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More than Milton's Man: Meet the Lebkichers

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Abstract

Even to many residents of Hershey, Pennsylvania, the name William Henry Lebkicher has lost its once great significance. Those who recall “Lebbie” remember him as a key investor, colleague, and mentor to confectionery industrialist Milton S. Hershey from the early 1880s until his death in 1929. But his life before meeting Hershey has faded into obscurity over the years, and Lebkicher’s service during the Civil War has been forgotten by all but a few local history enthusiasts. Thankfully, his experiences have been preserved through a series of letters he sent home between August 1862 and February 1865, part of a collection owned by the Lancaster County Historical Society. [*excerpt*]

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Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

More than Milton's Man: Meet the Lebkichers

October 6, 2014

by Kevin Lavery '16

Even to many residents of Hershey, Pennsylvania, the name William Henry Lebkicher has lost its once great significance. Those who recall "Lebbie" remember him as a key investor, colleague, and mentor to confectionery industrialist Milton S. Hershey from the early 1880s until his death in 1929. But his life before meeting Hershey has faded into obscurity over the years, and Lebkicher's service during the Civil War has been forgotten by all but a few local history enthusiasts. Thankfully, his experiences have been preserved through a series of letters he sent home between August 1862 and February 1865, part of a collection owned by the Lancaster County Historical Society. These letters exhibit the meditations of an individual whose legacy has been reduced to an aside in the annals of Chocolate Town. Lebkicher, like many other figures forgotten in time, has stories all his own.

In the summer of 1862, Lebkicher was one of the many young Pennsylvanians who, responding eagerly to Governor Curtin's call for volunteers, enlisted for nine months of service in a local regiment. The 122nd Pennsylvania was commanded by Emlen Franklin and comprised primarily of men from Lebkicher's native Lancaster County. Soon after leaving home, Lebkicher began regular correspondence with his father, who took a keen interest in his son's journeys. Perhaps the elder Lebkicher was even living vicariously through his son's reports while he himself remained at home, too old to fight for the Union. Whatever the case, the father took great care to preserve nearly all of the letters sent from his son during Lebkicher's first enlistment period, as well as several from later in the war.

During Lebkicher's absence from home, his family went to great pains to guarantee that their son's war experience would be as comfortable as possible. As his pay was often delayed while on campaign, Lebkicher's family provided him with stamps and money



*4D990126.5 William H. Lebkicher, 1900
Courtesy of Hershey Community Archives,
Hershey, PA*

with which to send them letters or to get haircuts. Whenever possible, Lebkicher received newspapers from Lancaster so as to remain aware of developments in his beloved community. He did not simply subsist on army rations, receiving frequent packages of puddings, sausages, and the like from his extended family. In return, Lebkicher sent some money back home whenever he was paid and kept his family members informed about their friends who had joined him on campaign.

In 1863, as the army stirred from its hibernation in winter camp, Lebkicher wrote to his father apologizing for the growing difficulty of regular communication. From his defensive tone, it seems that the Lebkicher family was beginning to confront that which would later be dubbed the war's military-civilian divide, that tragic divergence of wartime experiences between civilians and combatants. Yet the efforts made by both Lebkicher and his family reveal that they were not merely passive victims of this sociological phenomenon. It naturally became more difficult for Lebkicher to stay in touch with an increasingly distant family as his duties became more intensive, but he took care always to keep them in mind and in touch. The military would not break Lebkicher's strong ties to family and community.

It should be noted that Lebkicher's efforts to remain close to his family were not because he found army life distasteful. He was pleased with his officers, and called his company captain, J. Miller Raub, one of the nicest men he had ever met. With the support of his family at home and the comfort of being surrounded by trustworthy comrades, Lebkicher successfully acclimated to campaign life and began a journey that would remain with him the rest of his life.

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