



Years Roll Back on Signal Sergeant As Cleaners Polish Up 1879 Statue

Picturesque Costume and Novel Turret on Top of House Made Barnes
Conspicuous Figure and Brought Him National Notice at Unveiling

By Will C. Barnes

Washington, June 21.—It is cleaning day for the statues around the City of Washington. The fine equestrian figure of General Thomas, at Thomas Circle, is given a shave and a haircut. A white-haired man on the sidewalk walks over to the base of the monument to watch the men at work. He sees on one corner of the bronze base the date of the dedication, "November 19, 1879." What is there about that date which stirs within him memories of bygone years?

He walks on down 14th street. Nine o'clock is drawing near. Government officials must be punctual.

Suddenly something in his brain cells clicks. Half a century of years rolled back. He then was a young soldier at Fort Whipple, Virginia—now Fort Myer—a member of the old Signal Corps of the army in the days when the chief signal officer was not only a brigadier general in the United States Army but also the Chief of the United States Weather Bureau, commonly known as “Old Probabilities.”

He was standing at “attention” before John P. Story, first lieutenant, Fourth U.S. Artillery, the commanding officer of the post and acting signal officer at Whipple, who was reading some written orders to him.

“You will proceed to the City of Washington,” they read, “mounted and equipped with signal flags and field glasses, reporting at the residence of -----, on the corner of Massachusetts avenue and M street, west of Thomas Circle. You will inform Mr. ----- that you are the signalman who is to take station on the top of his house during the ceremonies of unveiling the monument to General Thomas. He has agreed to this use of his roof and will expect you at the proper hour.

“Lieutenant Eben Smith, Signal Corps, U.S.A., who will be in charge of the Signal Corps detachment at the monument, will give your further orders at the circle.

“After the ceremonies are over you will be at liberty for the rest of the day.”

That Crisp Day Fifty-one Years Ago

How it all comes back to the man! That crisp 19th day of November, 1879. The ride from the post down to the city, his horse stabled for the day in the old quartermaster stables down below the White House. In full-dress uniform of his corps, brass-covered German-style helmet, with long, lovely orange-colored horsehair plumes. Dark blue dress coat with orange facings, light blue trousers and white gloves, he was a colorful individual indeed. And by that same token, right proud of himself.

Washington that day was full of uniformed men. Mostly they were veterans of the Civil War, wearing their service uniforms with the odd overhanging caps with curved visor of that day. Excepting a small group of Mexican War veterans, they were all members of the Army of the Cumberland, of which General Thomas was their great Commander.

Carrying under his arm his red signal flag, with its white center wrapped around a jointed staff, the young signal man made his way through the throngs that filled the downtown streets.

Seats for 5000 had been provided at the circle. Even then they were filled. He found and reported to Lieutenant Swift, who directed him to proceed to the house west of the circle and, having reached the roof from which he could easily see the veiled monument, waited his (Swift's) signal. This was to come when the halyards which held up the veiling flags were about to be pulled and the statue uncovered. Briefly Swift explained what was expected of the young soldier.

Signal System Organized

On the open lot south of the White House a battery of the Fifth United States Artillery was stationed, ready to fire a salute when the flags fell away from the statue.

At the foot of the flagstaff at Fort Whipple an officer and several men of the Signal Corps were stationed ready for action. They too, had signal flags and field glasses.

When the draperies fell from the statue, Swift was to wave his cap to the man on top of the house. He, in turn, was to wave his signal flag three times back and forth. The men at Whipple on

reading this signal were to turn to signal the officer at the battery below the White House, which was then to fire the salute. In the light of modern methods, telegraphs, telephones, radios, etc., this system seems indeed archaic and cumbersome. But it was the best they had in those days.

Swift was seated at a small table upon which was a short keyboard, from which a number of wires were strung. The officer explained that a battery of ten guns was located on M street near 15th which was connected by the wires to an electric battery. A dedicatory hymn had been written and set to music to be sung by a choir of 300 picked voices. At the proper time the music was to be punctuated by cannon shots, each charge fired by Lieutenant Swift from the keyboard. For some reason that stunt was not carried out. The boy never knew why until fifty years later.

All Set and Station Is "Opened"

From the top of the high tower, which was not more than three feet in diameter, the young signalman had a famous view of everything. His fieldglasses showed him the group at the foot of the flagstaff at Whipple all ready for his signal. Swinging his flag he "opened station" and told them he would give the three waves, which would be their one for their signal to the battery below the White House. They acknowledged his message at once. "O.K." they waved him.

It was a lively scene below. On every street converging into the circle were bodies of marching soldiers. Most of them were headed by military bands. He recalls that they played the old wartime airs, "Marching Through Georgia," Tramp, Tramp, Tramp," "Tenting Tonight," "John Brown's Body," "The Vacant Chair" and other favorites of the period.

With his glasses he scanned the grandstand below, in which sat President Hayes and his full Cabinet, plus a whole herd of major generals and brigadier generals, with no end of Senators and Congressmen and other important Government official clustered around them. Well he remembers today how much long, billowy whiskers were in evidence on the males of the species.

By the time everything was in readiness more than 20,000 persons were crowded round the Circle.

Job Gave Him Swelled Chest

Everything worked out beautifully. Lieutenant Swift waved his cap as a signal, and the soldier gave three great sweeps of his red signal flag. Before he could pick up his fieldglasses came the roar of the cannon from the lot below the White House.

As he waved he saw that every face in that vast crowd turned toward him on his elevated station. His chest swelled with boyish pride. As far as he could see, the affair, or at least his part of it, had been a grand success.

He viewed the proceedings at his ease, heard the President and Stanley Matthews, the orator of the day, orate and watched the several organizations march away from the scene. He unjointed his flagstaff, rolled the flag around it, climbed down the ladder and made his way back to the quartermaster stables, where he left his flag and spent the rest of the day seeing the sights.

Incidentally he went to L.C. Dillon's photograph gallery, 1227 Pennsylvania avenue, and had his picture taken in full regimentals. He has it now before him. Some picture, he feels.

And now, fifty years later, as he goes over the things in his memory, he recalls going to the opera that evening, but who sang and what opera it was he cannot remember.

Also he wonders deep down in his heart just how much attention he really attracted from the crowd below him. Very little, he opines, what with so many big men on hand, from the President down.

Swelling Process Duplicated

His curiosity aroused, he looked up the date in the files of old newspapers in the library of Congress. Imagine his eagerness as he thumbed over the bound volumes of the Washington Post of that date. Was his presence on the top of that house noted by the reporters? Was it?

Curious to see if the reporters from other cities were as duly impressed with his greatness, the boy ran through the files of the big New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Baltimore dailies. There he was in all of them.

The Public Ledger, of Philadelphia, for example, gave him the following write-up, which is fairly comparable to the others:

The statue was then unveiled amid the roar of a major general's salute, in which the guns at Fort Whipple participated upon a signal waved to the heights by a sergeant of the Signal Corps from his perch of observation on the turret of a private residence immediately overlooking the Circle. His picturesque costume, no less than his novel station had already made him a conspicuous object in the surroundings.

The swelling process in his chest in 1879 was duplicated—and possibly surpassed—as he read these notices in 1930.

'Among Those Present'

He read over the accounts with interest. According to them the Circle was then called "Victory Circle." The statue was designed by J.Q.A. Ward, who did the unveiling. The statue cost \$60,000, the funds being raised by subscription among the members of the Army of the Cumberland, supplemented by the sales of a number of old cannon donated to the Army for the purpose, by Congress.

President Hayes, Senator Evarts, Generals Garfield, Sherman, Don Carlos, Buell, Hancock, Schofield, Angier, Myers, A.D. McCook—"of the fighting McCooks"—Jeff C. Davis and many other noted commanders of the Civil War period were "among those present."

Major General J.W. Denver, for whose father the City of Denver was named, and General H.V. Boynton, in later years Dean of the Washington Press Corps, were the Grand Marshals of the day.

Silence of Cannon Explained.

From these old papers the one-time signalman learned too why the cannon didn't roar out their part in the grand hymn written and composed especially for the occasion. The people were packed so closely around the square they dared not fire the huge guns.

L.E. Gannon led the chorus of 300 picked singers but just before the hymn began, word was sent Lieutenant Swift by the Grand Marshal that the crowd on M street near 15th, where Battery A of the 5th

Artillery was placed, was so dense and uncontrollable that it would be dangerous to fire the guns. So that explained their silence, a thing the ex-soldier had never before understood.

Turning to the theatrical ads, he found that the Emma Abbott Opera Company sang “Faust” that evening at the old National, which was what he heard. His memory was reliable after all.

Besides the charming Emma, at that time in her girlhood triumphs, he heard Tom Karl, William Castle, Zelda Serguin and several other world-renowned singers in the opera, most of whom the present generation know only by tradition—if at all.

From the Public Ledger, probably June 21, 1930