



Lincoln Lore

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BRIG.-GEN. BEN HARDIN HELM MRS. LINCOLN'S "REBEL" BROTHER-IN-LAW

Editor's Note: In 1943 the Civil War Round Table of Chicago published 225 copies of R. Gerald McMurtry's brochure, *Ben Hardin Helm "Rebel" Brother-in-Law of Abraham Lincoln — with a Biographical Sketch of His Wife and an Account of the Todd Family of Kentucky*. This was the Round Table's first publication and 25 copies were reserved by the author and the remainder were distributed among its members and friends. Now, twenty-nine years later, it is being reprinted (without the references and annotations) because very little information on Ben Hardin Helm has appeared in past issues of the *Lincoln Lore* bulletin.

R. G. M.

No high official of the Confederate government, either soldier or civilian, had a more intimate contact with President Abraham Lincoln than the rebel brigadier-general, Ben Hardin Helm. This close association resulted from the fact that the two men had married half-sisters and this kinship formed a lasting friendship which continued until the first years of the Civil War and until the death of General Helm.

Lincoln and Helm had much in common other than marriage in the Todd family. The young soldier resided in Hardin County, Kentucky, only fourteen miles from the place where Lincoln first saw the light of day, although he was born June 2, 1831, in the home of his grandfather, Ben Hardin, at Bardstown. Then, too, during the years of peace before the Civil War, Ben Hardin Helm had taken up law as his profession, which of course provided him with a congenial basis for a lasting friendship with Abe Lincoln, who was making a name for himself before the Illinois bar and in local politics.

Lincoln's brother-in-law was the oldest child of twelve children born to John Larue Helm and Lucinda Barbour Hardin. His father was twice governor of Kentucky and served in several other offices of trust and profit. The son was nurtured by the father in the Whig tradition, the same political party Lincoln championed so long in Illinois. John L. Helm was elected Lieutenant-governor in 1848 on the Whig ticket with John J. Crittenden, and he served out that notable Kentuckian's term when he resigned in 1850 to enter the Fillmore cabinet. Again in 1867, during the reconstruction period, he was elected governor by a majority of 43,019 votes over his combined

radical and conservative opponents. Governor Helm took the oath of office on September 3, while lying ill at his home in Elizabethtown, and he expired five days later before assuming his official duties.

His mother was a daughter of Ben Hardin, a member of the United States Senate from Kentucky, who was dubbed by John Randolph as a "kitchen-knife whetted on a brick." The eccentric Virginian characterized Hardin as being "rough and homely but keen and trenchant." From such illustrious forebears, who rank high on the list of Kentucky's imperishable names, Ben Hardin Helm was reared with a love for his country, his state and Southern institutions. Quite naturally he found his place in the aristocratic society of the South and, not unlike his friends and neighbors, he cherished the Union, but the key-stone of that governmental structure, in the light of his upbringing, was States Rights.

Helm received his literary education in the Elizabethtown Seminary, where he displayed a prodigious mind by completing the prescribed course of study when he was only fifteen. Even at this tender age, he decided upon a military career, but because of his youth he was unable to enter the West Point Military Academy immediately. Undaunted, he enrolled as a cadet in the Kentucky Military Institute in the winter of 1846. Cadet Helm remained at K.M.I. for only three months and then entered the United States Military Academy on July 1, 1847, shortly after his sixteenth birthday. After completing the regular four-year course, he was graduated ninth in a class of forty-two members in 1851. He was brevetted second-lieutenant in the Second Cavalry, July 1, 1851. However, before reporting for duty on the frontier at Fort Lincoln, Texas, he attended the Cavalry School for Practice at Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

While serving with his company, the "Second Dragoons," he unfortunately contracted inflammatory rheumatism, which rendered him totally unfit for a soldier's life. The seriousness of the attack, indeed, even pre-



Photograph from the Meserve Collection

A biographical sketch of Brigadier General Ben Hardin Helm is to be found in Ed Porter Thompson's, *History of the Orphan Brigade*, Lewis N. Thompson, Louisville, Kentucky, 1898, pages 380-387.



Ben Hardin Helm graduated from the United States Military Academy (ninth in a class of forty-two members) in 1851.

cluded his chances for recovery, so he obtained a leave of absence and returned to his home in Kentucky. The six months he had spent in Texas with the Second Cavalry convinced him that he was best fitted for the military profession and he longed for the day when he could rejoin his comrades at Fort Lincoln.

But after taking up his residence in Kentucky, he gave considerable thought to the future and, not unmindful of his health and the fact that there was small chance for attaining distinction in the army when the nation was at peace, he yielded to his father's wishes and resigned his commission on October 9, 1852. This resignation from the army necessitated his following an entirely new career after he had recovered his strength.

The Kentucky climate, along with the proper medical attention, enabled Helm to regain his health, which immediately added fuel to the fire of his ambition. He hoped to win renown in some worthwhile profession. Knowing that law is a trustworthy vehicle for politics, which has rocked in its cradle many a "darling of destiny," he resolved to enter that profession and immediately began to study under the direction of his distinguished father. The law-office course only convinced him of the necessity of adequate training and he enrolled in the School of Law of the University of Louisville, and graduated from that institution in the spring of 1853. Realizing the need for more advanced instruction, he immediately entered the Harvard Law School at Cambridge, Massachusetts, for a six-months course, before returning to Elizabethtown to practice his profession with his father.

The father and son partnership was of only a short duration and in 1856 he organized a law firm with Martin H. Cofer as his partner, which remained in existence until 1858 when he sought a more lucrative field for practice.

Going to the Kentucky metropolis, he was admitted to the Louisville bar and there he formed a partnership with Horatio W. Bruce, his brother-in-law. This partnership continued until 1861 when both men cast their lot with the Confederacy. As a member of the Louisville bar, he displayed great talent, and this, along with his high sense of honor, his lofty purpose, and his

unswerving integrity, distinguished him as one of the ablest lawyers practicing before the Kentucky courts.

With a military-legal education, he always displayed a fine grasp of the strong points of the law and, in conducting a case before the court, he used the technique of a general coupled with "the astuteness of the hair-splitter." He attacked the vulnerable positions of his legal opponents, which as a cadet in the military academy he had been taught to determine in advance. When he was placed on the defensive, he so guarded his position as to exhaust and bewilder his opponents before they could center their attack. Complicated suits in chancery were of little concern to Ben Hardin Helm, who early in his legal career learned to comprehend quickly their exacting terms in the development of his cases for his clients.

Shortly after graduating from law school, Helm entered politics and in 1855 he was chosen to represent Hardin County in the Kentucky General Assembly. As a state representative, he assumed a place of distinction in the legislative chamber, because of his legal knowledge and his astute grasp of governmental problems seldom displayed by one of his age. Serving his county in this capacity for only one term, he next announced his candidacy for Commonwealth Attorney for his own judicial district (Third District of Kentucky) and won that office in 1856. He served in this position until 1858. The most remarkable thing about the career of this brilliant lawyer was that he had achieved all of these distinctions by the time that he had reached the age of twenty-eight.

While a member of the General Assembly, this eligible young politician met Miss Emilie Todd, a daughter of Robert S. Todd of Lexington, Kentucky. Their friendship ripened into an affair of matrimony and on March 20, 1856, the couple was married in Frankfort, Kentucky, which was followed by a grand reception at Buena Vista, the country home of the Todds. Mrs. Helm, like her half sister, Mrs. Lincoln, was accomplished in the cultural arts which the "Athens of the West" afforded in her day. Being an aristocratic and estimable lady, this marriage was looked upon with favor by both the Todd and Helm families and the young matron endeared herself to all of her husband's Elizabethtown friends.



Ben Hardin Helm married Miss Emilie Todd, a daughter of Robert S. Todd of Lexington, Kentucky on March 20, 1856. This photograph was taken in 1857.

In 1857, while still practicing law in his home town, Helm had an opportunity to go to Springfield, Illinois, to argue a case before the courts of that capital city. This afforded him an opportunity to visit his kinsmen and to extend to Mary Todd Lincoln the sincerest and best wishes of his wife, who was familiarly known to all her relatives as "Little Sister." Mrs. Lincoln had never before had an opportunity to meet the distinguished husband of Emilie and she greeted him cordially as a brother-in-law and fellow Kentuckian. Mary Lincoln saw for herself that he was truly handsome, being six feet tall and having a well-proportioned figure which gave evidence of military training. She liked his penetrating blue eyes, his brown hair which blended with his ruddy complexion, and his genial and attractive countenance which lighted up at the slightest provocation. In receiving Helm in his home as a guest, Lincoln did not forget that this young man was the grandson of the "kitchen-knife whetted on a brick." The Lincolns knew how to be hospitable and they entertained the Kentucky attorney for a week.

Helm was a States Rights Democrat and Lincoln was a Republican and, when their conversation drifted around to politics, they could not agree. With Mary they discussed the slavery question from the date of its inception down to the year of the Dred Scott decision, and Helm believed the border states might be willing to adopt a plan of gradual compensated emancipation, but, as a matter of principle, this scion of the old South, who knew the people of the cotton belt, said the planter would never yield to such a proposal. But, there were topics of conversation more pleasant than politics and Lincoln soon learned that his guest was versed in all the traditions of Hardin County and he delighted in asking him questions about his old home. During this brief visit, a lasting friendship was formed. When Helm bade the Lincolns good-bye upon his departure for Kentucky, none of them realized what a turmoil the country would be facing in four years when Helm would lead a Southern army and Lincoln would find himself on the crest of a volcanic government.

As the country moved toward civil war, Helm argued that there would be no conflict. He would not believe it possible that the American people could be so aroused as to divide into two sections and turn and rend each other. Yet, he had foresight enough to feel that he should re-enter the military service. In 1860, he was appointed Assistant-Inspector General of the Kentucky State Guard and he took an active part in organizing and arming that body of fighting men. This was the year of the presidential election and he watched with anxiety the comet-like rise of Abraham Lincoln across the political horizon. He admired the man, but he

The Children of Robert S. Todd

Robert S. Todd and Eliza Parker (first wife) had seven children, six of whom reached maturity. Elizabeth married Ninian W. Edwards, Frances married William Wallace, Levi married Louisa Searles, divorced, Mary married Abraham Lincoln, Ann married C. M. Smith, and George married Miss Curry. All the children of the first family, with the exception of George, were loyal to the Union. Robert S. Todd and Elizabeth Humphreys (second wife) had nine children, eight of whom reached maturity. Margaret married C. H. Kellogg, Samuel was not married, David married a Mrs. Williamson, Martha married Clement White, Emilie married Ben Hardin Helm, Alexander was not married, Elodie married N. H. R. Dawson, and Katherine married W. W. Herr. All the children of the second family, with the exception of Margaret, were southern sympathizers.



Lieutenant Alexander H. Todd served as aide-de-camp on the staff of General Ben Hardin Helm while he commanded the Second Brigade. He was the second half-brother of Mrs. Lincoln to lose his life for the Confederate cause. On March 4, 1861, he witnessed the inauguration of Abraham Lincoln as President, having received a special invitation while he resided in Muhlenberg County, Kentucky.

could not vote for him. In fact, Helm was so imbued with the political principles of his father that he worked against his brother-in-law's candidacy. For whom he voted, there appears to be no record, but it is not at all difficult to hazard a guess that the man of his choice was that esteemed Whig of the old school, John Bell, who ran for the presidency on the Constitutional Union ticket.

Yet, in spite of the States Rights Democrats and the advocates of agrarian principles, Abraham Lincoln was elected president and the Southern movement, which is a rather mild way to describe secession, was inaugurated. It was soon apparent to Helm that he must decide upon his future course, and in March, 1861, he went to Washington in quest of a commission. Having a professional connection with the army, he had a reverence for the country's flag, which to him had always symbolized one nation, and not a hodge-podge of confederations. Yet, he was a Kentuckian and a son of the South and he determined that, regardless of the consequences, he would never turn upon his own native soil. Helm still clung to one hope — that the indignation of the South against the incoming Lincoln administration would subside and that all would be peaceful again. But like many other rational men, who had no solution to cope with the situation, he watched helplessly the division of the Union.

At the time when the secession movement was still confined to the deep South, Helm made a second trip to Washington to visit the President. This time he traveled to the capital, because he had received a cordial, personal invitation from the Chief Executive, who was cognizant of the fact that Helm was thinking of again



Lieutenant Wm. Wallace Herr was aide-de-camp on the staff of General Ben Hardin Helm while he commanded the First Kentucky Brigade. He married in January, 1866, Katherine Bodley (Kitty) Todd, the sister of Mrs. Helm and the half-sister of Mrs. Lincoln. As a widow, Mrs. Lincoln never had the opportunity to see or make the acquaintance of W. W. Herr.

entering the Army of the United States. Even at the time when the nation's eyes were focused upon Major Robert Anderson at Fort Sumter and there was talk about whether or not that island fortress should be surrendered to the Confederate government, he could not believe there would be a war.

In spite of his success in the legal profession, Ben Hardin Helm's first love was the army. Lincoln knew he was still a strong Southern-Rights Democrat, yet, not because of this, but in spite of it, he handed the young man a sealed envelope containing an attractive offer of a position. "Ben," he said, "here is something for you. Think it over by yourself and let me know what you will do." Lincoln anticipated the struggle Helm would have in accepting or rejecting the commission he had secured for him, because day by day the country was approaching nearer to the opening of hostilities. In fact, Lincoln was even willing to hold out another inducement, namely, that to prevent him from using his sword directly or indirectly for the coercion of the Southern states and against the people of Kentucky, he would be sent to the frontier and be spared the horrors of a fratricidal war.

The sealed envelope contained a coveted commission—paymaster in the United States Army with the rank of major. What was more, it was highly probable that promotions might come as he gained favor and as the Army was expanded to meet the ominous crisis. The offer stunned Helm when he considered that this position was presented to him at the age of thirty. Such a commission was exceptional for his years, and during his entire career nothing so attractive as this offer had ever before appealed to him. The office of paymaster with the rank of major was far more important than anything he had expected from Lincoln or had even imagined in his most fitful dreams. It was the ideal position for Helm because of his clerical abilities as a result of his work in the legal profession.

This magnanimous offer on the part of Lincoln brought from Helm a confession. "The position you offer me," he said, "is beyond what I had expected in my most hopeful dreams. It is the place above all others

which suits me, Lincoln. You have been kind and generous to me beyond anything I have known. I have no claim upon you, for I opposed your candidacy and did what I could for the election of another, but with no unkindly feeling towards you; I wish I could see my way. I will try to do what is right. Don't let this offer be made public yet. You shall have my answer in a few days."

It appears that destiny had a hand in making Helm determine his course. In Washington he sought out his old friends — Southern friends, and they exerted an undue influence upon him. Yet, he likely would have reached the same conclusion even if he had discounted the advice of his old comrades. On the same day he had received Lincoln's offer, Helm called upon Colonel Robert E. Lee, recently attached to the Second Cavalry, the same regiment he had been stationed with in Texas shortly after his graduation from West Point. Helm found Colonel Lee in a dilemma. He appeared ill or as if weighted down by some unfortunate difficulty. The Colonel was well enough in body, but temporarily broken in spirit, because he had made a fateful decision. He had resigned on April 20th, his commission in the United States army.

In such a mental state, Colonel Lee did not care to offer Helm any advice and, after reading Lincoln's offer of a commission and being apprised of the fact that the president was Helm's brother-in-law, the experienced soldier told his friend that there was going to be a dreadful war and he had determined that he would not strike at his own people. However, he did not doubt Lincoln's sincerity, but told Helm the president could not control the present trend of political chaos.

Mary Lincoln hoped Helm would accept the commission in order that she might have her attractive sister with her in the Executive Mansion. She would be the toast of Washington and the belle of every presidential reception. She told Ben that the country needed "scholarly, dignified young men in the army," but such statements only made the decision harder to determine.

In thinking over the matter of the commission, Helm realized he would be the youngest officer in the army to hold the rank of major, and, with such a start, he might, by transferring to one of the cavalry regiments, become a colonel within a year's time. He was ambitious and in his pocket was a brilliant career folded and sealed in an envelope from the President of the United States. The only thing he would be required to do would be to accept it. Also, he had great admiration for Lincoln, he was fond of his sister-in-law, and his wife would delight in the gaieties of Washington society.

Upon his departure for Kentucky, he bade Mary Lincoln farewell and again she expressed the desire that both he and Emilie would make their home with them in the Executive Mansion. As a farewell gesture, Helm clasped Lincoln's hand and then parted. This was the Lincolns' last glimpse of their fine, upstanding brother-in-law.

Upon Helm's arrival at home, he went to Frankfort and while in the state capital he met Simon Bolivar Buckner, who was then Inspector-General of the Kentucky State Guard with the rank of major-general. Buckner had been Helm's instructor at West Point and their warm friendship and his high regard for Buckner's judgment caused his loyalty to the Union to waver. Buckner was going with the Confederacy and this fact caused Helm to lean further toward the South in the approaching conflict. Next he talked with Thomas B. Monroe, Jr., Secretary of State of Kentucky and a staunch defender of States Rights. Helm called on other friends and discovered that their sympathies were also with the South.

Kentucky at this time was in great turmoil over the secession movement and Helm could not stand idly by and watch the approach of disaster. He was not a man to "halt between two opinions." He realized he could no longer delay making his decision, because this conflict would be a civil war and he did not intend to fight against his own cherished principles.

(Continued to February, 1972, issue)