

CLOSET SKELETONS

I rather like the name John Cobb. It has a nice ring to it. The English seem to favor it too; the London telephone directory is full of them. As I recall, there was at least one famous contemporary John Cobb. On 1 September 1947, John Edward Cobb made the cover of Life magazine. This London fur broker and racing car driver was cited for breaking land speed records on the salt flats of Utah. But a not so famous John Cobb of 16th Century Kent lost his seat in the church, among other things, for philandering or just "fooling around." The Archdeacon's Series on Reculver, Kent includes the following item, dated 11 October 1579: "We have conformed our state with the Queenes Majestyes injunctions and we find nothing that craveth reformation but those things followinge: . . . we complyne of the like offence geven by the uncharitable lives of John Cobb, the younger, and Clement Paramoure wife of the said George Paramoure whose reconcelliations for as much as they cannot be procured by no mistrye nor persuasion of our ministre . . . we crave most humbly that they spedely be don by authoritye and by publik ponishment of the partyes offendant . . . Joshua Huttey, minister; Thomas Hunt, churchwarden." C'est La Vie:

It is written that Sir Thomas Cobb(e) was decapitated at Her Majesty's Tower of London which, if true, would surely be the most genteel of all Cobb closet skeletons.

The Tower of London was built by William the Conqueror over 900 years ago "to inspire fear and trembling in his newly won, hostile and turbulent kingdom." It was here that queens, bishops, and knights were separated from their heads by the axe. Some of the well known among them were: Sir Thomas More (in 1535 for Catholicism), two of Henry VIII's six wives--Anne Boleyn (in 1536 for infidelity) and Catherine Howard (in 1542 for unchastity). Even Sir Walter Raleigh was imprisoned here for 12 years for conspiracy before being beheaded in 1618 at Westminster.

The account of Thomas Cobb is given in Colonial Families of America, Volume X, page 219, New York, 1932: "Sir Thomas Cobb of England was executed at the Tower of London as an adherent of the Stuart cause; his property was confiscated by the Government and his two daughters sent to convents on the Continent; his sons Augustine and Morgan were also sent to the Continent."

This legend makes titillating copy, but on extensive investigation a somewhat different story evolves: At the Public Record Office, Chancery Lane, London there is a document--Prisoners of the Tower by A. H. Cook, DCM, MM, BEM, formerly Chief Warder, HM Tower of London, dated 10 September 1959. This document lists all prisoners known to have been in the Tower(s). It can be seen in "the Round Room" by proper and persistent researchers. It shows: (1) in 1554 Thomas Cobham was tried and condemned to death but was subsequently pardoned and released in March of 1554, (2) in 1571 Thomas Cobham was involved in the Ridolfi plot, released in 1571.

Robert Ridolfi was born in Florence, Italy, 18 November 1531. In 1570-71 Ridolfi and his fellow conspirators attempted to overthrow Queen Elizabeth I of England in favor of Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots. These results were to be secured by the murder of Queen Elizabeth and a Spanish invasion of England. Ridolfi's intentions were exposed in April 1571 when his messenger Charles Baille was arrested at Dover, Kent,

Brian Harrison, currently a yeoman warder at the Tower, advises that Cobham's 1554 incarceration was due to another affair, his involvement in the Wyatt rebellion against Mary Tudor ("Bloody Mary").

In summary, when you visit the Tower of London, go to Beauchamp Tower. There you will find on the wall by a window overlooking "the Tower green" the name of Thomas Cobham, carved in stone by the prisoner himself while awaiting his rendezvous with the axe. But bear in mind that Sir Thomas Cobham was from the noble family of

Cobham, Kent which on occasion used the name "Brooke" but never "Cobb(e)," for the two Kentish families were unrelated.

There was an American Thomas Cobb who had a serious problem. The following entry is recorded in the Bruton and Middleton Parish Register, James City County, Virginia: "Thomas Davis Allis Cobb, a bastard son of Elizabeth Davis, widow of Lewis Davis deceased, was born in 1776." (Now, Thomas Cobb was not a completely irresponsible fellow for at some point between the date of his 1771 York County will and his death in 1774 he married Mrs. Davis. Is he your Thomas? See his pedigree at page 224.)

Most of the early Cobb emigrants from England to the Colony were Yeomen or free men. There is, however, one exception: Daniel Cobb was transported from Newgate Prison to Maryland aboard the ship "Patapscoe Merchant" in April 1733 as an indentured servant. The cause of Daniel Cobb's imprisonment or the seriousness of his crime is unknown. During this period there were some 150 capital crimes for which a man might be imprisoned or sent off to settle the colony. There were, of course, the major ones--murder, arson, treason, etc. There were also crimes of relative insignificance such as sending threatening letters, cutting down trees along an avenue and standing mute when addressed by a person of authority. Some convicts were persons of quality. As a child, George Washington was taught by a convict who had been a schoolmaster in England. One Englishman was sent to America as an indentured servant for seven years for stealing a chicken. It should be noted that the descendants of Daniel Cobb have not been identified in this book.

The skeleton spares no closet. John Cobb, the patriarch of the renowned Georgia family, also came upon hard times. Cobb was born in Albemarle County, Virginia, about 1740 and like a great many Cobbs, he married well. In 1768 he married Mildred Lewis then of Granville County, North Carolina; she was from one of the wealthiest and

most prominent families in the Old Dominion. William B. McCash, a Cobb biographer, discovered that in 1784, John Cobb, with his Virginia kin and associates, speculated extensively in land in Georgia. Cobb already owned thousands of acres in North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Kentucky. Some years later he moved permanently to Georgia to manage his holdings in five counties there. Unfortunately, his involvement in politics led to disagreeable controversies and undermined old friendships. At one point, he assaulted two newspaper editors who had printed unfavorable comments about him. He had become financially overextended and plagued with lawsuits. In 1800 he was defeated in a bid for the State Legislature. By 1807 his ruin was complete. On the insistence of a creditor, he was imprisoned in the Jefferson County Jail for four months. With his reputation blemished, he died a few years later a broken man.

At the end of the 18th century down in North Carolina, one of my own kinsmen found himself in "a heap a' trouble." The following was discovered, much to my chagrin, in the "Bastardy bonds and papers" (1771-1909), North Carolina State Archives: State of North Carolina, Edgecombe County--To any lawful officer to execute and return. This day came Dortries Dehority, single woman, before two of the Justices for the said County and made oath that she is with child, which when born will likely be chargeable to our said County and charges Edward Cobb to be the imputed father of the said bastard child. This is to command you on sight to take the body of him, the said Cobb, and cause him to appear before us or any two Justices for the said County and there to be dealt with as the law directs in such cases Given under our hands and seals this 8th day of December 1794. (sic) Signed: Joseph Pender & Elnathan Tartt, Court Justices. On 27 December 1794, Edward Cobb and friend Benjamin Williams appeared before Justice Pender and paid 150 pounds to guarantee the presence of Edward Cobb for trial at the Tarboro Court House on the "last Monday in February." The finding of the Court is unknown.

The following bizarre pedigree fissure was told by Irwin S. Cobb, not by Robert L. Ripley as a "believe it or not." Cobb in his book Exit Laughing tells a not totally convincing story of his grandfather's revelation:

Thinking back, I can summon up a coherent vision of that autumnal afternoon and two sitting together on a log, the octogenarian and the sapling in his early teens at the edge of a cypress slash above a little lazy by-creek which loafed along at the back side of my grandfather's shorn tobacco patch. He began, as usual, without preamble. He said:

"One of my father's older brothers took up with a Cherokee squaw. This was soon after he came out to Kentucky, about the time the Revolutionary War ended. I don't know whether he married her. It was a thing the family didn't talk about afterward, although, back yonder, there was a lot of that sort of thing going on. By this Indian woman my uncle had a son who was named Nathaniel Saunders, but while he still was a shaver people took to calling him Bull Saunders: he had such a fierce temper and was so strong physically. Even in a country as raw and rough as that was, he had a hard reputation, from boyhood on up. This is hearsay with me. He was gone from those parts when I came along.

"The explanation was that, to get rid of him, he'd been sent off as a student to West Point soon after West Point was founded. According to the same story, he made a showing up there on at least two counts--his aptitude at military strategy and his quarrelsome disposition. He hadn't been there more than a year or two, they said, when he got into real trouble. The daughter of a man who ran a ferry between Garrison and the Point told her father Cadet Saunders had been intimate with her and the father made threats. A few days later the ferryman's body was found in the Hudson River with the head battered in. That's the next chapter in the tale as I myself got it much later on. Naturally suspicion fell on Young Saunders. On the eve of being arrested, he

disappeared after telling a classmate that he wasn't guilty, but since nobody liked him he wouldn't stand a ghost of a show to prove his innocence. His father's race had cast him out; he had no friends, was to everybody a wood's colt and a mongrel. All right then, if America was going to cast him out, he'd devote the rest of his life to hating the whole breed of Americans and getting even with them. First thing though was to get away.

"That wouldn't be hard. All he had to do was climb the mountains behind West Point and strike off into the wild country to the southwest. Most of it was still Indian country. He was swarthy and black-haired. He spoke at least one Indian language, probably had smatterings of others. He'd get along in the deep woods if anybody could.

"Now then, here's a wide gap in the sequence. We've got to jump to the year 1836 when the Texans under Sam Houston captured the infamous Santa Anna at the Battle of San Jacinto. Although Santa Anna was a prisoner of the new Republic of Texas, the Texans, by some mysterious means, induced the United States Government to take over custody of him. With a guard of dragoons he was carried across country to Washington and later was sent back on a naval vessel to Mexico. If you'll read up on him you'll find he was a dictator and once or twice a president of Mexico and in at least two campaigns was commander-in-chief of her armies and finally died somewhere down there in obscurity and disgrace. He was one of the greediest, cruelest men that ever lived on this continent, I reckon, but he was a scientific soldier and a genius in his twisted way, and he left his mark in history"

A more serious skeleton closet came out of antebellum Georgia. The second man to be legally executed in Fulton County, Georgia, was John Cobb, Jr., for the murder of Samuel B. Landrum on 8 April 1858.

Landrum, a man of about sixty, had come from his home in Carroll County to Atlanta to sell some cotton. He sold his cotton and left Atlanta on the afternoon of 8 April in his carry-all drawn by a single mule. Three youths from Atlanta, John Cobb, Radford Crockett and Gabriel Jones, were under the impression that Landrum had \$600 on his person from the sale of the cotton. They jumped Landrum in his carry-all and hit him on the head with a "slung-shot." They then dragged him, fatally injured, into the woods near the present site of the federal prison. For all their trouble, they found only a dollar and a half on him. Landrum had put the remainder in the bank.

Crockett confessed and was hanged in June 1858. Jones, on advice of counsel, plea bargained and was given a life sentence. Cobb entered a plea of not guilty but was convicted on circumstantial evidence. When the jury foreman brought in the verdict of guilty, "Cobb's eagle eye never quailed and there was not a tremor in his muscles." He refused an offer to see a minister, "I don't want any of that sniveling around me." After a review of his case by the Supreme Court, he was hanged on 8 July 1859. Cobb, like Crockett and Jones, had come from poor but religious and respectable parents.

Jones was released from prison in 1864 for service in a convict company, as a last-ditch effort by Georgians to halt Sherman's march to the sea. Jones fought bravely against federal troops but eventually escaped. He was last heard of in 1888 where it was said that he was living "up North" under an assumed name as a Christian citizen.

It is true that the Cobbs came to America before the Mayflower made its maiden voyage to Plymouth, but they are a small family, less than 200,000 heads of families, in a nation of millions. Yet they seem to have infiltrated every facet of society from boardrooms to bedrooms. Such was the case of Augusta Adams Cobb, "a beautiful woman from a long line of New England string savers."

Augusta Adams married Henry Cobb of Boston and they had seven children. Some say they were a happy family, others say there was another woman. But that was before Brigham Young came to Boston in search of converts and whatever. For on 2 November 1843, Augusta Adams Cobb became the fifth of Brigham Young's twenty-seven wives.

In 1856 Benjamin Ferris wrote a "Victorian account" of Mrs. Cobb's plight in Utah and the Mormons:

The wives of Young "become thorough-paced strumpets, and, when they are too old for use, are noted devotees. A fair type of this class is Mrs. Cobb This woman was living in Boston with her husband and family when Brigham Young visited the city as a missionary. He was at that time a good looking man, and Madam Cobb made up her mind that to aid Brigham in building up a celestial kingdom was far preferable to the humdrum of her domestic duties. She accordingly raced off, taking two children . . . was divorced from her husband, and afterward duly sealed to Brigham. She was the reigning sultana for a time, and queened it with a high hand; but he finally tired of her . . . she now talks solemnly of being sealed to Joseph Smith and other dead prophets. Her daughter, in the meantime, has grown up handsome in face and accomplished in the peculiar graces of Mormondom."

Brigham Young died a millionaire in 1877 and provided generously for his surviving wives and children. Augusta Cobb's share was a valuable piece of property in the center of the city and \$75 per month, a sizable sum for the time. She spent her remaining years isolated and ostracized from her Boston family. She was buried in Brigham Young's cemetery plot along with the other wives.

Ty Cobb said a number of things in his lifetime but nothing more seriously than "the Cobbs cry easy." His tears were not without just cause. Cobb was abundantly successful in all of his professional undertakings, but his personal life was filled with bitterness and tragedy. In

1947, he divorced Charlotte Lombard, his wife of 39 years and the mother of his five children, but this was the least of his problems. His entire adult life was scarred by the mysterious death of his father, W. Herschel Cobb. Long after he had retired from active life, he told John McCallum (his biographer), "my father had his head blown off with a shot gun when I was only 18 years old--and by my own mother."

On 9 August 1905, Royston Record (Royston, Georgia) carried the story of "the only man Tyrus Raymond Cobb would ever love":

"Ex-Senator and County School Commissioner W. H. Cobb of Royston was fatally shot last night by his wife. It seems that he came home late in the night and was mistaken for a burglar. He was unconscious until his death at 1:30 this morning.

Mr. Cobb was shot twice, one shot taking effect in the head, the other in the abdomen. A coroner's investigation is under way."

Royston Record, 10 August 1905:

"The coroner's jury in the case of the homicide of County School Commissioner W. H. Cobb, formed a verdict of voluntary manslaughter against Mrs. W. H. Cobb today and ordered her arrest tomorrow. The warrant was held up until after the funeral today. Witnesses were introduced who testified that there was a considerable interval between the shots, sufficient time for a person to walk back and forth across the room. Dr. J. O. McCrary, the first physician on the scene, produced a revolver and rock found in the coat pocket of the deceased.

Mr. Cobb had gone to a farm he owns near town and left his buggy and walked through the fields back into Royston. He was seen on the street at about 10 o'clock, but seemed, it is claimed, to hide his identity.

It is said that sensational developments will follow the investigation into the killing of ex-Senator Cobb by his wife. According to statements made in this city today, Mr. Cobb had received notice about two weeks ago that he had better watch his home. Before the night of the tragedy, it is alleged that there had been more than one disagreement between himself and his wife and owing to the various rumors it is expected that sensational developments will follow.

Mrs. Cobb's statements that she mistook her husband for a burglar are doubted by many. No other person, as far as is known, was seen at the Cobb home on the night of the shooting.

Royston Record, 12 August 1905:

Mrs. W. H. Cobb, who was arrested under the coroner's warrant, charging her with voluntary manslaughter in killing her husband, whom she allegedly mistook for a burglar, quickly gave the \$7,000 bond required by Justice Jordan. The court to which this is returnable will be held the fourth Tuesday in September.

Paul and Florence Cobb, children of Mr. and Mrs. Cobb, said in an interview that they were much surprised to see the sensational reports in regards to family differences between their parents. Paul said that the domestic relations between his father and mother were most pleasant and that rumors to the contrary are absolutely untrue.

The intricacies of what finally happened to the case remain a mystery. The newspapers carried little of the story after the initial, sensational reports. What is known is that the case never reached the courts, and the case was quietly forgotten.

There are other skeletons lurking in closets that are yet to see the light of day, for Cobbs like others are not a perfect clan. If you know of one it may be appropriate to file them in a category of things to forget. As someone once said:

"If you see a tall fellow ahead of a crowd
A leader of men marching fearless and proud,
And you know of a tale whose mere telling aloud,
Would cause his proud head to in anguish be bowed,
It's a pretty good plan to forget it.

If you know of a skeleton hidden away,
In a closet, and guarded and kept from the day,
In the dark, and whose sudden display
Would cause grief and sorrow and life-long dismay,
It's a pretty good plan to forget it.

If you know of a thing that will darken the joy
Of a man or a woman, a girl or a boy,
That will wipe out the smile or least way annoy
A fellow or cause any gladness to cloy,
It's a pretty good plan to forget it."