

Personal Memoirs of P.H.Sheridan V1 of 2

by Philip Henry Sheridan

PREFACE

When, yielding to the solicitations of my friends, I finally decided to write these Memoirs, the greatest difficulty which confronted me was that of recounting my share in the many notable events of the last three decades, in which I played a part, without entering too fully into the history of these years, and at the same time without giving to my own acts an unmerited prominence. To what extent I have overcome this difficulty I must leave the reader to judge.

In offering this record, penned by my own hand, of the events of my life, and of my participation in our great struggle for national existence, human liberty, and political equality, I make no pretension to literary merit; the importance of the subject-matter of my narrative is my only claim on the reader's attention.

Respectfully dedicating this work to my comrades in arms during the War of the Rebellion, I leave it as a heritage to my children, and as a source of information for the future historian.

P. H. SHERIDAN. Nonguitt, Mass., August 2, 1888
PERSONAL MEMOIRS P. H. SHERIDAN.

VOLUME I.

CHAPTER I.

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My parents, John and Mary Sheridan, came to America in 1830, having been induced by the representations of my father's uncle, Thomas Gainor, then living in Albany, N. Y., to try their fortunes in the New World: They were born and reared in the County Cavan, Ireland, where from early manhood my father had tilled a leasehold on the estate of Cherrymoult; and the sale of this leasehold provided him with means to seek a new home across the sea. My parents were blood relations--cousins in the second

degree--my mother, whose maiden name was Minor, having descended from a collateral branch of my father's family. Before leaving Ireland they had two children, and on the 6th of March, 1831, the year after their arrival in this country, I was born, in Albany, N. Y., the third child in a family which eventually increased to six--four boys and two girls.

The prospects for gaining a livelihood in Albany did not meet the expectations which my parents had been led to entertain, so in 1832 they removed to the West, to establish themselves in the village of Somerset, in Perry County, Ohio, which section, in the earliest days of the State; had been colonized from Pennsylvania and Maryland. At this period the great public works of the Northwest--the canals and macadamized roads, a result of clamor for internal improvements--were in course of construction, and my father turned his attention to them, believing that they offered opportunities for a successful occupation. Encouraged by a civil engineer named

Bassett, who had taken a fancy to him, he put in bids for a small contract on the Cumberland Road, known as the "National Road," which was then being extended west from the Ohio River. A little success in this first enterprise led him to take up contracting as a business, which he followed on various canals and macadamized roads then building in different parts of the State of Ohio, with some good fortune for awhile, but in 1853 what little means he had saved were swallowed up --in bankruptcy, caused by the failure of the Sciota and Hocking Valley Railroad Company, for which he was fulfilling a contract at the time, and this disaster left him finally only a small farm, just outside the village of Somerset, where he dwelt until his death in 1875.

My father's occupation kept him away from home much of the time during my boyhood, and as a consequence I grew up under the sole guidance and training of my mother, whose excellent common sense and clear

discernment in every way fitted her for such maternal duties.

When old enough I was sent to the village school, which was taught by an old-time Irish "master"--one of those itinerant dominies of the early frontier--who, holding that to spare the rod was to spoil the child, if unable to detect the real culprit when any offense had been committed, would consistently apply the switch to the whole school without discrimination. It must be conceded that by this means he never failed to catch the guilty mischief-maker. The school-year was divided into terms of three months, the teacher being paid in each term a certain sum--three dollars, I think, for each pupil--and having an additional perquisite in the privilege of boarding around at his option in the different families to which his scholars belonged.

This feature was more than acceptable to the parents at times, for how else could they so thoroughly learn all the neighborhood gossip? But the pupils were in almost

unanimous opposition, because Mr. McNanly's unheralded advent at any one's house resulted frequently in the discovery that some favorite child had been playing "hookey," which means (I will say to the uninitiated, if any such there be) absenting one's self from school without permission, to go on a fishing or a swimming frolic. Such at least was my experience more than once, for Mr. McNanly particularly favored my mother's house, because of a former acquaintanceship in Ireland, and many a time a comparison of notes proved that I had been in the woods with two playfellows, named Binckly and Greiner, when the master thought I was home, ill, and my mother, that I was at school, deeply immersed in study. However, with these and other delinquencies not uncommon among boys, I learned at McNanly's school, and a little later, under a pedagogue named Thorn, a smattering of geography and history, and explored the mysteries of Pike's Arithmetic and Bullions' English Grammar, about as far as I could be carried up to the age of fourteen. This was all the education then bestowed upon me, and this--with the

exception of progressing in some of these branches by voluntary study, and by practical application in others, supplemented by a few months of preparation after receiving my appointment as a cadet--was the extent of my learning on entering the Military Academy.

When about fourteen years old I began to do something for myself; Mr. John Talbot, who kept a country store in the village, employing me to deal out sugar, coffee, and calico to his customers at the munificent salary of twenty-four dollars a year. After I had gained a twelvemonths' experience with Mr. Talbot my services began to be sought by others, and a Mr. David Whitehead secured them by the offer of sixty dollars a year--Talbot refusing to increase my pay, but not objecting to my advancement. A few months later, before my year was up, another chance to increase my salary came about; Mr. Henry Dittoe, the enterprising man of the village, offering me one hundred and twenty dollars a year to take a position in the dry-goods store of Fink & Dittoe. I laid the matter

before Mr. Whitehead, and he frankly advised me to accept, though he cautioned me that I might regret it, adding that he was afraid Henry (referring to Mr. Dittoe)"had too many irons in the fire." His warning in regard to the enterprising merchant proved a prophecy, for " too many irons in the fire" brought about Mr. Dittoe's bankruptcy, although this misfortune did not befall him till long after I had left his service. I am glad to say, however, that his failure was an exceptionally honest one, and due more to the fact that he was in advance of his surroundings than to any other cause.

I remained with Fink & Dittoe until I entered the Military Academy, principally in charge of the book-keeping, which was no small work for one of my years, considering that in those days the entire business of country stores in the West was conducted on the credit system; the customers, being mostly farmers, never expecting to pay till the product of their farms could be brought to market;

and even then usually squared the book-accounts by notes of hand, that were often slow of collection.

>From the time I ceased to attend school my employment had necessitated, to a certain degree, the application of what I had learned there, and this practical instruction I reinforced somewhat by doing considerable reading in a general way, until ultimately I became quite a local authority in history, being frequently chosen as arbiter in discussions and disputes that arose in the store. The Mexican War, then going on, furnished, of course, a never-ending theme for controversy, and although I was too young to enter the military service when volunteers were mustering in our section, yet the stirring events of the times so much impressed and absorbed me that my sole wish was to become a soldier, and my highest aspiration to go to West Point as a Cadet from my Congressional district. My chances for this seemed very remote, however, till one day an opportunity was thrown in my way by the boy who then held the place failing to

pass his examination. When I learned that by this occurrence a vacancy existed, I wrote to our representative in Congress, the Hon. Thomas Ritchey, and asked him for the appointment, reminding him that we had often met in Fink & Dittoe's store, and that therefore he must know something of my qualifications. He responded promptly by enclosing my warrant for the class of 1848; so, notwithstanding the many romances that have been published about the matter, to Mr. Ritchey, and to him alone, is due all the credit--if my career justifies that term--of putting me in the United States Army.

At once I set about preparing for the examination which precedes admission to the Military Academy, studying zealously under the direction of Mr. William Clark; my old teachers, McNanly and Thorn, having disappeared from Somerset and sought new fields of usefulness. The intervening months passed rapidly away, and I fear that I did not make much progress, yet I thought I should be able to pass the preliminary examination. That which

was to follow worried me more and gave me many sleepless nights; but these would have been less in number, I fully believe, had it not been for one specification of my outfit which the circular that accompanied my appointment demanded. This requirement was a pair of "Monroe shoes." Now, out in Ohio, what "Monroe shoes" were was a mystery--not a shoemaker in my section having so much as an inkling of the construction of the perplexing things, until finally my eldest brother brought an idea of them from Baltimore, when it was found that they were a familiar pattern under another name.

At length the time for my departure came, and I set out for West Point, going by way of Cleveland and across Lake Erie to Buffalo. On the steamer I fell in with another appointee en route to the academy, David S. Stanley, also from Ohio; and when our acquaintanceship had ripened somewhat, and we had begun to repose confidence in each other, I found out that he had no "Monroe shoes," so I

deemed myself just that much ahead of my companion, although my shoes might not conform exactly to the regulations in Eastern style and finish. At Buffalo, Stanley and I separated, he going by the Erie Canal and I by the railroad, since I wanted to gain time on account of commands to stop in Albany to see my father's uncle. Here I spent a few days, till Stanley reached Albany, when we journeyed together down the river to West Point. The examination began a few days after our arrival, and I soon found myself admitted to the Corps of Cadets, to date from July 1, 1848, in a class composed of sixty-three members, many of whom--for example, Stanley, Slocum, Woods, Kautz, and Crook--became prominent generals in later years, and commanded divisions, corps, and armies in the war of the rebellion.

Quickly following my admission I was broken in by a course of hazing, with many of the approved methods that the Cadets had handed down from year to year since the Academy was founded; still, I escaped excessive

persecution, although there were in my day many occurrences so extreme as to call forth condemnation and an endeavor to suppress the senseless custom, which an improved civilization has now about eradicated, not only at West Point, but at other colleges. Although I had met the Academic board and come off with fair success, yet I knew so little of Algebra or any of the higher branches of mathematics that during my first six months at the Academy I was discouraged by many misgivings as to the future, for I speedily learned that at the January examination the class would have to stand a test much severer than that which had been applied to it on entering. I resolved to try hard, however, and, besides, good fortune gave me for a room-mate a Cadet whose education was more advanced than mine, and whose studious habits and willingness to aid others benefited me immensely. This room-mate was Henry W. Slocum, since so signally distinguished in both military and civil capacities as to win for his name a proud place in the annals of his country. After taps--that is, when by the regulations of the

Academy all the lights were supposed to be extinguished, and everybody in bed--Slocum and I would hang a blanket over the one window of our room and continue our studies--he guiding me around scores of stumbling-blocks in Algebra and elucidating many knotty points in other branches of the course with which I was unfamiliar. On account of this association I went up before the Board in January with less uneasiness than otherwise would have been the case, and passed the examination fairly well. When it was over, a self-confidence in my capacity was established that had not existed hitherto, and at each succeeding examination I gained a little in order of merit till my furlough summer came round--that is, when I was half through the four-year course.

My furlough in July and August, 1850, was spent at my home in Ohio, with the exception of a visit or two to other Cadets on furlough in the State, and at the close of my leave I returned to the Academy in the full expectation of graduating with my class in 1852.

A quarrel of a belligerent character in September, 1851, with Cadet William R. Terrill, put an end to this anticipation, however, and threw me back into the class which graduated in 1853. Terrill was a Cadet Sergeant, and, while my company was forming for parade, having given me an order, in what I considered an improper tone, to "dress" in a certain direction, when I believed I was accurately dressed, I fancied I had a grievance, and made toward him with a lowered bayonet, but my better judgment recalled me before actual contact could take place. Of course Terrill reported me for this, and my ire was so inflamed by his action that when we next met I attacked him, and a fisticuff engagement in front of barracks followed, which was stopped by an officer appearing on the scene. Each of us handed in an explanation, but mine was unsatisfactory to the authorities, for I had to admit that I was the assaulting party, and the result was that I was suspended by the Secretary of War, Mr. Conrad, till August 28, 1852--the Superintendent of