

Major L.W.R. Blair, Once-Famous Camdenite Remembered Now By Few

By ALLAN F. GOUD

In the election of 1880, two Kershaw County men were opposing each other for high office; one a revered General of the Confederacy well remembered to this day; the other a courageous veteran of the War, well known in his time but remembered by very few in 1970.

The General was John D. Kennedy, running for the office of Lieutenant Governor with Johnson Hagood as the gubernatorial candidate. Kennedy had been the leading Democrat in Kershaw County since returning from the War, and was one of the "Bourbons" who controlled South Carolina until 1890.

The other was Major L.W.R. Blair, the Greenback-Labor Party candidate for Governor, who rebelled against Wade Hampton's program for South Carolina because, in Blair's thinking, Hampton's successors had betrayed the Negroes and the farmers.

Blair was the son of General James Blair, a prominent South Carolinian who served as Congressman from 1821 to 1834, at which time he shot himself while in his hotel room in Washington. It was also rumored that Blair's uncle had been executed for murder long years before. So it is not surprising that Major Blair's life was filled with controversy, and that he also was tried for murder in 1853, nor that he took an active part in the Cash-Shannon duel in 1880, being the intermediary for Capt. W.L. DePass in arranging a site for the duel.

Physically, he was commanding in appearance, being over six feet in height and very erect in his carriage. He was recklessly brave, and disposed to be aggressive in act and word. Charles Moise of Sumter, a political associate, described Blair in this way when writing his obituary: "His private character was good and he was a man of unquestioned courage. He was regarded in Kershaw County as a brave man but a bully. He was a tall, thin man, aged about 68 (he was actually 61), with long, uncombed and dishevelled hair, a long shaggy beard, very dirty in his person and with nails resembling the claws of an animal." Hardly a flattering description, and one tainted with political feeling.

Major Blair lived for awhile on his Father's estate near Bethune, then moved to Paint Hill, where his home overlooked the precipice that is still there. He was quite prosperous, owning several acres in the Beulah section of Kershaw County, part of which he rented out to other planters. He married Miss Sarah Workman, 18 years his junior, and raised six children. He was well educated and devoted a large amount of time to scienti-

fic research, a hobby which was well illustrated by a friendly debate he carried on in the pages of the "Kershaw Gazette" with Dr. Simon Baruch on the amount of strychnine contained in the drinking water of the county.

During the Civil War he served as the original commander of the Lucas Guards, Nelson's battalion, Hagood's brigade. After serving creditably for two years he was forced by ill health to resign and he retired to his plantation in Kershaw County. He lived more or less in seclusion until 1878, tending to his farm and writing articles for various papers in the state. From 1876 to 1879 he edited the "Kershaw Gazette" and was regarded as a writer of considerable ability.

The year 1876 was a banner year in South Carolina, as all students of history know. It was then that Wade Hampton and his followers, the famous "Red Shirts," wrested control of the state from Radical Republican rule. South Carolina had been under the control of federal troops for nine years, longer than any other southern state except Louisiana, and feelings were at a boiling point. Blair was no less a supporter of the Hampton forces than any one else, as his editorials suggest. Several leaders of the democratic party were advocating a policy of "Fusion" with the better elements of the Republican party as the best way to get control of the political machinery of the State. However, a large portion of the leadership insisted on a "Strightout" ticket composed of loyal sons of South Carolina and including no carpetbaggers, Negroes or scalawags. Blair's editorials castigated advocates of Fusion in earthy language, as the following paragraph will illustrate:

"Is the white element of this state to be always a mere appendage tacked to the shirts of a Chamberlain (Republican governor-AFG) and perhaps after him to an Elliott to be used by them for the purpose of whitewashing their motley party or rabble, and to restrain them from enormities which would disgust even such leaders?"

At the same time, another side of Blair's character was showing in his writings. He complained bitterly about a lynching in Edgefield County, saying that the law should take care of murderers. He wrote frequent editorials against high interest rates, which was to become one of the important planks in the Greenback platform. One of his best pieces was a plea to vote down an amendment to do away with private or sectarian schools. He claimed that it would eliminate

Bible reading in schools. He also complained about the treatment accorded Negroes, and accused the democrats of forsaking the promises of Wade Hampton in 1876.

By the middle of 1877, it was apparent that Blair had expected to be rewarded for his vehement support of Hampton and the Straightouts. He began to be critical of the policies Hampton was following; as early as January, 1877, he was showing his dislike for out-of-state insurance companies. Later he called for a reduction in salaries of state employees. He opposed the refusal by the Democratic party of membership for former members of the Republican party. Although he spoke sarcastically of the national Greenback party in 1876, by 1878 he took a prominent part in the endeavor to form a Greenback Party in South Carolina.

May of 1880, as can be shown by a report on the Kershaw County convention printed in the "Gazette." Blair was a delegate to that meeting and took a prominent part in its proceedings, offering a resolution that reflected his complete change-over to the Greenback philosophy. It included attacks on the national banks, protective tariffs, hard money and national debt, but added a section condemning political discrimination against Negroes, hardly a popular stand to take at that time. The convention did not vote on his resolution, and Blair left to become the leader of South Carolina's Greenback-Labor Party.

On October 2, 1880, at a convention in Chester, Major Blair was nominated as the Greenback candidate for Governor, with David Gist of Union County as his running mate. The party was made up of small but respectable farmers from throughout the State, mostly congregated in the northern and northeastern sections. There were four Negroes at the convention, but the party cannot be designated as dominated by centrated in the Republican party at the time. Kershaw County was represented by five delegates, the second largest group at the meeting.

Blair ran an aggressive campaign and, due to his blunt style of speaking, was bound to make many enemies. The Charleston News and Courier has a lengthy article on the canvass, or public meeting, held in his home town Camden. Hampton, Hagood, Kennedy and the rest of the candidates were present, and Wade Hampton invited Blair to speak. When his turn came, the "Red Shirts" in the crowd would not let him address them, but would shout and boo at every word. Even when Hampton pleaded with them for quiet,

Blair was not allowed to speak. A letter from Blair recounts his experiences after he left this meeting, in which he claims that the crowd of "hoodlums" followed him down town where he was meeting with his supporters and broke up the gathering violently and with abusive language. This was the treatment he received throughout the state, most of it obviously pre-arranged, as was the fashion of the day.

Due to the political and social climate prevailing in the 1870's and 1880's, there is no way of knowing for sure who won elections during those years. The party in power appointed poll managers who had unlimited authority in overseeing their boxes. Some of the sites for voting were moved on election day so that the Negroes could

(Continued On Page 10)

THE REYNOLDS
stood near L
now stands. N

Blair Remembered

(Continued From Page 1)

not find them; two different kinds of paper were used for ballots, one thinner than the other so that, in the likely event that more votes were found in the box than there were voters, the "tissue ballots", which had been issued to Republicans, would be easily recognized by touch and pulled out of the box. Then, if all this did not work, the practice of "counting-out" was used, where a false count was deliberately turned in to the headquarters.

Major Blair had no chance of winning with all this collusion against him, but there is good possibility that in an honest election he would have won. Most South Carolinians agreed with the Greenback doctrine, even Wade Hampton and Johnson Hagood, who had always urged monetary reform. Unfortunately, the whole election hinged on the fear of a return to Radical rule, and any other problem was relegated to the background. The Republican Party published a paper after the election itemizing the vote in each county, and gave a good argument that Blair was "counted out" and cheated by the use of tissue ballots in all precincts. Be that as it may, Kershaw County has reason to be proud of its contribution to the election of 1880.

Major Blair continued actively in the Greenback party throughout 1881 and when the election year of 1882 dawned, he expected great things. The party was conducting organizational meetings in all parts of South Carolina, and the future looked bright. Then tragedy struck in the form of violence. On July 1, 1882, the Democratic club of Beulah precinct had called an organizational meeting at which Capt. James Haile was to preside. Major Blair attended also under the strange political adage that you could work for two parties at the same time. However, he took the precaution of carrying a 12-shot Winchester rifle slung over his shoulder, evidently wishing to overawe the meeting. Capt. Haile told Blair that, since the meeting was being held at Brunson's gin house, which was private property, he was not welcome. However, Haile adjourned the gathering to a nearby school, and told Blair that he would follow at his peril.

The following Tuesday, July 4, the Greenback party was to hold a rally in the area behind the city hall (now a department store). Blair evidently felt that he was cock-of-the-walk that day, since Col. Cash, of the Cash-Shannon duel, was scheduled to speak, and the Greenbackers had taken over Camden. Capt. Haile was in the vicinity and was approached by Blair. The accounts of bystanders in the area and at the later trial seem to substantiate the claim that Blair approached Haile in an aggressive manner, with his hand inside the front of his coat as though grasping a weapon. He, Blair, accused Haile of telling lies about Blair's association with Negroes in his home and that Haile would have to retract the statement. Haile, as he testified later, thought that Blair intended to kill him, so retreated into the city auditor's office, emerging with a gun. He pumped three shots into Blair's body, the last piercing the heart and Blair fell dead.

There was much speculation that Blair's death was political in nature, that he was goaded into making threats to Haile. Haile's trial proved nothing, and he was acquitted on a plea of self-defense. Jack Haile, the defendant's grandson, says that the story has descended in his family that Blair came to town with the intent of killing his grandfather. Blair's 16-year old daughter Rochella, who later that year met a tragic death by committing suicide, wrote a letter to the Sumter "Watchman and Southron" claiming that her father "had no altercation with Haile previous to leaving home, anticipated no fracas at all. He had nothing but a pocket knife and his cane on his person, which could not be called lethal weapons. Important papers were taken from his person which will probably never be returned. I understand that a common boast among the Democrats was that Colonel Cash and Col. Blair would not live to see election day."

The editorial in that same issue of the paper fears that the death of Major Blair would be advertised as political and that it would gain votes for the Republicans.

The Greenback party received over 13,000 votes in 1882, but its leadership was too permeated with former Radical Republicans and it died from misuse. Students of the period have credited Major Blair with being its driving force, and his death the catalyst for its decline. Perhaps in time a memorial will be erected in Camden to commemorate this famous son. At present, interested people can visit his grave in Quaker Cemetery where headstones have been placed for him, his wife, and his tragic daughter Rochella. The site is within fifty feet of Richard Kirkland's grave, one of the historic stops in Camden's tour.

Union College, Schenectady, N.Y., founded in 1795, was the first non-sectarian college in America.
