the date the Colonel was mustered out of the army, when he came to his new home. Colonel May fought in the battle of Perryville, Laurel Hill, Stone [sic] River, Murfreesboro, the siege of Vicksburg, Jackson, Miss., Comut River, La., Semmes Post, and Yellow Bayou. He was wounded at Murfreesboro and laid up for four months. His son, Tom, was also wounded in the war, losing one eye.

On his arrival here he built the house that still stands, a low, rambling structure, typical of southern plantations. What appears to be the main part of the house is really the newest part, for it was apparently built by putting two smaller houses together. The front of the house is extraordinarily wide and there are two wings to the rear. Where one wing was added it was apparently put together without removing either of the outside walls and as a result the wall between the rooms is between a foot and a half and two feet thick.

[photo: Picture of Colonel May's Home, with note: "Standing for nearly three-quarters of a century, the above house, the former home of Colonel Reuben May, near Viroqua, today is one of the historic marks of Vernon county. It was one of the palatial homes of the country years ago, similar to the plantation homes of the south. Col. May came to Viroqua at the close of the Civil war, built the home and lived in it until his death in 1902. Since then it has been occupied by the Louis Thompson family."]

Employed Many Men

The property, when Colonel May owned it, amounted to nearly 700 acres. He employed six or seven men throughout the year besides his sons, and at harvest time had a regular army of hired labor. One of the notable incidents of his life on the farm was the finding of lead on the property. He expended near \$4,000 in sinking shafts and making diggings, and mined enough lead to bring him in about \$800. The mines are still visible from the highway on the left of the road going west from the farm home. They are atop the back of the first left hand turn.

Some claim that Colonel May was one of the first in Vernon county to raise tobacco, and J.D. Houaker, of Viroqua, a nephew of the Colonel, declared that the Colonel raised one crop shortly after arriving here, but did not attempt it again for years, one of the reasons being that there was no market in or near Viroqua.

He had eight sons, Richard dying some time prior to 1884. The other boys were Zwing, William, Tom, Bascomb, Lonnie, Bob and Hugh. Lonnie, Bob, and Hugh are still living in California. Lonnie lived in Viroqua until last fall when he moved to the west coast to join his brothers. He also had five daughters.

Colonel May was an eloquent speaker and had a remarkable and wonderful voice that could be heard, it is said, at a distance of four blocks. He was a democrat at first, and after serving as a member of the state assembly, ran for state senator and was defeated. That was in 1875. When the Greenback party was formed a few years later he became a member and ran for governor on that party's ticket in 1879. His wife died in 1881 and on February 28, 1883, he re-married, taking as his wife Mrs. Phebe A. Aiken, nee Dolliver.

Home Still Stands

His home stands today a monument to his integrity and hard work. It is but a shell of its former self. Its walls are sagging, its basement walls are crumbling away. Except for a few coats of whitewash and fresh wall paper, it has not been materially changed since the Mays lived in it. The Louis Thompson family, of which Mrs. Thompson and two of her sons are left on the farm, have occupied the place for the past 27 years.

At the rear of the house an outer shed stands just as it did years ago except that it is much worse for age. On the ridge is the same old dinner bell which the Mays used to call the men from the field for meals. Further back is an old stone shed, and beside it is a large iron kettle probably used years ago for boiling down sap or some other use. To

the rear and left of the house as one faces the road are the remnants of the old Col. May school. It formerly stood 100 or 150 yards further east in a field that is now cultivated, and even 25 years ago the children of the district attended the school. About 25 years ago a new school was built 200 yards east of the old location, and eight or 10 years ago the present modern school house was built, about the doorway of which is the legend, "Col. May School District No. 7."

[image: Post-war picture of Colonel Reuben May]