

The Search For Solomon C.

A Bicentennial Poem

My Grandfather, who should have been my Great Grandfather,
(my son, George's Great, Great Grandfather, my wife,
Dot's Great Grandfather-in-law, I suppose), wasn't. He was
my grandfather and
was named Solomon
Churchill Wyrick. Thus, because
we were together, spurred, let's say,
by the Bicentennial—one hot
day last July—we searched for him.

He wasn't lost exactly—just mis-
laid. We didn't know where
the graveyard was. It lay,
I knew, on the corner of a hill
near a road long since abandoned:
across an open field near Stockton Lake.
I knew the name, of course, Wylie Cemetery. Wylie
was my Grandmother's maiden name.
And I had been there before when I
was nineteen, in 1940, before my War:
Well, our war—Dot's and mine, World War II.
We stopped at Agricola on the farm-to-market,
M-39. A village, as I remembered, named
by some forgotten Latin teacher, bringing Caesar and Virgil
to Missouri: I was nineteen when I thought of that:
I must have been.
Agricola was gone. Stockton Lake had

doomed it to a country store.
We stopped, and what had been
conditioned air, became an unopened
tomb.

"Go ask, Dad, it's your idea," George said.

"Someday you'll remember this," I said.

"I'll go with you," Dot said. "You know
how you are with directions."

The proprietor seemed to expect us:

"I've been here longer than anyone," he said.

"I never heard of the Wylie Graveyard.

But there's a graveyard up the road a piece. Two miles, near about,
turn left when you reach the gravel—
about a mile or more, then south.

People sometimes still go there." His face
was ancient, impassive, uninterested. Tourists, it said,
ask questions: I reply. He gave me
one other thing: an idea.

Jerico Springs was the asking place. That's
where I'd gone in 1940.

At the Cosy Rest Funeral Home, we found our
answer. The director's list contained
the graves of Cedar County. We
read: Wylie Cemetery:

Fifty-three named graves; eight
unknown." And there was "Wyrick,
Solomon C., 1835-1921, his wife, Mary, 1859-1924,
Sons Charles and Binyard."

"I remember Dad told me," I said, in the car again,

"that Mary was a second wife—

(The first had died of childbirth in
Kentucky.) "She's buried there.

They had two daughters—I didn't know *their* names, nor
hers either: Funny neither first nor last. They married, the
girls I mean," he said,

"went somewhere. Moved away."

Then we left the blacktop; rode
on gravel; fought a barbed wire
gate; stopped in a pasture: Cows and cockleburs among the
lespedeza. The graves
were on a hill, all right, across a gully-

a corner square in double fence—one
new, one fallen, and part of
what had once been a rock wall.
The fence was difficult: I snagged
my leisure suit; Dottie almost fell and let the
dog get loose. George had to chase the dog among the cows.
But there they were: "Solomon
C., His Wife, Mary. Sons, Charles
and Binyard," the marker read.
No dates—one simple headstone
four limestone slabs stacked about their feet.
"Your grandfather," my father told me,
"made the goldrush in '51; got in a fight,
somehow in San Francisco; got
shot in his left foot; went
home then: limped, I guess, across the Isthmus."
There was more he told me. How the steam
engine was removed and horses
pulled the train through Philadelphia.
He married, had children,
and in '61, Dad paused to count. "He was 26,
joined the Confederate
Army: Bragg's of Tennessee. Got
wounded," he told me, "and discharged."

Wounded at Chickamauga (I read years later, in 1956,
Solomon Churchill Wyrick, Lt., Honorably
Discharged, Feb. 3, 1864). The
Richmond Confederate Archives that day almost empty:
the record—yellowed when I
saw it, burned on one edge.
Then Solomon was in Missouri, a
soldier now in the Home Guard, Union
Army, captured by
Marmaduke's Calvary,
exchanged in Springfield.
late in '64: moved to Cedar County, never left again.
(This from the family Bible, in
what must have been called Spenserian script, hand unknown.)
Three other records: Solomon petitioned for
an army pension—in Grover
Cleveland's second administration. The application looks official:
He was denied; and last,

Died, Sept. 17, 1921,
Buried, Wylie Cemetery,
Jerico Springs, Missouri.
We left.

I tore my suit
again. Dottie ruined a pair
of panty hose; and George stepped
into a nest of seed ticks.
We shoved the dog into the
station wagon, and by the time we got to Greenfield,
heading east on U.S. 160, the
air conditioner had cooled us comfortably.
George checked his camera. "I think I ruined two exposures."
he said.

Since then I've thought about it; ghosts
have walked the screen behind my eyes:
I see and I remember: "No, son, you disremember. Ole Sol,
yes, he had religion, but you see? Let me
go back apiece. What I'm tryin' to say is:
There we was. We was dug in pretty good,
you see? Ole Bragg knew Rosecrans wouldn't
think of that. Well, there we was, lyin low, when
it started rainin. On the river we couldn't see fifty
yards—when here they come!
The fog cleared up and just before us,
Goddamn: The whole world seemed blue,
walking cross the field not two hundred
yards away. I waited, God, was I awaitin.
When the cannon above just let loose:
Still, ole Sol stood there, till, I swear,
the bastards were ass deep in the river. "Fire," he hollered:
Son, I fired until that Endfield was so
hot I couldn't push another menie down it.
Then I fired one more time. Shit, man, that's
when hell broke loose. The gun exploded, went
everyway. You see, I'd shoved twenty-one
balls and powder in that rifle, and none
went off. But that last one did.
I was bucked clean across our line.
And when I come to, there was the Yanks—
stumblin, fallin, bleedin in that river, and there
was my Endfield: Blowed clean apart,

and then ole Sol, standin, blood
runnin down his leg, lookin at me.
and laughin his by God heart out.”
Now vertical lines keep rollin high above
me; the horizontal moves beyond my reach.
Someone asks questions: Maybe Morrow,
Cronkite, Chancellor—all voices are directed to Sol.
See it now: Meet the press: Issues and Answers:
How did Kansas look in '51? What was a Colorado?
Where were the Indians: Was there a Red Wing?
A Romona? A quickie behind the waterfall?
Sol, did you ride a wind across the prairie?
Turn south into a sea of buffalo?
The Oregon, The Santa Fe, other trails:
Death Valley, Great Salt Lake, Bonner Pass:
Did survival mean you had to eat someone?
Or did someone desire to eat you, too,
drink your blood, and suck marrow from your bones?
Was there a Front Street, then, in San Francisco,
a wharf, a hill, and fishermen by the bay?
Did whores laugh behind the windows, and was there
the scent and sound and feel of Orient?
Did the palms of Panama grow through the boardwalk?
Did the boats rock, docked beside the quay?
How does it feel to sit the bank of Chickamauga
and watch 20,000 soldiers walk toward you?
Did you know when Jackson caught his bullet?
Did you see Lee? After all that Gray—
then dressed in Blue—fear for your hide?
Or was it some remorse that ripped your soul?
Did you smile at the Little Big Horn news,
laugh when Wyatt Earp cleaned up Dodge City?
What price was assassination: Lincoln's Garfield's, McKinley—
or Tilden when Republicans bought the White House?
Among those bright glowed hills, why Mary Wylie?
Why wait for Grover Cleveland
to try the easy money—when Sutter's
Mill, at one time, was near
enough? In '17 did you hate the Hun?
Now old, were Reveille and Taps a single tone?
What Gods sang to you? What was hell?
Was there laughter sometimes? Where there clowns?
Were there parties, birthdays, books to read?

Why in the 60's, Southwest Missouri,
a place of springs and wildwood—little else—
and what was forever lost in Wylie's graves,
among the unknown eight buried there?

The sound's cut out on my receiver;
the color's blurred—the channels run together.

NABC: PBCS. Cut to commercial.

But,

Charles, I knew was

Father's stillborn twin.

Binyard—well, Binyard—

Binyard, I guess, I never found.

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