

Sarah Elizabeth Peese Simcox

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Clinton County Woman Was Nurse in Civil War. Mrs. Sarah Elizabeth Simcox, of Pine Creek Twp., Relates Many Interesting Events of War Period. Called on Lincoln at Capital – Knew Gen. Grant.

By Myron R. Huff.

“My brave lad he sleeps in his faded coat of blue,
In a lonely grave unknown lies the heart that beat so true.
He sank faint and weary,
Among the famished brave,
And they laid him sad and lonely
Down in his silent grave.”
The Faded Coat of Blue.

Youthful acquaintance of Ulysses S. Grant in the day before he was considered as the future great general: of James A. Beaver when he, too, was but a youth, with his honors as a Union colonel and governor of Pennsylvania yet to come; but more than that, as a young wife, a woman with courage sufficient to send her hundreds of miles on her first railroad journey that she might reach the bedside of her husband, wounded in the Wilderness fight, only to have him later die a Confederate prisoner – that is the brief but thrilling history of Mrs. Sarah Elizabeth Simcox, now a woman of 78, who resides in an ancient log house in a hollow bearing her name, six miles east of Lock Haven.

The writer found the interesting old lady seated in a rocking chair drawn up so that she could reach the kettle in which the supper for herself and only son was stewing on the stove. Her face lined, for time has not dealt so kindly with the woman, so courageous in youth. Her eyes for the most part were sad, which might be expected, considering her present surroundings, but at times when she reached spirited parts of her life’s narrative, they sparkled with the fire of that

something, call it what you will, that falters not, even in death, and ages not with the passing years.

Sarah Elizabeth Simcox was born at Curtin's Bank, Boggs Township, Centre county, on May 29, 1843. She is the daughter of John and Lovey Ann Peese. Mrs. Simcox's father was a native of Switzerland and has been dead for many years. The mother came of a line possessing longevity and died only a few years ago at the age of 90. The father was employed as engineer on the digger excavating iron ore for the furnaces operated by the famous old ironmaster, Curtin, and the mother, being employed about the house, often sent the little Sarah Elizabeth up the road to visit for the day with her grandparents, John and Rachael Lucas Watkins, the former a native of England, the latter of Ireland. The grandfather generally took the little girl to his home on horse-back, the child sitting in the rear of him with her hands clasped about her grandfather's waist.

John Watkins was a great hunter, perhaps the greatest ever living in Centre county. The winter meat at the Watkins farmhouse was in a great part the result of the deadly accuracy of his rifle. Bear and deer, in those days, were near at hand in great numbers and the little girl often assisted her grandfather to skin the game. She states that it was custom, on a particularly cold day when her grandfather had brought down some animal, to drag it into the house, with his grandchild's assistance it was skinned in the warmth before the great open fireplace. Not all the wild animals killed by John Watkins were food, however. He became famous in the Center county region as a slayer of panthers and wolves. Kills Buck at 96.

The spirit of the hunt was with John Watkins until the last of his days. He died in his ninety-sixth year and Mrs. Simcox relates that in January of that year, 1881, he shouldered his rifle for the last time, returning after an hour or so with a fine buck and a red fox to prove that his eye was as keen and unerring as of old.

Mrs. Simcox has four brothers and four sisters living; Thomas Peese, of Coalville, James Peese of Lock Haven, Andrew Peese of New York, John Peese of Milesburgh, Mrs. Bell Baker, of Jersey Shore, and Mrs. Edith Crawford, of Altoona. Sarah Peese, at about the age of 16 met Abram Boyer, a young native of Jefferson county, who came to Curtin to work as a farm hand. Their acquaintance resulted in marriage, the ceremony being performed at Milesburg in 1860 by Rev. Charles Ryman, a Methodist minister.

hardly were they married until the black clouds of war began to gather on the

southern horizon. Following the fall of Sumter in April 1861, Abram Boyer took his young wife back to the home of her parents and enlisted in the federal service among the first three months. At the expiration of his enlistment he returned to his wife, but the war clouds were steadily growing blacker and in August of the same year he re-enlisted for three years in the Bald Eagle Infantry, a Company which was being organized in the vicinity of Howard in command of Captain John Irvin Curtin.

Mrs. Simcox related that on the day of the company's departure for the national capital, Sept. 12, 1861, where it was destined to be mustered into the federal services of Company A, Forty-fifth Pennsylvania Volunteers, a gigantic dinner was prepared at Howard by the wives, mothers, sisters and sweethearts of the 95 men of the organization. Flags waved and a band played as the troop train moved away from the station, bound for the south.

Company A, after its preliminary training, found itself actively campaigning. Abram Boyer managed to write occasional letters to his wife during the next nineteen months, but there were no furloughs home and in the meanwhile he took part in the battles of South Mountain, Antietam, Blue Springs, and Crab Orchard, without being wounded.

Starts the Front.

His young wife therefore frightened and resolved to see him at all costs when she received a letter stated that he had been twice wounded in the Battle of the Wilderness on May 6, 1864, and that he was in a hospital at Annapolis, Md. Boyer had been struck by a rifle ball in the right shoulder and a few moments later by another, which entered his right leg at the hip, coming out on the inside of the knee.

Mrs. Boyer had never been in a railroad train in her life, but a few days after receiving the letter she boarded the train at Milesburg, then the head of the Lock Haven & Tyrone railroad, bound for Annapolis.

The trip lasted almost two days. At Annapolis she found the only hotel full, with General Grant and his family among the guests, but she finally succeeded in obtaining lodging. She had known Grant when he was a youth, having become acquainted with him at Bellefonte, where he came to spend a vacation. Mrs. Simcox relates that the young Grant spent much of his time on the swing on the veranda of the hotel while in Bellefonte and, she still retains a vivid memory of his appearance.

General Grant Aids Her.

General Grant aided her in locating her wounded husband, finding Lieutenant Waldo C. Vanvalin of his company, who appeared early the next morning walking along the camp street. When the lieutenant saw Mrs. Boyer he smiled and his comment was, "What the devil are you doing down here?":

Once again Mrs. Boyer displayed the indomitable courage which had brought her south, She replied, "I just came down to see you fellows and to shoot a couple of Rebels!"

Lieutenant Vanvalin found several soldiers of Company A, who volunteered to lead the young woman to her husband. She found him, much to her surprise, sitting behind a commissary hut engaged in cleaning his rifle. He had not been as dangerously wounded as had been supposed, though forced to remain off duty to receive daily surgical care.

Began to Nurse.

In the hospital Mrs. Boyer found two of her former Howard schoolmates, Adam Brade and George Brown both of whom were wounded and badly needing a nurse's attention. Mrs. Boyer began to help the army surgeon the day she arrived and at his urgent request remained for six weeks, caring for her husband and the two former schoolmates. Her husband got her lodging with a woman whose house was near the camp, but after a few meals, which consisted almost entirely of black coffee and black strap molasses, Mrs. Boyer began to think she could not stay. Abram, however, managed to get cakes, roast beef, cheese and other little things for her and this made the stay endurable.

Mrs. Simcox says her landlady was a Rebel in sympathy and often told her all the soldiers about should be killed and Washington burned. While at camp Mrs. Boyer learned to know by sight Generals Scott, Sherman, and Burnside's.

When Mrs. Boyer got ready to return home the army surgeon presented her with ten dollars as a token of his appreciation. She came north by way of Washington and there visited the White House, sitting in one of Lincoln's big horsehair chairs and seeing the President and Mrs. Lincoln. The latter, she says she believes, was Rebel in sympathy.

Husband Dies Prisoner.

Abram Boyer returned to Curtin following his discharge, but remained only a few weeks, when he enlisted for the third time, going back to his old company which was with the Army of the Potomac hemming in Petersburg. His wife followed him

south a few weeks later and remained at the camp of the army until General Grant told her one day the army was about to move, that she had better return home and that she could return to the army when another camp had been made. Mrs. Boyer said good bye to her husband on the day the army began to move, Sept. 29. Her husband was captured by the Confederates the next day, her parents receiving word of it before she reached home. He was a prisoner at Andersonville for a month and died at Salisbury, N.C., Nov. 1, 1864. He lies in an unknown grave in North Carolina, company mates who returned saying that he had been buried in a trench with other dead prisoners, the buzzards pecking at their only partially covered remains.

Kick Instead of Bible.

Fellow prisoners of Boyer told upon returning home of his death, lying upon the floor of a shanty. A member of Company D of his regiment, a native of Boggs, was captured with him. This man was Union while with the federal army, but became rapidly Rebel when he found himself among the Confederates and became a prison trusty. Boyer, dying, begged this man to read him the passage in the Bible which has "In my Father's house are many mansions" as a phrase, but received a kick for his request. When the Company D man returned home he found a reward posted for his apprehension and disappeared. Mrs. Simcox told the writer she would have killed him had she ever met him.

With a twinkly in her eye, half of amusement, half of mischief, Mrs. Simcox reached the next episode in her story. Following the death of her husband, she remained with her parents. In a year or two she became acquainted with a young lawyer from the west, a man named Shurgarts. He pressed his suit with vigor and pleaded that she accompany him west. She packed a trunk for preparation, then told her parents that before going, she must first visit a sister-in-law in Lock Haven.

Disappoints Lawyer.

The visit meant disappointment for she met Samuel Simcox and married the young lawyer, during the visit with him in Lock Haven, April 16, 1887, the ceremony being performed by Squire John Noble. She states that she does not know what Shugarts did with her trunk of belongings, although he was later killed in a railroad wreck.

Mr. Simcox, with his wife, set up housekeeping in the log building in Simcox Hollow, Pine Creek township, where she still resides, and followed charcoal

burning as a livelihood. Two children were born to the union, Louis who lives with his mother and who has gained quite a reputation as a mountain fiddler, and Mrs. Jennie Nichols, of Jersey Shore. The husband died less than a year ago.

Mrs. Simcox has made no trips from the hollow in the past few years with the exception of one to Bellefonte a few years ago when she attended the funeral of her former acquaintance, Ex-Governor James A. Beaver, whom she had known when a girl and who served during the Civil war as a colonel in her first husband's regiment.

Mrs. Simcox has suffered extreme poverty, but her last days are to be happier, friends having succeeded in securing an ample soldier widow's pension for her. She recently suffered a paralytic stroke which has left her body enfeebled, but her mind is as clear as always.