

The Roses of Gettysburg

by David Ackley

Fred Ackley, my grandfather, was born in 1871, Lela Dennison, my grandmother, in 1873, respectively 6 and 8 years after the end of the Civil War. They grew up in Machias and Cutler, Maine, neighboring towns on the rocky seacoast, a few miles from the border with New Brunswick. Eighty thousand Mainers fought in that war, the highest ratio of soldiers to population of any of the northern states. Family members of Lela and Fred were among them, friends, neighbors, people whom they grew up knowing from around their towns, some still wearing their war in visible and hidden scars.

At Gettysburg, soldiers of Maine's 20th Regiment faced the Confederate advance on Little Round Top under the command of Colonel Joshua Chamberlain of Brewer and, nearly overrun, at his order, fixed bayonets and charged, shocking and routing the Confederate troops. Their action is credited by some with turning the tide of the war.

Of the three hundred eighty men in the unit, over 130 were wounded; thirty were killed and subsequently buried in the ground of battle, which would become, with President Lincoln's dedication and lasting words, the Gettysburg National Cemetery. There were over 51,000 casualties at Gettysburg—killed, wounded, missing—more than 3500 are buried there. With more than 200,000 troops facing off, it was the largest battle in United States History. Chamberlain would receive the Medal of Honor and a battlefield promotion to Brigadier General. Despite a grievous wound in a later battle he would survive to retire in Maine and live out his days until the eve of another war in 1914; my grandmother Lela would see her first son, Eugene, off to that war three years later, having given birth to her third and last son, Philip in 1915, for whose future too, she would have had reason to fear.

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In the summer of 1940, on the eve of yet another war--her third, by my count--with her youngest--Philip--on active duty in the army, and three of her son Eugene's four sons subject to the call, Lela and several female friends went on a ten-day motor trip through Virginia and Pennsylvania, which included a stop at Gettysburg National Cemetery. Upon their return to Nashua, she reported to the Telegraph's Personals column, without the appearance of irony, that at Gettysburg, "the roses were in full bloom." As usual her words, their words or the withholding of them, hide what might have been said. My reticent forebears have left the task of filling in the blanks of response, of tallying the cost hidden behind their silence. Only sometimes, as in Eugene's comically poignant letter from the Western Front and Lela's devious response is there a glimpse of something like anguish. One is not supposed to talk of these private matters, you see.

The roses were in fact beautiful, banked masses of blooms, dark red against the green foliage.

They walked a few steps apart between rows of stones, speaking little, hushed, tidy in their hats, gloves, print dresses, a gloved hand brushing lightly across a headstone of a boy at 17 or 18, hardly full-grown. They looked much older than do women their age these days, with their lined, slightly sagging faces, rounded, somewhat shapeless figures, and those loose clothes designed to hide what they'd prefer to not have seen. Modesty, that antique word. Their laced, sensible black shoes. A slight wave toward the marker of a boy from home, a boy too young.

A squarish stone with rounded corners set low to the ground: Maine 412 bodies. They fell here just ten years before she was born; in a way she is closer to these than to most who have come after: Strange to think of it that way, but she was born, grew up, married

and had her first child in the same half-century as these boys lived and died. Among the mothers who had worried and wept and wrapped handkerchiefs into balls and stuffed the wet cloth in their mouths to suffocate the sobbing. Hostages to fortune. Those sons, those mothers.

A grey stone fretted with lichen and set almost flush to the ground bears the single word: UNKNOWN. Which would be the worst. To wait for the son who might but never does. What does she do? Leave a lantern lit? A chair and plate and silver at table? A room, bed made, waiting? Did those women feel that they had not worried enough, that they'd failed of love? All that worry and waiting, the pain of birth, come to this: A stone. Unknown.

The rose blossoms, jeweled with dew, saturate the air with their sweetness, dark red against the green.

