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# J. WILKES BOOTH AT SCHOOL

Recollections of a Retired Army Officer Who Knew Him Then

**N**OT many years ago a building stood on Prospect Street, opposite the first toll-gate a short distance from Pine Street, in York, Pa. It was erected in 1760. In this building John Wilkes Booth who shot Lincoln attended school. The teacher was Richard Bland. Most of his pupils were from the South. Bland was an old soldier who had served in the English army during the War of 1812 and deserted in Canada and came to the United States upon a rumor that his regiment was to be sent to reinforce Wellington in Spain.

Bland, although eighty years old and not qualified by education to instruct, tried to make up for these deficiencies by employing young and fairly competent men to assist him. The institution proved eventually, however, a failure and Bland became a bankrupt, and was compelled to find employment as a steward at Fairfax Seminary, in Virginia, where he probably ended his days.

Among the pupils at Bland's school at the time Booth attended, was Colonel Clarence F. Cobb, a retired army officer and an ex-newspaper man, at present residing in Los Angeles. He has generously furnished the writer with an account of the school and incidentally has related many interesting facts, not generally known, pertaining to the Booth family and the assassination of Lincoln.

"I attended, when I was a boy, Bland's boarding-school in York, in 1853," says Colonel Cobb, "when I was ten years old. Bland had been a soldier in the British army on duty with his regiment in Canada, in 1812 or '15 and when it became buzzed about that they were to be fitted out to take shipping and sail from the St. Lawrence to Spain, to reinforce Wellington, many of the enlisted men deserted, crossed the St. Lawrence into this country and remained here. He was accompanied by Peter Kelly, a comrade, who lived many years in Baltimore, prospered, and became the leading tailor. I knew Kelly very well and have heard him and Mr. Bland talk about their experiences as private soldiers in the British army.

"Bland's boys learned but little and were taught less. There was no system, no regular course of study, nor recitation.

"Bland's school failed utterly, at the last. The old gentleman secured employment thereafter, as a steward, at Fairfax Seminary, Va., back of Alexandria. I am informed that he lived to a great age. He believed in corporal punishment and plenty of it. Perhaps his extensive exercise as a whipping-master was the cause of his health, vigor and activity. He never whipped me as I think I may say I was a good boy, but, I thought, he used to whale the bad boys for fun.

"John Wilkes Booth, whom we always called Jack, attended school there for only a few weeks in 1853. Prior to that he was a pupil at the Milton Boarding School, which was on the Baltimore and York turnpike, about seventeen miles from Baltimore, and three miles above Cockeysville. That school was kept by an elderly Friend, John Emerson Lamb, who was, later, employed in Baltimore, in the internal revenue service. He died in Baltimore, many

years ago. The old school building still stands and is utilized as a country store. I motored past there a few years ago.

"I attended that school, too, when Booth was there and slept next bed to him in the dormitory. 'De mortuis nil nisi bonum,' says Horace, but our later pedagogs make us translate it or write it themselves thus: 'De mortuis nil nisi verum.' We should speak no evil of the dead, but we can tell the truth of the dead.

"Jack was a bad boy and used to fag the smaller boys cruelly. He was a bully until a short, stout boy, from the Eastern Shore, matriculated and Jack tried to fag him, but that boy turned on Jack and thrashed him terribly and he never crowed again. His scepter was broken, his throne was destroyed, his dynasty was ended, he was thoroughly conquered, cowed and humiliated, and all the boys were glad of it.

"I knew Jack Booth's family very well; his sire, Junius Brutus, his oldest brother, Junius Brutus, Jr., his brother, Edwin, his sister, whom we used to call Mollie, who married the comedian, John Sleeper Clarke, whom I met in London, England, in 1883.

"The elder Booth died in 1852, on a steam-boat, on the Mississippi, between St. Louis and New Orleans. All of his contemporaries said the sire was a man of genius, a wonderful actor. I have seen him frequently, but as young as I was, being but nine years old when he died, I could not appreciate his histrionic ability. The family, when I was a boy, rented a house from my father, 109 Mulberry Street, Baltimore. That house still stands. It was afterwards rented and occupied by that great actor, Joe Jefferson, before he became famous, when he was stage manager at the old Baltimore Museum.

"Jack Booth had a yellow streak in him. Along in 1864, during the Civil War, in New York City, he grossly insulted Joe Jefferson. Although Jefferson was then a very frail man and was being treated for tuberculosis, a man had better fight a powder magazine than Jefferson, so he challenged Booth through a dramatist, named Clifton W. Tayleure, and they were to fight at ten paces, back of Hoboken. Jefferson and his seconds were on the ground at the appointed time, but Booth took a night train at the old Fourth Avenue station in New York City and stopped not until he reached Canada.

"John McCullough, Bishop, John T. Ford, Phillips, and a number of other theatricals, twitted Booth about the circumstance, but the amiable Jefferson and Booth became friends, and Jefferson asked that it be forgotten. They became reconciled through the efforts of that sterling comedian, C. B. Bishop, who belonged to the stock company of the old Holiday Street Theater, in Baltimore.

"The frailty of the elder Booth is well known. He drank enough to float a man-of-war, he used to say, and he died suddenly. Jack, too, was a drinker of drinkers and he had but one tippie, brandy-smashes. He frequently remarked that he never got drunk in his legs, that he never staggered. He was a handsome fellow, always dressed well, had on at all times, when on the street, a beaver, as high

silk hats were then called, kid gloves and clean linen. He was, what was designated before the War of 1861, a spad; we call them dudes or mashers now, and he was a matinee idol. Many foolish girls were crazy about him, but he never was much of an actor. As a matter of course, those misguided people, who were in sympathy with him, in the press of 1865, after he was shot, claimed that he was a great actor; that he possessed the spark of genius; that he would have electrified the world had he lived; that the glory of his sire had descended to him, etc.

"That was all fol de rol. In truth, he would not study, would not exert himself, would not apply himself, but he would skim over a part and improvise, and that would cause a confusion on the stage, because the other actors would miss their cues. Along in 1864, Forrest, the Great, was playing an engagement in Baltimore and his support was stricken ill. John T. Ford suggested that Jack Booth was in Washington, that he would telegraph for him to come over and take the part of Iago, but Forrest, who was a tyrant on the stage, and was horribly profane, ripped out a frightful oath and said he would not 'tread the boards with the G—d—spad' and that he had seen him try to act in Philadelphia, etc.

"At another time, a small man, a druggist in Philadelphia, who had a weakness for the stage, and used to travel at times as a star—his name was Roberts—refused to go on the stage with Jack. They had a quarrel and came to fisticuffs, at the Girard House, in Philadelphia, and Jack was fined in the police court.

Booth shot President Lincoln the evening of April 14, 1865, which was Good Friday. An old man kept a livery stable, in Washington, back of the National Hotel. His name was Humphreys. Jack kept a saddle horse there, the same horse he rode away on after the assassination. I enlisted early in 1861 and from the front, two or three times, I got a furlough, for a few days, and would go to Washington City. I saw Jack there and he would look at my uniform and chaff me, in a playful way, for being a Yank, and I would chaff him for being a Johnny. We always liked each other from our school days. It may be remembered that General Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox, on Sunday, April 9, 1865, but the wires were down and the news did not reach Washington and the North and West till the next day, Monday. The country went wild. Mr. Stanton, who was the Secretary of War, ordered a royal salute of 200 guns, fired at every army post in the land. Even the Confederates and their sympathizers appeared to be glad that the strain was ended, that the war would cease.

"Washington went wild indeed that Monday. The mobs seized every prominent man and forced him to make a speech from stands, boxes, housesteps, anything that could be improvised. In those days there was an iron flight of steps on the east front of the old Willard hotel, on Fourteenth Street, and Andrew Johnson, who was then Vice-President, made a most bitter speech. He had a howling mob for an audience; he was then the most radical man in the country; had not 'soured' on the Republicans; expressed his desire and intention to hang every Rebel south of the Potomac should he become Presi-

dent; he was in truth more radical than Thaddeus Stevens, who was looked upon by the Democrats as 'the worst pill in the box.' Andrew Johnson, it is well known, was a periodical, and he was in an unfortunate condition when he delivered that speech, but it was reported the next day in the *Daily Chronicle*, a paper edited then by Forney.

"The afternoon of Good Friday, I was on my way to Baltimore to see my family, and was hastening past Humphrey's stable, to catch the 4:30 train, when Jack hailed me. He had been drinking, but was not drunk. He said that in truth he was d— glad the country was not Mexicanized; that Grant had acted well to the Confederates; that the war had ended happily and he ended his harangue by some quotation from Shakespeare which I have forgotten. He was always stagey and interlarded his conversation with quotations wherein he was generally incorrect and he seldom quoted happily. He asked me if I had heard that speech made by 'that dirty tailor from Tennessee at Williard's,' the Monday before. I told him I had not, but had read it in the *Chronicle*. He then said that he would have shot Johnson had he been there. An old gentleman standing near overhearing him remarked that he, Booth, should have joined his friends in the Southern army long before and he would have gotten his fill of shooting. I left them there. That night he shot Mr. Lincoln.

"After Booth was shot, in Virginia, his body was brought to Washington City. There was published there at that time a daily paper, the *Constitutional Union*, edited by Thomas B. Florence, who had been a hatter in Philadelphia, had served one term in the House of Representatives, after which he had established that paper and was the owner of it. It was what would be called now a yellow journal, decidedly sensational and bitterly opposed to the Lincoln administration. After Booth's body was brought to Washington, an article appeared in that paper to the effect that Booth was not shot, that he had escaped into Virginia, that the body brought in by the detectives and the cavalymen was not Booth's, etc.

"General Benjamin W. Price was then Paymaster General of the army. He sent for me and told me, in the strictest confidence, that he wished me to report to General Barnes, the Surgeon General of the army, and go down with him to identify Booth's body, which was on a monitor, laying in the Eastern Branch, off the Navy Yard. I immediately reported to General Barnes, who was getting out of his ambulance in front of his office, on the northwest corner of Fifteenth Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, and when I told him my errand, he said it was unnecessary; that he and nine others had identified the body; that Dr. Merrill, the dentist, had filled two teeth for Booth the week before; that they had forced the mouth open and saw the fillings. So the identification was complete. The body was buried in an obscure place and some months thereafter it was exhumed and turned over to Edwin Booth, and buried in Greenmount Cemetery in Baltimore, where it now is.

"Booth mistook the Southern people. If the Confederacy had succeeded, had he escaped and reached Richmond, those gallant people would have returned him to the Washington authorities for trial and execution. Such a people would never countenance assassination, would never harbor an assassin."