William and Sarah's Photographs

Readers of my first column for Blue Ridge Traditions ("A Long Journey Home") may note that I said that no pictures exist for William and Sarah Brackin, the couple reunited when William's grave was moved across the state of Kentucky to rest beside his wife after 105 years apart. However, two pictures of the couple are quite prominent on the webpage. Although I am not as effective in chasing typos from my work as I would like, it should be noted here that the pictures only recently appeared and were added after the column appeared. It is an interesting story.

A few weeks after the memorial service for William Brackin, the Bracken family (read the column to understand the change in spelling) took another look at their family treasures and, indeed, two photographs were found. Mrs. Betty Bracken of Xenia, Ohio, remembered that her husband John had restorations made of the originals sometime in the 1960's. John was the grandson of William and Sarah, and he went to Owensboro, Kentucky to visit other family members, located the pictures and had copies made. Mrs. Bracken remembers that the restorations were expensive. Unfortunately, John Bracken is no longer with us and Betty does not know what the originals looked like, but it is probable they were what were known as tintypes.

A number of years ago, before digital photography allowed the average person to restore old images with a computer, photographic studios did a booming business in restoring old photographs, and some still do. The pictures of William and Sarah are obvious restorations, since there are no blemishes. Artists with airbrushes could work wonders with old photographs, even adding the other side of a face if one side had been lost over the years.

William and Sarah
Supplied by Mrs. Betty (John) Bracken, Xenia, Ohio

We believe that these pictures were taken

around the time of the wedding of William and Sarah, maybe on their wedding day itself, in 1866. Sarah's resemblance to Dorothea Buchanan, who stands next to me in one of the pictures in my column, is obvious. Sarah seems so innocent, wide-eyed and nervous, as many brides are when they begin the most important chapter of their lives, and William, although he is attempting to smile, also seems nervous, befitting a young groom embarking on the same chapter. But there is also an air of tragedy around his eyes, as if he had seen too much for a young man in the middle of the Nineteenth Century. He seems to be wearing his Union cavalry uniform, as there is the hint of insignia on his collar, along with brass buttons on his jacket, and since he served honorably throughout the Civil War, there is little doubt he saw much tragedy in his service. But photographs are captured moments, sometimes deliberate and sometimes unaware, and they are always open to interpretation.

Old pictures are often grim, but mostly because exposure times were long and the subjects were uncomfortable. Most pictures like these were daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, tintypes, or wet-plate or dry-plate prints. Photographs were still relatively new to the world when William and Sarah married and the time frame indicates they were probably tintypes. Like most wars, the Civil War hastened development of certain technologies, and photography during the War, especially as a result of Matthew Brady's work.

The first photographic images were developed in Europe, either calotypes or daguerreotypes, using light-sensitive solutions spread onto a paper (calotype) or metal (daguerreotype) plate. The metal plate process created by Louis J. M. Daguerre in the 1830's produced the better image, but he had a patent and strictly enforced it. To save royalty fees, some photographers experimented with other processes. Ambrotypes came along just before the Civil War and used a glass plate that required putting a dark background behind the image so that it could be viewed. But glass is inherently fragile and itinerant photographers, especially in America, needed something more stable when traveling. Consequently, the tintype, also known as ferrotype, came into being just before the Civil War and remained popular until the end of the century.

The problem with all these processes was that they were one-shot affairs. If a customer wanted several pictures, he had to endure several sittings, none of which were pleasant since exposures took

several minutes and photographers often used clamps on the back of their subjects' skulls to keep them immobile. Later on, the invention of wet-plate and then dry-plate negatives, using the glass from the old ambrotpe process, enabled multiple prints to be made from a single negative. However, most rural areas continued to use tintypes because they were cheaper and there was less risk of loss, not just from broken glass, but because the chemicals used in wet-plate photography were actually explosive. However, one photographer became famous using wet-plate, or colloidal, technology during the Civil War.

Matthew Brady was a well-known "daguerreotypist" who adopted the new process so that he could follow the eastern Union Army and take pictures for resale in his New York studio. He did well for a while, especially after the New York Times said: " "Mr. Brady has done something to bring home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of war. If he has not brought bodies and laid them in our door-yards and along the streets, he has done something very like it...."

But that was in 1862, and as the War droned on and the losses mounted catastrophically, no one wanted to see Brady's unrelentingly horrific images. He died a penniless alcoholic and of the seven thousand glass plate images he made of the War, many were sold for greenhouse glass, their irreplaceable images fading long before the memories of the Civil War burned out of the nation's consciousness. In strictly historical terms, the loss is incalculable.

Which brings us back to William and Sarah. In rural Ohio County, Kentucky in 1866, it was likely that the couple had a tintype done for their wedding, since few customers had the money for reprints. The pictures Mr. John Bracken had restored a hundred years later were probably the only pictures made of the couple. They were probably the popular carte-de-viste, which were about 2 ½ by 3 ½ inches and placed in some sort of decorative frame. The restoration artist would have made pictures of the pictures and then airbrushed out any imperfections to make modern 8 X 10 prints. Perhaps some of the Bracken family may still have the originals, and maybe they will some day be found.

I hope they do. These portraits are good enough for me, and William appears very much like I pictured him in my mind during the years my family decorated his grave, never knowing who he was or how he

came to my valley in the hills of Kentucky until eight decades after his death. But the Brackens deserve to have the originals. They need to have what the young couple spent their precious money on in 1866, to have the same pictures they would have proudly showed their family and friends, to have the same picture that William would have looked at in his sorrow after he buried Sarah in 1898. They need to be able to touch the same objects their ancestors touched.

Families deserve such things; these are the threads that link generations and remind us that we are who we are, and that there is a sacred duty to remember our people and our past. These are the tangible objects, when we are lucky enough to have them, that confirm our dreams.

Laura Summers, who is in the picture with Dorothea Buchanan and me at William's memorial service, sent me these pictures via email; their digital images swooping from her computer to mine in less than a heartbeat. My wife printed both of them for me in a fraction of the time the photographer would have used to open the shutter when they sat for him. And anyone in the world can see them with a mouse click on this website. Technology has advanced with breathtaking speed in the last one hundred forty years, and every year advances bewilderingly faster.

But my favorite place to view these pictures is in the old-fashioned frames I put them in, beside other pictures of my history. Pictures of my parents, my grandparents, ancestors I never knew, pictures I have found, sometimes after I had forgotten them, pictures I have salvaged from relatives or friends who were kind enough to share with me something important to my life. I keep them on the shelf at my home where I keep all my family pictures.

Now including William and Sarah's.