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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*]

Keywords

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

More than Milton's Man: Lebbie's Wisdom

October 8, 2014

by Kevin Lavery '16



3D006.4 On the Homestead porch. L-R: Henry Hershey (Milton's father), William H. Lebkicher. Ca 1900-1903.

The Conclusion of a Two-Part Series

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.

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