

A HIGH POINT IN AMERICA'S THINKING

By Charles Evans

In taking up the work of Secretary of the Oklahoma Historical Society more than eight years ago, I found two rooms in the Historical Building given over to emphasizing the history of the War Between the States, 1861-1865. Perhaps no period of American history reveals the fundamental issues, the hidden compromises, and finally the flaming differences involved in the founding and growth of the American Union than did these four years of civil strife. So these rooms, one designated as the Union Memorial Room and the other as the Confederate Memorial Room grew out of a noble desire of a large group of Oklahoma citizenship devoted to the ideals and traditions of the Old South in the four year contest, and a great sentiment and loyalty of many people in the State who wished to pay tribute to, and preserve the teachings of their ancestors in their loyalty to the Northern cause.

It should be said that perhaps Oklahoma, the forty-sixth state, coming into the Union on November 16, 1907, is likely the most cosmopolitan in the American Union. Situated in the heart of the United States it has been a reservoir into which north and south, east and west, have poured their peoples. When the Oklahoma Territory and the Indian Territory were joined to make one state the population of Indian Territory, composed largely from inhabitants receiving their origin from the South, was 733,062. The Territory of Oklahoma, then possessing a population of 681,115 was composed of settlers from the northern states and of course was saturated with Northern sentiment. So those who planned a liberal, unbiased, and lofty-thinking institution, devoted to all of Oklahoma's people, proceeded with high and prophetic insight developed under law two departments embracing and visualizing the principles and glory of the Confederate and Union cause. To keep the atmosphere free of historical bias, and in accordance with state law, the Board of Directors through the years have ruled that the custodians of these rooms should be scions of Union and Confederate soldiers, respectively.

Observing that visitors entering these rooms are composed of thousands of school children and thousands more of adult Oklahomans and Americans (more than 125,000 entered the Oklahoma Historical Society building in 1951), I discovered there were evidences of false judgments originating from old-time prejudicial influences.

Heroism in Great Struggle Accentuated

That something might be done that would concentrate the splendid positive values disclosed to the visitors coming to visualize and study this period, and at the same time, challenge the negative thinking which was too often apparent, I had fashioned two electrically illuminated panels measuring some 3 x 7 feet.

On the panel in the Union Memorial Room the visitor reads the following:

VISITOR, YOU ARE IN A ROOM OF PUREST THOUGHT AND HIGHEST HONOR. READ THE WORDS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN:

"WITH MALICE TOWARDS NONE, CHARITY FOR ALL, WITH FIRMNESS IN THE RIGHT, AS GOD GIVES US TO SEE THE RIGHT, LET US STRIVE ON TO FINISH THE WORK WE ARE IN; TO BIND UP THE NATION'S WOUNDS; TO CARE FOR HIM WHO SHALL HAVE BORNE THE BATTLE, AND FOR HIS WIDOW, AND HIS ORPHANS; TO DO ALL WHICH MAY ACHIEVE AND CHERISH A JUST AND LASTING PEACE AMONG OURSELVES AND WITH ALL NATIONS."

In the Confederate Memorial Room, the illuminated panel bears these words:

"VISITOR, YOU ARE IN A ROOM OF HIGHEST HONOR AND PUREST THOUGHT. READ THE WORDS OF GENERAL ROBERT EDWARD LEE:

"I LOOK FORWARD TO BETTER DAYS AND TRUST THAT TIME AND EXPERIENCE THE GREAT TEACHERS OF MEN, UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF AN EVER MERCIFUL GOD, MAY SAVE US FROM THE DESTRUCTION AND RESTORE TO US THE BRIGHT HOPES AND PROSPECTS OF THE PAST."

The Event Around Which This Article Centers

As America has grown strong and mighty, the sectionalism and bitterness occasioned by differences of honest opinion more than ninety years ago, is fast disappearing. One of the most remarkable proofs of this, and pleasing beyond measure to every thinking American was an event that took place in the United States Military Academy at West Point on the birthday of General Robert E. Lee, January 19, 1952. It is one of the climactic points in the evolution of American life because it reveals this country can and does lift itself through agencies of civilization until it embraces great elemental truths which bring a higher and nobler freedom.

In order that this event may be recorded with as much accuracy and point as possible, some paragraphs from the New York Times of Sunday, January 20, 1952, are here given:

A portrait of Gen. Robert Lee, wearing the grey uniform of the Confederacy, was unveiled in the post library at the United States Military Academy this afternoon.

The portrait, hung as a companion piece to a painting of Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, Union leader in the War Between the States, was presented to the Academy by a committee headed by Gordon Gray, former secretary of the Army and now president of the University of North Carolina. The portrait was painted by Sidney E. Dickinson.

General Lee, who resigned from the United States Army in April, 1861, to command first the military forces of his native Virginia and later all the Confederate armies, was honored and welcomed "home" at the unveiling ceremonies as a famous son and distinguished graduate of the academy. General Lee, after his surrender, was indicted on a charge of treason but never was tried.

The portraits of the two West Point graduates who fought against each other have been placed on either side of a gothic-type window that stretches from the floor to the ceiling on the main rotunda of the library. The Lee portrait is the first picture of a graduate of the academy in a Confederate uniform to be hung at West Point. Although other portraits of the General and of other Confederate officers are hung here, all portray them in the uniform they wore as officers in the United States army.

General Grant, commander in chief of the Union Forces, accepted General Lee's sword in surrender at Appomattox Courthouse, Va., on April 9, 1865—and then returned the sword. Neither of the generals is wearing a sword in the portraits hanging in the post library.

The unveiling ceremony took place on the 145th anniversary of General Lee's birth in Westmoreland County, Va., on Jan. 19, 1807, and on the 100th anniversary of his appointment as the eighth superintendent of the United States Military Academy in 1852. The painting was unveiled by his great grandchildren, Hanson E. Ely, III, and Ann Carter Ely, both of New York.

Lieut. Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, former superintendent of the academy, in a speech in connection with the unveiling ceremonies, "welcomed" General Lee back into the fold of the West Point graduates. "To some, this delay in acknowledging our Confederate graduates may seem excessive prudence, or indeed a concession to the bugbear of sectionalism long since departed from the land" said General Taylor in a talk before a distinguished gathering of West Pointers. "In spite of the sight of the stars and bars flying from the radio masts of occasional automobiles coming out of Dixie, few fair-minded men can feel today that the issues which divided the North and the South in 1861 have any real meaning in our present generation. By the same token, there has ceased to be any justification for maintaining the fiction at West Point that General Lee's military life ended in 1861 when he declined the command of the Northern army and presented his sword to the State of Virginia. To most of us it appears high time to lay aside such historical blinders in viewing our graduates, and to acclaim with pride the fact which every school boy knows—that Robert Lee was not only a distinguished graduate of West Point, a superintendent who contributed notably to the development of the academy, a brilliant officer of the United States army worthy to be offered the supreme command, but also the immortal battle leader of the Confederacy whose deeds will stir men's soul as long as future generations find time to read the history of this country."

General Taylor asked West Pointers to rejoice in the symbolism of unity that the unveiling ceremony offered. "Today there is no North or South, no East or West, but one people, proud to honor two such leaders as Lee and Grant," he said.

"It is true that we have other divisions, other troubles which distract and distress. But when our burdens seem heavy, let us draw strength and

inspiration from the fortitude which Lee and Grant displayed in the terrible days of the Civil War when the country was in greater danger than at any time in our history."

The Lee painting was commissioned by a committee composed of Mr. Gray, Wharton Weems, Dr. Douglas Southhall Freeman, Wm. Clayton, Wm. Randolph Hearst, Jr., and General Taylor. Maj. Gen. Frederick A. Irving, present superintendent, accepted the portrait on behalf of the institution.

West Point graduates were represented at the ceremonies by Brig. Gen. Chauncey L. Fenton, retired, president of the association of the graduates, and a representative of each of the academy's classes having living graduates.

So on the hundredth anniversary of Robert Edward Lee's appointment as the eighth superintendent of the United States Military Academy in 1852, he was welcomed home to West Point. This is one of those rare and quiet events born of racial wisdom that move up through the decades. Although it is not surrounded by the clamor, tumult and shoutings of men, still it is the most genuine mark of human progress. Eighty-seven years have gone by since Appomattox. The sectional bitterness that has occasioned so much weakness and sorrow has almost been erased. The youth in our homes and schools need beyond measure the lessons of the noblest heroes found in the Lincoln's, Lee's, Grant's and Jackson's.

It is the hope of this writer that some of these paragraphs may be read by some teachers of aspiring youth in the Oklahoma and American schools. Curricula, courses of study, teachers, come and go. Heroes and hero-worship never die.