

Notes

THE INFANT TARKINGTON

Here, for me, began the search of the Tarkington's of Tennessee. My wife Della Lorraine (Tarkington) Peery Russell had been interested in her family's history for some time. She had written a book--The Peery's of Hickman County-- which received high praise from family members. I couldn't have cared less until an event following the death and funeral of Willie Marie Barnhouse, my wife's sister. The following is a composite of several events.

At the meeting of the family following the funeral, an old friend, blinded by age and crippled by diabetes, was asked to tell the story of the incident following the death of the infant Tarkington. It went something like this:

"Uncle Rich, tell us the story about the Feathered Crowns." And, as he agreed, all the nieces and cousins and sisters and brothers and sons and daughters called to one another, "Uncle Rich is going to tell us the story of The Feathered Crown." On a cold dismal night, they gathered around the low ebbing fireplace with a hushed anticipation. It was as if the master story teller was about to hold his audience spellbound.

Mysteriously, magically, without sight, he opened an old "Young Skin Soap" box and carefully withdrew a round, pressed, core of feathers. With a gentleness of hand and a firmness belying his age, he laid the object on the table as all present oode and aude. Quietly, he began:

"In the old days at the turn of the century, country folks around here in Swan Creek neighborhood raised geese. And, despite, what many of you think --there were several comforts that exceed those of today. In particular, goose down pillows were the vogue, very common--even for poor folk--and much more comfortable than the foam rubber of today. The women folk would take the very fluffy under down from the geese, plucking and inserting the feathers in pillows. And from those pillows come this story of

The infant Tarkington who was born sickly and died two days later. His mother had placed him on a pillow filled with down. Sadly, when the little infant could not make it and passed onto his maker, he was laid out on a Singer Sewing Machine which acted as a slab. As an aside, he said that the sewing machine was still in his bedroom. Moving the baby from crib to slab, Mother Della Tarkington reached into the pillow and said, "I want to see if there is a crown here". All present witnessed her placing her hand into the pillow and removing this "Feathered Crown".

This was the second crown that she had discovered. The first crown was from the pillow that her sister Daisy Neely died upon in 1903 at the tender age of 22 years. The second, the Infant Tarkington, the third was from another sister, Annie Neely, who died in March of 1919 and the fourth from her

brother, Moody Neely.

As the additional crowns were laid upon the table, he continued to fondle the objects and wove his tale of the Tarkington Feathered Crowns. The crowns are formed when the individual dies, and as life leaves the body, the spirt goes counter clockwise into heaven. Note, he said, the compression of the crown-the tight woven circle. No machine could make these crown that remain to this day-- some 95 years later- in the same shape and form as when they were taken from the pillow. Old timers believe that these Feathered Crowns are manifestation of the spirt leaving the body.

Skeptic's might say, if you turn the crown over it is wound clockwise. As a matter of fact, all of them, if turned over, would be clockwise but those that go to hell do not get a crown. There are many wise men who believe that the spirit goes counter clockwise to heaven and to the right, or clockwise, they are assigned to purgatory.

"My children, there are those of us who cannot see, there are those of us that will not touch and those of us who do not believe. A sighting, a touching, a believing is for you and you alone to determine. I can only tell you of this touching and sighting that occured when the infant Tarkington died on May 29, 1909.

The baby's father and mother, Elgin H. Tarkington and Della Tarkington and their daughter, Jennie Lee Tarkington were present and witnessed this event. (Jennie Lee Tarkington was interviewed and video taped by this author on April 15, 1997. The 95 year old sister of the infant Tarkington remembers and verified that she saw her mother reach into the pillow and extract the "Feathered Crown.")

He continued, " It is for you to determine the story's reality but unlike other manifestations of spiritual sightings, I lay before you the actual objects which you can see, and touch, and believe. To those that believe, it is the physical sign of our God."

In the silence of the evening, the story teller concluded while those present sat and wondered and marvelled at the composition of the feathers.

Uncle Rich is still living to this day and I have interviewed him on camera in Summertown, Tennessee.

I have gone on to find other crowns-in other families. And I continue to document all that I can find.

Folklore, I think not. Reality, perhaps. Compelling, Absolutely!


Tom Russell

