The Colonel's Pajamas:
The Gustave Cook Collection

by Claire Wilkerson

Strolling through HCU's Museum of Southern History I became intrigued with a particular artifact. On display opposite a military uniform is a faded shirt with frills. Intrigued as to what this shirt was and why it was on display, I read the description. The small slip of paper said, "Col Cook's embroidered Night Shirt." I could not help but laugh out loud as I thought about what it might be like for a museumgoer almost two centuries from now see my own pajamas in a display case. Horrified at the thought, I began to examine the other items in the collection.

The assortment of belongings surrounding the night shirt were the property of Colonel Gustave Cook, a former Texas attorney, judge, and politician who served with Terry's Texas Rangers during the Civil War. The collection was donated to the museum by Sharon Ambrose Duntley of Houston, Cook's great-great granddaughter and includes his prayer book, a military frock coat, beaver skin gloves, a felt slouch hat, a beaver skin haversack with a canvas strap, and the cotton nightshirt. All of the items are dated ca. 1861. As I looked at these items I started to piece together the life of this man. The most fascinating pieces of the collection are the prayer book and the nightshirt because they are the most human elements. These are intimate items that are entirely specific to Cook and his experiences.

The prayer book sits opened to the first page where you can read scrawling handwriting of a descendent. The descendant wrote, "This prayer book was used by your great great grandfather Gustave Cook during the Civil War." The book is a 4" high, 2.5" wide copy of the 1789 Book of Common Prayer of the United States Episcopal Church. Above is the tattered nightshirt. A stain adorns the middle, likely there just from age. The shirt is detailed with green

buttons and small strips of fabric, likely scraps left over from one of his wife's dresses. I can picture him in a military camp, lying in bed and participating in the Daily Office of Prayer when he wakes and before he goes to sleep and thinking of home when he sees the detailing on his night shirt.

Cook became a man in a tumultuous time in American history. Born in Lowndes County, Alabama in July of 1835, he came to Texas alone at the age of fifteen with "neither friend nor acquaintance west of the Mississippi river" (Daniell 189). He came looking for adventure, inspired by stories of his Uncle who fought in the Texas War for Independence. To make money Cook clerked in a drug store and learned the business. According to his biographer Lewis Daniell, "This was the turning point in his life, and from the date of his abandonment of the boyish desire for adventure" (190). In 1853 ,at the age of eighteen, he married his wife, Eliza Jones. The pair would go on to have four children.

In 1854 Cook, under the encouragement of friends, began to educate himself and training to be a lawyer. He was admitted to the bar in 1855 and before he was twenty-one, he was Clerk of the District Court of Court Bend county (191). In 1861 he enlisted as a private in the Texas army later becoming a private in the Eighth Confederate Cavalry, also known as Terry's Texas Rangers. He would eventually work his way up to Colonel. Cook's time in the army was tumultuous. He remarked to a friend once, "I never could understand why it was that I couldn't go through a battle without getting in the way of a Yankee bullet" (Kittrell 106). And this was indeed true. Of his war wounds Daniell notes:

> "At Shiloh, his right leg was broken by a musket ball; at Farmington, Tennessee, he was shot through the right arm, and received a shot through the right hand that fractured every bone in it, disfiguring, and almost disabling it; at Buckhead Church, Georgia, he was

> wounded, by a minie ball, through the right ankle, and at Bentonville he was shot through the right shoulder, the ball lodging in the rear of the lung. He received six or seven wounds during the war, and the scars he wears tell a tale of courage and gallantry and heroism far more eloquent than the praise of his biographer." (191)

Cook was indeed a resilient man.

Daniell makes clear that Cook "had voted for secession, and he offered his life to secure it" (191). There exists a tension in Gustave Cook's life, like all men, between virtue and vice. Cook fought on the side of the pro-slavery confederacy in the Civil War, in favor of upholding the southern way of life with an economic infrastructure built on slavery. In spite of this moral misjudgment, Cook still remains a figure to be learned from. And this can be seen by the way he lived the latter half of his life. In 1870, after recovering from the war, he moved to Houston. In 1872 be became an elected member of the Thirteenth Legislature of Texas and in 1874 he was appointed Judge of the Criminal Court for the District of Galveston and Harris counties and served as such until 1888 (Daniell 192). As a judge he was committed to upholding order and peace. Daniell praises him writing, "The working classes have no truer friend than Judge Cook" (193). Daniell also notes, "Dignity, uprightness and absolute justice characterize his actions on the bench" (194).

Another virtue of Col. Cook was his devout faith. This can be seen in his prayer book that he made sure to carry into battle. It is said that "He makes no concealment of his devout gratitude to God for past preservation and present prosperity" and "The controlling principle of his life has been to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before God" (Daniell 194). I think that humility before God aptly describes Col. Cook. In an auto-biographical sketch given to the *Confederate Veteran* magazine in 1893, shortly before his death, Cook describes his life: "The

truth is, I never did or said anything worthy of record in either civil or military life" (254). He goes on to describe his family as his greatest accomplishment, "I have four children and fifteen grandchildren. In this I have been moderately successful, and possibly have not lived entirely in vain"(254).

Cook, though a humble man, was well regarded by the public for his commitment to justice. One lawyer that knew Cook describes him writing:

> "any story of the public men of Texas which did not include Gustave Cook would be like the tragedy of Hamlet with the melancholy Dane omitted from the cast. He was strictly *sui generis.* He had neither precedent nor model. He was a bundle of inconsistencies and contradictions, but nevertheless through his mental and moral makeup there ran a thread of pure gold." (Kittrell 106)

Standing in the Museum of Southern History, looking upon a man's pajamas, I see more than meets the eye. In a pair of pajamas there is the symbol of human weakness and fragility. But there is also the promise of a coming morning, where—by the grace of God—a man can start all over again. Truly Gustave Cook was a man like this, who took on life with balled fists and gritted teeth, saying his prayers before bed.

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