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More than Milton's Man: Lebbie's Wisdom

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Abstract
For such a young man, William Henry “Lebbie” Lebkicher (Company D, 122nd Regiment PA Volunteers) appears in his Civil War Era letters as a keen observer of society. Curiously, he rarely spoke of the larger war or even his friends from the regiment. The few people he alluded to are family members or family friends, mostly in discussion of their well-being. The letters are more a collection of observations on his experiences than a series of back-and-forth conversations with his father. His thoughts are insightful and fairly objective. [excerpt]

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More than Milton’s Man: Lebbie’s Wisdom

October 8, 2014

by Kevin Lavery ‘16

For such a young man, William Henry “Lebbie” Lebkicher (Company D, 122nd Regiment PA Volunteers) appears in his Civil War Era letters as a keen observer of society. Curiously, he rarely spoke of the larger war or even his friends from the regiment. The few people he alluded to are family members or family friends, mostly in discussion of their well-being. The letters are more a collection of observations on his experiences than a series of back-and-forth conversations with his father. His thoughts are insightful and fairly objective. On one occasion, he noted that the bounty payment was late and some soldiers were getting “a little tired of waiting” for it, though he did not explicitly
express his own frustration even though he, too, was awaiting payment. Nor did
Lebkicher allow himself to be overexcited by the military’s vibrant rumor mill,
dismissing whispers of a march on Richmond in August 1862 on the grounds that there
were “so many rumors here that you cannot believe any of them.” His healthy skepticism
was a trait that he would later put to good use as a thrifty businessman while working
with Milton Hershey in a number of roles, including as the first Vice President of the
Hershey Trust Company (established in 1905).

At one point, shortly after the dismissal of General Burnside, Lebkicher had scathing
words for his commanding officers. “I think [there] are [too] many changes made in this
army,” he wrote to his father. “And if the Generals would all work together the war
[would have] been at a close but here the one tries to get more honor than the other to
get a fat office.” Lebkicher was not even twenty, yet he was making sharp judgments of
men more experienced – though also more political and ambitious – than himself.
While it could be argued that his criticisms stem from a youthful misunderstanding of
the complexities of leadership, Lebkicher’s critical eye in fact identified the self-
important leadership style that he would reject later in life. Instead, Lebkicher adopted a
management style that balanced elements of the leadership lessons he gleaned from his
superiors with the followership experience he gained as a private soldier – a pair of
lessons that would make him ideally suited to serve as Milton Hershey’s “good right
hand.”

Perhaps it was his ability of quiet observation and his devotion to duty honed during his
time on campaign that made him such a potent business partner to Milton Hershey.
“Lebbie was the only man I couldn’t outwork,” Hershey once mused – no small
compliment given Hershey’s own industrious reputation. “But I could out talk him. He
didn’t say much, and when he did, he usually snapped at you.” Lebkicher’s reputation
for modesty was often remarked upon in the Hershey Press during the early 20th
century, which nonetheless hailed his Civil War service and involvement in the Grand
Army of the Republic on more than one occasion. To the people of Hershey, Lebkicher’s
status as a veteran further enhanced his prestige.

In order to understand history, we have a tendency to break our past into easily
digestible chunks: the Antebellum Period, the Civil War, the Gilded Age, and so on. But
for the people who lived through those times, each chunk was just another portion of
their lives – a part of who they were. It is a widely-held paradigm that to understand the
present we must understand the past, but we must also understand the background and
formative experiences of any given person or event in history to be able to know their
present. William Henry Lebkicher is not remembered for his Civil War service, yet it was
a key piece of a life narrative that made him the man he was – and by extension helped
made Hershey the town it has become.

To remember only Lebkicher the Soldier or Lebkicher the Businessman is an injustice to
his memory. Lebbie Lebkicher was both of these –and so much more. He, and other
figures of the past, should be remembered as such. They are as human and complex as
you or me.

Sources:


