

# 'Stop All You Can... Let's Make a Stand Here'

JUST WHAT happened on Shy's Hill?

Was the peak at Granny White Pike and Harding Place the scene of a heroic stand or a disgraceful panic?

The most colorful account of the action on the hill was written by a man who was in the middle of the fighting. His name was James Litton Cooper, a lieutenant on the staff of Confederate General Thomas Benton Smith.

Cooper's remarkable letter was written to the NASHVILLE AMERICAN and was published on Jan. 26, 1889, 25 years after the battle. He did not sign it, except for the letter "C," but careful investigation has shown that it was written by Cooper, whose children and grandchildren are still living in Nashville.

James Cooper was the second son of Washington B. Cooper, famous Nashville portrait painter, and his wife, Ann Litton. At the time of the battle he was just 20 years old. In 1880 he married Sarah Vaughn, moved to a farm north of Nashville and became well known as a farmer and breeder of Jersey cattle. His Civil War diary and a brief biography appeared in the Quarterly of the Tennessee Historical Society in June, 1966.

James Cooper lived a long and happy life, but it is certain that he never forgot what happened to him on Dec. 16, 1864. His unsigned letter to the American follows:



Col. William Shy  
He died on the hill

Georgia Regiment and Caswell's Fourth Battalion of Georgia's sharpshooters, two as gallant commands as ever faced an enemy.

The Tennessee regiments were what was left of the Second, Tenth, Fifteenth, Twentieth, Thirtieth and I believe the Thirty-seventh regiments, all consolidated into regiment and commanded by Col. Shy of the Twentieth Regiment.

This brigade did not fighting on the 15th. Late in the afternoon Bate's division was ordered from the right, near the Nolensville Pike, to our left, which had been sorely pressed during the day.

### A Gay Scene

I think we passed by Mr. Overton's house. We passed a large house, filled and surrounded by generals and staff officers who, to an onlooker, seemed to be paying more attention to some pretty girls than to the duties of the hour, and were having a good time generally. My heart was with them, but I couldn't stop. After dark we crossed the Granny White Pike and, with our line extended from a little beyond the summit of a little steep hill, probably half a mile beyond the pike, well down upon the south side, were told to set every man at work fortifying.

Gen. Bate, as usual, was with the head of the column,

and I well remember his impressive words to me that night: "Tell Gen. Smith to get every pick and shovel he can find, and don't let a man stop until they are well sheltered. We will fight here and the result of the battle may depend upon this brigade."

We did the best we could, but tools were very scarce, about one to every ten men, and some points were so rocky that it was almost impossible to make an impression.

### Too Far Back

When morning came we had very poor works—at some places only old logs and rocks piled together and a few shovels of dirt thrown on them. Worst of all, we found that the line had been located by the command who occupied the position before us so far back from the crest of the hill that at several points a six-foot man could not be seen twenty yards in front, thus rendering it possible to mass an attacking party within a few yards of the position and be perfectly sheltered from our fire. This was actually done before the final charge. This, of course, was not desirable, and the ridge which the enemy gave us no chance to remedy it then.

Between Smith's brigade and Cheatham's division, occupying the position to the left, my recollection is that there was a considerable gap not occupied, through which a road ran.

At daylight we had a fair line of battle, but during the day it was stretched and prolonged till it was less than one man thick. There was a brigade in rear of the hill, as reserve, part of the forenoon, but as the enemy kept driving back our men on the hills to our left and rear, they were moved off to the left.

From 10 o'clock the hill was exposed to a cross-fire from sharpshooters and artillery that made a staff officer's life a burden. After 2 o'clock it was swept by the most searching fire of shell it had ever been our fortune to experience. Three or four batteries at short range were playing upon the few acres about the top of the hill, and if a man raised his head over the slight works he was very apt to lose it.

Every old ragged Rob, as he lay there during that long day—it was the longest day of the year if it was in December—and watched the enemy in full view working around to our left and rear, knew that we would "light out" as soon as dark. The ranks were full of generals. They knew too that if a charge were made they could only fire one volley—there would be no time to reload. A boy could shoot a marble to where they knew a large force was being concentrated to make a dash at them.

### Too Many Yankees

Gen. Smith would occasionally seem some reckless, gallant soul (there were lots of them there covered by those old dirty rags) to creep to the edge of the hill and report the progress of the affair. They would bring back such cheerful items as "Can't see down that hollow for 'Yankees,'" "They'll give us '—I directly," etc. To an unprejudiced mind they had been giving us that all the afternoon.

About 4 o'clock, as things seemed approaching a crisis, I was ordered by Gen. Smith to go to the left of the brigade. His adjutant, Captain Jones, was sent to the right, where (while) he remained in the center, where we were to make report if necessary.

I thought the best place for me to make observations was just over the brow of the hill (there was a bigger tree there) near the gap between Bate's left and Cheatham's right. Dismounting from my horse I sheltered myself as well as possible and prayed for night.

In a few minutes what had been feared all day occurred. A large force of the enemy massed under the crest of the hill, and, by a gallant charge, dashed over the flimsy works before some of the men had time to fire a single shot. More than half the brigade were killed, wounded or captured in a hand-to-hand struggle, prominent among the killed being Col. Shy. Gen. Smith, after surrendering, was struck across the head with a sword by a Col. or Gen. McKenzie, I think, and received wounds from which he has never recovered. (EDITOR'S NOTE: The colonel's name was William L. McMillen.)

The first Federals I saw cross the line came through the gap between Bate's and Cheatham's divisions, but it is probable the line was broken at other points at the same time. Their guns were empty, or I would have stayed with them. Several of them made a dash at me while I was remounting on my horse, one getting so close I thought he would grab my foot while I was digging him with the spur.

### No Stop Left

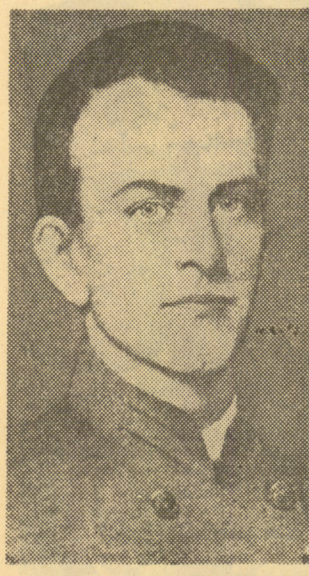
I and the few who were with me lost no time in getting down that hill; at the foot of it I met Gen. Bate, cool as a cucumber, but using some pretty hot words in an attempt to rally the now thoroughly demoralized command.

He said: "C—, where is Gen. Smith? Stop all the men you can at this fence. Let's make a stand here."

I didn't have much stop left in me, but knew it would never do to admit it, so I said, "All right, General, but look yonder," (pointing up the hill to what had been our line) and the enemy were so mixed they could not be told apart and to another line coming down the hill.

### Toward Dixie

I did not hear his reply; with a twitch of his bridle he dashed off to the right to stop the rout from that direction. The "boys" were trotting past with their faces toward Dixie, paying no attention to my rather feeble requests to rally



James L. Cooper  
As a young Confederate

on the fence, except a look of "you make me very tired" and a remark of, "Sonny you'd better be getting round that ridge if you don't want to go to Nashville." I didn't want to go; the Yanks had got their guns loaded and were using them; my horse was frightened and hard to hold; and with one look after Gen. Bate, I went with the boys.

There was no more chance of retaking that hill than there was of taking Nashville, and we all knew it. Night closed down upon a thoroughly demoralized and routed mob making all possible haste to get into the Franklin Pike before their only way of retreat should be blocked. Hood's army had never re-



Gen. William B. Bate  
He tried to rally

covered from the demoralization caused by the fearful loss at Franklin. The sight of that slaughter pen, the morning after the battle was enough to appall the strongest mind.

Speaking for myself, after twenty-five years, I cannot yet recall the memory of that awful field where the best blood of the South was poured out so lavishly that it could not only be seen but smelled and where dead men were piled three and four thick, without a shudder.



### A Dim View

The men who fought on Shy's Hill knew what a beat-

ing they took there—that the Federal artillery fire was so heavy that "a snowbird could not have lived on the hill." But there were others in the army, including General Hood, who took a dim view of the Confederate retreat.

When General Hood arrived in Columbia he met Bishop Charles Quintard, and handed him the following letter, which Quintard copied into his diary:

Hd. Qrs. Strahl's Brigade, In the field, Dec. 18, '64.

Sir:

It is a duty I owe myself, brigade, division, the commanding general and to the country to state facts in regard to the panic of the army on the afternoon of the 16th.

The lines were broken about 3 p.m. on a high hill west of the Granny White Pike about half a mile—which hill was occupied by Tyler's brigade, Bate's division, and given up to the enemy without a struggle.

My command was on Tyler's left and the right of Cheatham's division.

This hill as occupied by the enemy overlooked the right of the army; and the troops seeing it in the hands of the enemy, and seeing the left wing of the army running without making a stand, fled also.

It was not fighting, nor the force of arms, nor even numbers which drove us from the field. As far as I can now learn I did not lose more than 30 men, and about 35 small arms, already replaced.

For the first time in this war we lost our cannon. Give us the first chance and we will retake them.

Respectfully yr obdt svt., Andrew J. Keller, Colonel Commanding.

This letter, in Hood's possession at Columbia, had been written in heat and in haste, and addressed to the acting adjutant general of the Army of Tennessee.

In showing it to Quintard, Hood apparently wished to let the chaplain know there were officers in the army who shared his opinion of the retreat from Nashville. Quintard wrote that Hood "gave me the following (Keller's) letter which explains the disaster."

### 'Not Handled Well'

Quintard paid tribute to Gen. William B. Bate as personally a gallant commander, but charged that Bate's infantry division "is not handled well." It was true that Gen. N. B. Forrest had criticized the division for its ineffectiveness in the "Third Battle of Murfreesboro," fought a few days before the Battle of Nashville, though Smith's brigade was excepted from this charge.

The historian Park Marshall, in writing the life of General Bate, strongly defended the conduct of the Confederate troops. "Physical endurance and hardihood, even with the best spirit, have their limitations," Marshall wrote. He added that Hood's army could not have had "a reasonable hope of success" at Nashville.

Dr. E. L. Drake, writing in Clayton's History of Davidson County, says Hood did not fully appreciate the exposed nature of the position on Shy's Hill, and that Hood's map of the battle was drawn "without reference to accuracy." The map appears in Hood's book, "Advance and Retreat." Drake emphasizes, as do

other writers, that the defenders of Shy's Hill had no "field of fire," and that the position could be enflamed by artillery and "at several points taken in reverse." Drake wrote that "it was a hundredfold worse position than that at Cassville, Ga., which General Hood declared to Gen. (Joseph E.) Johnston he could not hold a half-hour against an attack."

"While the capture of this angle was a most gallant achievement on the part of the Federals and decisive of the battle," Drake summed up, "the strength of the place has been greatly overrated by their historians, who have represented it as a formal and elaborate work, bristling with cannon and defended by heavy lines. This is a mistake. The defense consisted of only a shallow ditch and there were no guns which could be brought to bear upon the assaulting column; the only guns, consisting of two pieces, were under the hill to the right."

It was easy to criticize the men who lost Shy's Hill that day—but there were no critics among the men who fought on that fire-swept peak. And none could question the bravery of those like young Col. William Shy, who was powder-burned by the shot that killed him on the hill.

Bishop Quintard was, for the time, an embittered man. With a "bitter spirit" he turned away from the burial place of his friends at Columbia, and headed south with Hood's defeated army. Sick with despair he wrote in his diary:

"Alas for our poor bleeding land  
Alas for the friends I mourn.  
Darkest of all Decembers  
Ever my life has known."



### The Letter

To the Editor of the American:

A few personal observations of the Battle of Nashville suggested by S. A. C.'s article of the 17th may be of interest to some of your readers who participated in that memorable struggle and rout.

The writer was upon the staff of Brigadier General T. B. Smith, commanding Tyler's brigade of Bate's division. The brigade was composed of Tennesseans with the exception of the Thirty-seventh

### Miss Johns, Mrs. Orr

## 2 Who Remember

ON A cold, dark and cloudy day last January, two Nashville ladies, for the first time in their lives, went up on Shy's Hill.

They didn't go all the way to the top, but they went high enough to look east to Peach Orchard Hill and Traveler's Rest, and over the land where the Johns and Bradford houses stood during the Battle of Nashville, a hundred years ago.

For Mrs. Mary T. Orr and Miss Virginia Johns it was a sentimental journey, stirring memories of stories their parents told them about the great battle. Miss Johns, born in 1876, and Mrs. Orr, born in 1879, are living links between the Civil War and the present. Each had ancestral homes on the battlefield, each can say "My mother told me..." and go from there.

Miss Johns is the daughter of Mary Bradford, a girl mentioned in Gen. John B. Hood's official report as the heroine of the battle. Her house stood squarely in the center of the "no-man's-land" of the first day of the battle, and had to be abandoned that night. When the family returned, days later, the house was a blood-stained wreck.

Miss Johns, like her mother, was a teacher. Mary Bradford taught at MBE soon after the war, and her daughter, a graduate of the University of Nashville, taught at the Winthrop Model School and offered private lessons.

### Has a Twinkle

At 83 Miss Johns is sprightly but dignified, with a quick sense of humor and a twinkle in her eye. At her home at

1610 East Linden she spends some time in genealogical research. Her own ancestry goes back to John Rolfe and Pocahontas of Virginia.

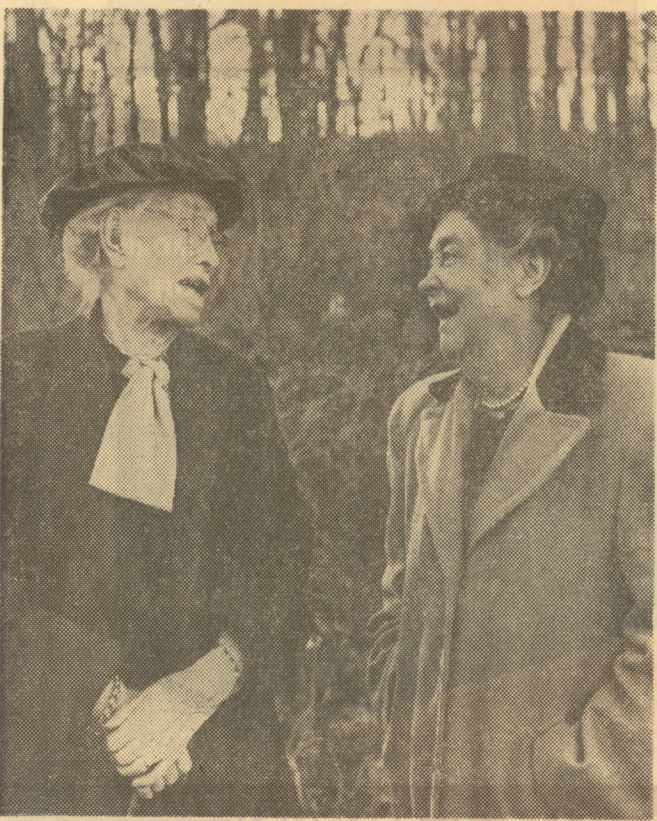
Mrs. Orr, who lives on ancestral acres on Franklin Road, is descended from two of Nashville's oldest and best known families, the Thompsons and the Overtons. A graduate of Vanderbilt at a time when few girls had seen the inside of that institution, she asserts that she can't write, but has put her memories on tape for the benefit of future generations. In 1956, at Traveler's Rest, she delivered a paper on the life of Judge John Overton which was later printed in the quarterly of the society and recognized as a solid contribution to the history of Middle Tennessee.

The daughter of John Thompson Jr. and Mary McConnell Overton Thompson, Mrs. Orr, Mrs. Orr is the widow of Samuel H. Orr. She has daughters living in Memphis and Seattle. Having been brought up at Glen Leven, the old Thompson home on Franklin Pike, she still lives nearby on a part of the original farm.

### Things in Common

Miss John and Mrs. Orr have a number of things in common, one being that their fathers had land on the Franklin and Granny White Pikes, two of Nashville's most historic roads. And each of them married "the girl next door." Mary Bradford electing to become Mrs. John Johns.

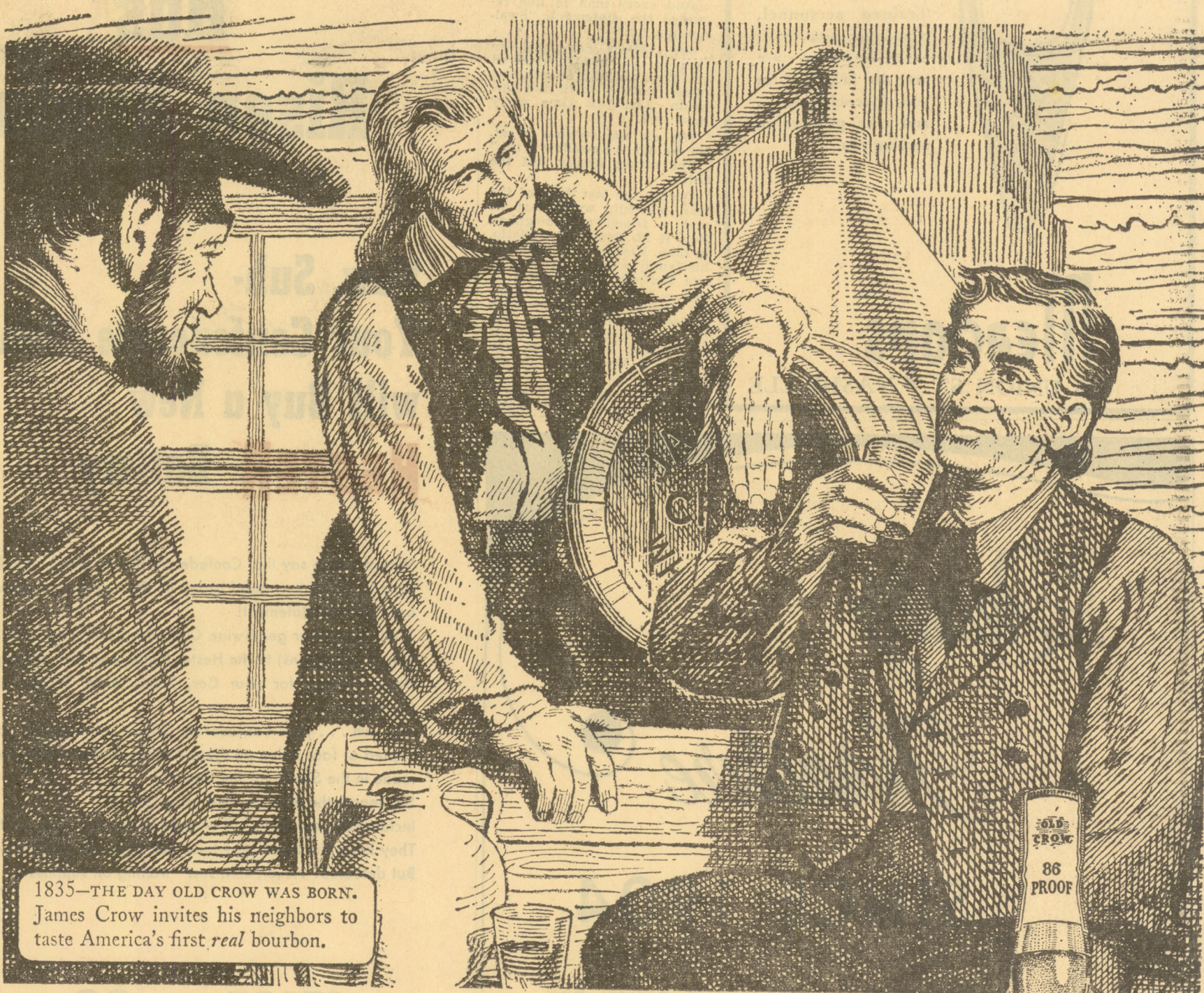
Having been brought up on the battlefield, both girls heard the Civil War talked all during their girlhood. And each has a valuable store of information and anecdotes from the mouths of people who saw and heard the great battle, and fought in it, too.



—Staff photo by Hugh Walker  
Mrs. Mary T. Orr, left, and Miss Virginia Johns talk about yesterday — and today, too — on a visit to Shy's Hill.

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