

THE RELIGIOUS CHARACTER
OF
NATHAN BEDFORD FORREST

Prejudiced, White Supremacist, slave trader, rough, profane, known for violence---all these terms are often applied to Nathan Bedford Forrest. What about Christian, prayerful, respectful of religion, church member? Have you ever heard these terms applied to Forrest? I suspect that you have heard them used seldom, if at all. Yet, both sets of terms are true and both can be used to describe Nathan Bedford Forrest. Like all of us, he was a man of many parts, a man whose parts often contradicted each other.

Let us examine the first set of terms. By the definitions current in the 21st Century society there are very few white people of the 19th Century who cannot be described as “prejudiced” or who would not be called a “white supremacist.” In the 19th Century the idea that Anglo Saxon people were superior to all peoples of the world was a belief held universally in western Europe and in North America. The philosophers David Hume, John Fiske, and John Burgess; the biologist Charles Darwin, the German composer Richard Wagner; the British writer Rudyard Kipling; the New England clergyman Josiah Strong; U. S. Senator and former Union general Carl Schurz, and Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts; and the U. S.

president Abraham Lincoln are representatives of prominent people of the 19th Century who believed in what they would have called “Anglo Saxon Superiority.”

The concept of “Anglo Saxon superiority” rested on the fact that the culture of western Europe and North American had spread across the globe and had come to dominate popular tastes, habits, and customs. The nations of western Europe had created world-wide empires which spread their culture, including their religion, around the globe while in the United States we were busy eliminating the culture of the Native Americans, a process which the Spanish had begun in Central and South America and which the Canadians were attempting to do as well. The entire world was coming to be dominated by the culture, religion, and economies of the Anglo Saxon nations. All of African had been turned into colonies of European nations and nations in the Pacific region were under pressure from colonization as well. The British had taken over India, Burma, Australia, Hong Kong, and were spreading along the coast of China. France had seized Viet Nam as well as numerous islands in the Pacific, and all the other European nations were anxious to do the same. The United States had plenty of land within our control but we were working furiously to expand the frontier and fill up

the space. In all these cases the native peoples were considered “in the way” and were to be subordinated if they cooperated, crushed if they resisted.

So, to say that Nathan Bedford Forrest was a “white supremacist” is to say that he was a typical white man who lived in the 19th Century. He was no worse, and no better, than 99 per-cent of the rest of the people who lived during his era.

Bedford Forrest bought and sold slaves. That is a fact and Forrest never disputed the matter. The idea of trafficking in human beings is repugnant to the minds of the 21st Century but we are the product of **OUR** times and environment. Historically, trading in slaves was an ancient and accepted practice. The practice was not condemned overtly in Holy Scripture; indeed, Paul said on three occasions that “slaves should obey their masters” and Paul sent back to his master a run-away slave---go read the short book of *Philemon*. The wealth of much of what would become the United States of America was based on the slave trade.

It was only as slavery became regional, forming the basis of large-scale agriculture in the South, that consciences became tender in New England or anywhere else. The slave trade was acceptable so long as money was to be made from it. The only historically valid charge against Forrest concerning the slave trade is that he continued to make money from the

practice some years after the merchants of Boston, Providence, and New York got into other lines of work. Difficult though it may be for us to do, we must look at the past in the way the people of **THAT** day looked at it; we must put aside our contemporary point of view.

Forrest was rough, profane, and prone to violence. All this is also true. Forrest grew up on the edge of the frontier, a rough place which produced rough people. Forrest was born less than a decade after Andrew Jackson had defeated the Indians and broke their hold on the Old Southwest. When Forrest, as a young man, moved to Mississippi he was going into an untamed area where the rule of law was weak and people had to depend on their own strength and skill to make a living and to protect themselves. Forrest was the product of a rough society, it is no wonder the product of such a society should be a rough character.

Part of that roughness was uncouth language. Forrest spoke the language of the people around him and that was the language of the forest, field, logging camp, mule-skinner, and bear hunter. The content of much of that language was vulgar. Please note, in the Nineteenth Century a sharp distinction was made between “vulgar” language and “profane” language. Vulgar language involved the use of colloquial dialect instead of standard English, contained numerous mispronunciations, and was riddled with four-

letter words of Anglo-Saxon origin. Profane language involved breaking the third commandment and “taking the Lord’s name in vane.” Forrest frequently used vulgar language but was noted for his restraint in the use of profane language.

The quick resort to the use of fists to settle personal disagreements was common in the society in which Forrest grew up and in which he conducted his business for many years. This was part of the “code of manhood” which every other society enforces. Disputes were to be settled as quickly and as directly as possibly and fisticuffs was often the chosen method. For more serious disputes weapons were readily at hand and tended to be used. In the absence of law-enforcement officers self-defense was not only a right but a necessity. Let me remind you that President Andrew Jackson engaged in precisely the same kind of behavior as a younger man; Forrest was not unusual in his resort to violence but mirrored the society from which he came.

If being rough in behavior, having a limited education, accepting the prejudices of your time, using vulgar language, and resorting to violence seem to be characteristics which would prevent a person from having an abiding respect for religion I will remind you that these traits are not

applicable to Bedford Forrest alone; the same traits are characteristic of Simon Peter the Apostle.

Many men in the South prior to the War Between the States delayed affiliation with a church well into their adult lives. That exemplar of Christian piety, Thomas Jonathan Jackson, did not make a public profession of faith in Christ and join the Presbyterian denomination until 1851 when he was 27 years old. Robert E. Lee was confirmed as a member of the Episcopal Church in July 1853 when he was 46 years old. Braxton Bragg was baptized as a Christian in 1863 while commanding the Army of Tennessee. We all are well aware of the revivals which swept both the Army of Northern Virginia and the Army of Tennessee in 1863 and 1864, bringing thousands of adult men into the church.

Forrest was not different from a large number of the men of his time and place in not making a formal affiliation with a church; however, this does not indicate a lack of interest in religion or lack of respect for the church.

In the case of Forrest, this respect for the church is seen at the time he met his future wife, Mary Ann Montgomery. The story is well known, how Forrest came upon a buggy in which Mary Ann and her mother were riding, stuck in a muddy creek crossing. Two young men were standing on the

bank of the stream laughing at the plight of the women. Forrest dismounted from his horse, got the buggy team across the creek, turned his attention to the two men who had refused to help the women—knocking them both into the muddy water, and then asked Mary Ann if he could come calling at her house.

On his first visit to Mary Ann the 24 year-old Bedford ordered all the other young men visiting there to leave or “step out behind the barn” with him; they all left. On the second visit he proposed to Mary Ann, and on the third visit she accepted. The Montgomery’s were “church people,” staunch supporters of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, and Mary Ann’s uncle, **the Rev. Mr. Samuel Montgomery Cowan**, questioned Bedford about his spiritual condition. Forrest admitted he was a man with a quick temper and with certain bad habits. Told that Mary Ann was a very religious young woman, Forrest replied that “that is just the sort of wife I want and need. I need somebody to keep me straight.” The Rev. Samuel Montgomery Cowan was not only the uncle of Mary Ann Montgomery, he was the father of Dr. James B. Cowan who would become the personal physician of Forrest during the War.

It would be easy to ignore Forrest’s remark, passing it off as the sort of thing a suitor would say to a minister who was the uncle of the bride-to-

be, but Forrest was not given to saying things he did not mean. Throughout the years of their marriage Forrest was under the influence of his wife and allowed himself to be directed by her in matters of personal behavior. She was a tempering factor in his life and had the ability to soothe and guide him more than any other person. She also seems to have been a major factor in keeping Forrest in touch with the church and in leading him to become a professing Christian in late years.

As a Memphis businessman Forrest was not an active member of any church but he showed the respect for the church which would have been expected of him and which was normal for the times. His wife joined the Cumberland Presbyterian congregation in Memphis when the family moved there and Forrest attended services with her on a regular basis.

When the war began and Forrest entered on a military career one of his earliest associates was a young Methodist minister named David Campbell Kelley. Kelley was born in Wilson County, Tennessee, had served as a missionary in China, and was pastor of the First Methodist Church in Huntsville, Alabama, when the war began. Not interested in becoming a chaplain, Kelley organized a cavalry company from the men of his congregation and this unit, "The Kelley Rangers," was sent to Memphis where they were joined to other cavalry units to form a battalion under the

command of newly-minted Lt. Col. Nathan Bedford Forrest. As soon as the battalion was formed Kelley became its Major, second in command to Forrest, and the two began an association which would last until Forrest died in 1877. It is in the writings of David C. Kelley that we find much of what we know about the religious nature of Nathan Bedford Forrest.

Kelley, by the way, returned to the Methodist ministry following the war and served several churches in Middle Tennessee. It was at the 1871 meeting of the Tennessee Methodist General Conference that Kelley made a motion that the Conference found a university. That school is Vanderbilt University.

In an article in the Confederate Veteran in 1908 Kelley said *the writer was associated with General Forrest from a very early period in the war, first in the Forrest Cavalry Regiment, our regimental headquarters being one. We had one table and, for a while, one tent; family prayers in the evening and grace at meals. The son (William Montgomery Forrest) was a member with the mother (Mary Montgomery Forrest) of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Memphis. By his father's consent he became my deacon and elder, performing both functions. Later, when General Forrest was commanding a division or corps, the son was still charged with conveying orders for religious services to be held at headquarters. With the*

genteel and devout bearing of the mother, commingled with the activities of his father, he conveyed the orders for headquarters services or cared for the preacher's comfort, so we came to know and love each other well.

It was not until since the close of the war that I was able to decipher one problem or connect it, especially with William. General Forrest made a visit to General Polk's headquarters, about two days' ride distant, and returned with two soldier youths who possessed the highest blood of our Southland—one the son of Bishop Otey, of the Episcopal Church; the other the son of General Donelson of Tennessee. For more than two years they had been under the care of Bishop-General Polk. Forrest never told us that they were for companions to Willie in that life, to meet the anxiety and Christian culture of the mother when her health would no longer allow her to keep near headquarters, watching over this boy. The General had for once forgotten battle and hardship that she might feel comfort in the knowledge that the companionship of the only son was with charming youths of the highest birth and truest courage. This is written that the fame of the father in battle might not obscure the higher and nobler characteristic of desire for Christian training and pure association for the son.

Not only does this account show the influence of Mary Montgomery Forrest over her husband, it reveals a deep respect for religion on the part of

General Forrest himself. The image that most people may have of the headquarters encampment of Forrest probably does not include the picture of Forrest paying attention to the reading of the Bible or with his head bowed before meals. But that is precisely what happened.

Forrest freely expressed his belief in the efficacy of prayer throughout the war. He said, in 1870, that he believed his survival of his many battles and numerous wounds was the result of the prayers his wife had offered for him. In the midst of battle, at Fort Donelson, as the gunboats moved up river against the fortifications, Forrest watched in awe as the big guns crashed out and shells impacted the fort. Turning to Major Kelley, Forrest said, “*Pray, Parson, pray. Nothing but God Almighty can save this fort.*” The popular image of Forrest would have him calling on the name of God, albeit, not in reverent terms. But Forrest believed in prayer.

David C. Kelley would write: *He had absolute confidence in the piety of his mother and wife, and was himself a thorough believer in Christianity, was as fully persuaded of the efficacy of prayer in times of danger or in battle as Napoleon was a believer in fate. Throughout the war he always gave me the fullest opportunities for preaching in camp, courteously entertaining at his mess-table all preachers whom I might choose to invite. He was always present at such services when it was practicable. While we*

were messmates there was always family prayer in his tent at night, conducted by the chaplain and myself.

On one of our expeditions a chaplain of the Federal army was overtaken and captured. When he learned that he was to be taken to Forrest's headquarters, every feature showed the deepest anxiety and depression. As he approached, General Forrest bade him to be seated while he was attending to other matters. A little later supper was announced, and the chaplain was requested to share our meal with us. When all were seated, Forrest turned to him reverentially and said: 'Parson, will you please ask the blessing?' The minister could not conceal his surprise, which was evident from the manner in which he looked at Forrest before being assured that he was in earnest. He gave expression to the gratitude he felt at being thus considerately treated. He had evidently been expecting to be killed by this fierce fighter. The next morning Forrest gave him an escort through our lines, telling that he had no war to make on non-combatants, and humorously remarked to him as he bade him good-bye: 'Parson, I would keep you here to preach for me if you were not needed so much more by the sinners on the other side'."

One of Forrest's Escort recalled, years later, that no one was surer to draw on himself the wrath of the General than one who failed to show

proper attention and respect for the ministers who conducted services at headquarters whenever the circumstances of campaigning permitted worship to be held. He also recalled that before every expedition against the enemy the troops making the move would be drawn up in ranks and, before mounting their horses, a prayer for their safety and success would be offered by a chaplain or by one of their officers.

Major Charles Anderson who served as Assistant Adjutant on Forrest's Staff gives us a final glimpse of the religious nature of Forrest. In July 1877 Forrest came to Hurricane Springs, a health resort near Tullahoma, Tennessee, in an attempt to regain his shattered health.

Anderson met Forrest there and recorded his impressions: *When the stage arrived I found the General waiting for me. As I waited for the ladies to alight, General Forrest went to the opposite side of the coach, gave me a handshake, and expressed his pleasure at my visit. There was a mildness in his manner, a softness of expression, and a gentleness in his words that appeared to me strange and unnatural. At first I thought his bad health had brought about this change, but then I remembered that when sick or wounded he was the most restless and impatient man I ever saw.*

Soon I told him that there was something about him that I couldn't understand; that he didn't appear to be the same man I used to know so

well. He was silent for a moment, then seemed to divine my trouble, and halting suddenly, he took hold of the lapel of my coat and turned me squarely in front of him, and raising his right hand with that long index finger (his emphazizer) extended, he said, "Major, I am not the man you were with so long and knew so well—I hope I am a better man. I've joined the church and am trying to live a Christian life." Said I, "General, that's it, and you are indebted to 'Old Mistess' (as we called Mrs. Forrest), and to no one else, for this great change."

"Yes, you are right," he replied, "Mary has prayed for me night and day for many years, and I feel now that through her prayers my life has been spared, and to them am I indebted for passing safely through so many dangers."

It had happened like this. While walking along a street in Memphis Forrest met Raleigh R. White who had been Lt. Col. of the 14th Tennessee Cavalry. In the course of a conversation White stated that he had given up business to become a minister. The conversation turned to religion and the two went into the lobby of a bank, found a quiet corner, and prayed together. The next Sunday, November 14, 1875, the Reverend Mr. George T. Stainback, pastor of the Court Street Cumberland Presbyterian Church, preached on Matthew 7: 24-27. Sitting in the pew with Mary Montgomery

Forrest was her husband. At the conclusion of the service Forrest took the pastor's arm and walked out onto the sidewalk. Leaning against the church building Forrest stated that he was "the fool who has built on sand" and stated that he knew he was a sinner. The pastor recommended that Forrest go home and read Psalm 51, which begins "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy." The following day Pastor Stainback made a call on Forrest at his home and the two prayed together. Forrest stated that he put his trust in Christ.

On October 29, 1877, two years after his profession of faith and three months after his conversation with Anderson, Forrest died. In a last conversation with his pastor Forrest stated that he had within "indescribable peace. All is peace within. Between me and the face of my Heavenly Father not a cloud intervenes." Forrest's funeral was conducted under the supervision of the pastor of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church where Forrest had worshipped and where he had professed his Christian faith. The Reverend Doctor David C. Kelley, "Forrest's Fighting Preacher" from the war days, assisted.

Bedford Forrest was a man of many parts---quick tempered, coarse of language, prone to violence when provoked; but he was also a man who possessed a sense of the spiritual and who respected the Christian religion, a

respect which ripened into belief and commitment. We cannot omit recognition of this latter fact if we wish to have an accurate view of this important, controversial historical figure.