

CHAPTER 12

BENTON AND VEST MEET IN BOONVILLE IN 1853

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(Transcribed by Dorothy Harlan)

The Young Kentuckian Places a High Estimate on the Man Who Served 30 Years Consecutively in the United States Senate, Where He Himself, Later Was to Represent Missouri--Vest Praises the Quality of Food Served in Two Boonville Hotels--He Goes to Georgetown, and Represents a Negro Attacker Who Is Burned to Death, While 2,500 of His Race and Their Masters Look on--In 1856, Vest Locates in Boonville.

GEORGE GRAHAM VEST, while United States senator, wrote in 1896, of his early days in Missouri. He located in Boonville in 1856, practicing law.

He left his native Kentucky in the spring of 1853, traveling to St. Louis by the Louisville Packet and then on the *F. X. Aubrey* up the Missouri. St. Louis levee scenes were exciting, with a dozen steamers leaving port. Their bills of fare "*would put an appetite into the jaws of death*".

STOPPING in Boonville, Vest and his fellow passengers divided patronage between the two leading inns--the City Hotel, operated by Edward McPherson, cultivated, intellectual Marylander, and Pierce's, owned by Colonel Peter Pierce, large, genial, hospitable Virginian.

Vest described these as "famous hostelries, worthy of the best days of the republic. . . . I have traveled many a mile and far, but never looked upon their like again."

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Pierce was partial to turkey--roast, cold or hash.

VEST stopped with McPherson. He wrote: "There was a crowd on the veranda, and the central figure was a fine-looking man of massive form, with an antique, classic face. He talked loud and aggressively, while his audience listened respectfully, often murmuring approval.

"While waiting for dinner I ventured to ask an old gentleman the name of the speaker. With a look of contemptuous pity, he replied: 'You are evidently a stranger, sir. That is *Thomas H. Benton*, the greatest man in the United States'.

"Colonel Benton was not on a regular canvass, but had come to visit his daughter, Mrs. Jacobs, wife of Lieutenant-Governor Jacobs, of Kentucky who owned a farm 12 miles west of Boonville.

"That Benton was a very great man, there can be no question. He was haughty, violent and uncompromising, but his mind was strong, analytical and untiring. He was inclined to verbose speeches and was the vainest man living, but his vanity was not repulsive. His courage was of the highest order. He was destroyed politically by his opposition to extension of slavery, which he honestly believed a curse.

"FROM BOONVILLE, I went by boat to Lexington and traveled by stage to Georgetown, county seat of Pettis. The interior counties were sparsely settled and their resources undeveloped. All freights were hauled inland from river ports. The Missouri Pacific had been built to Washington. It was the only railroad south of the Missouri river.

"The journey to Georgetown was a revelation. I had never seen a prairie. Its undulating billows, covered with virgin grass and wild flowers, with deer timidly gazing at us, made a landscape of rare beauty. Deer, turkeys, prairie chickens, pheasants, quail and rabbits were everywhere."

AT GEORGETOWN, July 3, 1853, a slave attacked a white woman while her husband was at church. He killed her and her daughter, 5, and beat a son, 3.

When the father returned, the little boy, weak and hurt, whispered that it was a certain Negro owned by a neighbor.

The slave was taken to Georgetown, Monday, July 4, and Vest was employed by his master to defend him. The lawyer raised the question of the competency of a witness so young, since he could not know the nature and obligation of an oath.

When the court, after questioning the child, sustained the point, Vest moved the discharge of his client.

"AT THAT instant", Vest wrote, "came rattle of a chain and a yell, '*Make way for the Heath's Creek Statue!*'

"The mob rushed upon the prisoner, threw a log-chain about his body, and dragged him from the courtroom. The negro confessed, in horrible detail. The mob coolly took the jail keys from the sheriff, appointed one of their number as jailer and fixed the execution for two weeks later.

"On the day appointed, owners in Pettis and adjoining counties brought their slaves to Georgetown, and in a natural amphitheatre north of the town, with 2,500 of his race looking on, the wretch was burned to death.

"EVERYTHING was done so systematically and deliberately, it seemed a lawful proceeding. The two saloons in Georgetown were closed by order of the mob, and no concealment of identities was attempted. General Sterling Price was governor, and the seat of government was 65 miles away. So defective was communication that state authorities knew nothing of it until after the Negro's death.

"The leaders were neither barbarians nor ruffians. They were the best citizens of the county--members of orthodox churches. They came from that Scotch-Irish stock which has furnished so many illustrious men.

"Living upon the border, with the institution of slavery in their midst; their homes isolated and their women unprotected, these husbands and fathers determined that punishment would be such as to prevent recurrence."

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