PERSPECTIVE

The writings of Green Clay painted a picture of post-Civil War Richmond, Madison County



MAURY SEARCY
LOCAL HISTORIAN

Guy Ephrium Herrick (1871-1962) was the son of John Frank and Mary Clay Herrick, whose father was Cassius Marcellius Clay.

According to the Green Clay Papers, located within the Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) Special Collections, after her divorce, Mary renamed him Green Clay. His education consisted of elementary and high school in Richmond and Ann Arbor, Michigan. His study culminated with an earned law degree from Columbia in Washington D.C. in 1893 and he proceeded to practice law in Richmond and Cincinnati. He wrote articles about Richmond and Madison County as well as newspapers in Ohio, New York and Tennessee.

The EKU Collections include numerous historical narratives about the turmoil within Madison County when lawlessness and violence ran rampant during the post-Civil War. Clay authored three essays during the early 20th century regarding this topic: 1) A Kentucky Feud of Reconstruction Days, 2) Home Rule — The Klan Way, and 3) The Ku Klux Klan I Knew. Klan activity represented an extension of the breakdown of civilized norms of society following the war. It surpassed war in its nefariousness because during battle, one knew where the danger lay whereas Klan violence was furtive. One's friends could suddenly become his executioners.

Amid this atmosphere, Clay wrote that "For a full year the Sheriff and his force (were) practically inactive. Jurors refused to act. Witnesses were driven off or killed." As Klotter and Harrison phrased it, "---the main source of feuds was the ineffectiveness of the law and the consequent lawlessness." There were five armed gangs that threatened the Madison County community. His A Kentucky Feud read: "During those years of the Reconstruction period the children living alongside the well-traveled streets of the town were told to drop to the floor—".

The case of Frank Searcy exemplified this scenario. According to Clay's Home Rule, he was a local resident and after the war he engaged in illegal activities. In fact, Clay maintained that he was a "lone bandit who had flourished grandly" during and after the war. In one case, he hijacked a large quantity of cut timber and hauled it near the river. The wood was loaded on his rafts for transport and sale at New Orleans. During this period, he joined the Klan and appeared to have obtained a good standing with them.

This symbiosis with this belligerent organization proved short lived as he began openly defying them. Clay even maintained that Searcy was the first and only man to utter such disdain towards them. Frank's fortune changed in 1869 after he fatally shot a man in the back during a brawl on Main Street in Richmond. According to Partial List of Ku Klux Activities in Kentucky, 1867-1871, (Shaking Paper 2015) this incident occurred during November 1869. The casualty attempted to leave the premises when the bullet found him. Frank then pinned a KKK note upon his remains.

The Klan soon reacted because the deceased person had brothers who were members. They launched an assault upon Searcy's house but at first, they were repulsed with one Klansman wounded. They finally disabled and lynched him in Richmond, leaving a note warning the residents not to remove the corpse for 24 hours. There were dozens of witnesses to this, but no one attempted to intervene or bring charges.

Aside from Klan activity, Clay's A Kentucky Feud mentioned the rogue behavior of one Walter Saunders. Despite his thievery, he became Sheriff and appointed himself as sole lawgiver and executioner in the Crab Orchard vicinity. By 1877, he allegedly slew up to eight men — three of them while Sheriff, including one Bob Bethuram, for taking a wagon load of corn.

Meanwhile Walter's brother George Saunders and some friends went to a fair in Richmond and caught the attention of Marshall Gus Edwards by exhibiting unruly behavior. The lawman warned the 18-year-old stop the disorderly conduct or face jail. Saunders felt insulted with this reprimand, so he and his entourage initiated a drunken mock brawl in a local bar, which involved destruction of property. Edwards arrived and during an altercation, inflicted a solid blow upon George's head. At that point Edwards and his two deputies retreated as the Saunders faction, led by Tuck Ballard, became poised to attack.

Later that evening, the Saunders group went into the Garnet House lobby. By the next day, Walter Saunders arrived on the scene and took command while Edwards obtained a warrant from a nearby Justice of Peace against his injured brother, George. When he and his four deputies arrived Ballard uttered threats, which sparked Edwards to obtain a second warrant against him. The factions eventually agreed that George would later surrender to authorities other than Edwards, so Walter returned to Crab Orchard.

Unfortunately, a member of the Edwards faction sent a taunting letter to Sheriff Saunders daring him to "take Richmond." Saunders could not ignore this challenge, so he rounded up the Ballards and other allies. On August 28, 1877, he returned and a gunfight erupted in downtown Richmond, resulting in several deaths, including Walter Saunders and Tuck Ballard. With the two most belligerent leaders gone, cooler heads prevailed and the Edwards-Saunders conflict of Madison County ended.

Green Clay authored many other articles which describe life and culture in Madison County and other locations within our commonwealth. While he is not well known to the modern reader his work appears to emit images of our community's past and is of value to lay people and scholars.

The EKU archive collection has grown, and sound primary source material is now available for researchers.

GUEST COMMENTARY

Beshear's book touts Christian values (except when it comes to Bevin)



LINDA BLACKFORD
KENTUCKY LANTERN

If there are one or two of you out there who still have doubts that Gov. Andy Beshear will run for president in 2028, doubt no more. Last month, he officially released "Go and Do Likewise: How We Heal a Broken Country," joining the Presidential Hopeful section of your local bookstore already stocked with choices such as "Young Man in a Hurry: A Journey of Discovery" by Gavin Newsom, "Where We Keep the Light: Stories From a Life of Service" by Josh Shapiro, "Crisis of the Common Good: The Fight for Meaning and Connection in a Broken America," by Chris Murphy. You get the idea — first you set up a PAC, then write a book with a colon in the title and you're halfway to New Hampshire.

Luckily for these busy men, 1) Donald Trump has provided an excellent opening to talk about such hopeful, healing topics, and 2) there are many talented ghost writers out there. Mark Tabb, who is thanked by Beshear in the acknowledgements, keeps a light touch and a fast pace with the greatest hits of the Kentucky governor.

Luckily for Tabb, Beshear has a truly unusual number of high-drama moments from his years in office, which also provide him with excellent examples of his Biblical themes, the good Samaritan etc. From COVID to the West Kentucky tornadoes to the Eastern Kentucky floods, Kentuckians shine in crises – neighbors helping neighbors – in all the ways that are antithetical to the Trumpist individualism that has poisoned our public discourse.

Trump will not be on the ballot in 2028 (we hope) so it's interesting the book is so focused on him, but it's clear that Trumpism is what Democrats will have to continue to run against, and thus is how Beshear has structured the book. (He may not have imagined Trump's polls being this low as he and Tabb wrote it.)

Luckily for us readers, Beshear is not so filled with the Holy Spirit that he leaves out any thoughts of payback. Kentucky's favorite bad guy, former Gov. Matt Bevin, is referred to throughout as Trump Lite, and their political tussles are highlighted with more candor than previously encountered.

There is, for example, the time then-Attorney General Beshear was crossing the Capitol parking lot when he ran into then-Gov. Bevin, and chastised him for not doing his job after a Louisville child was hit by a stray bullet.

"Eyes wide, Bevin leaned toward me and snarled, 'Spare me your talking points. If you want to get political, I'll knock your f—— head off!'

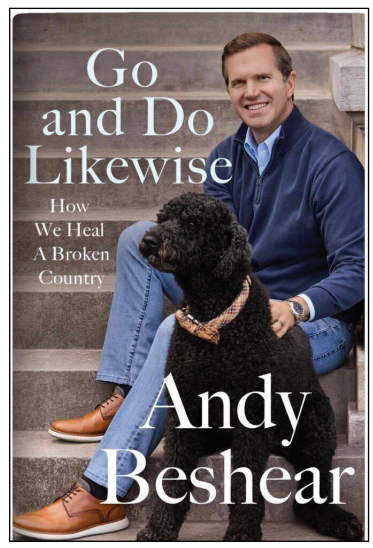
I stared directly into his bugged-out eyes. 'Are you threatening me, Governor?' I said as calmly as I could but, raising my voice, added, 'Cause I don't take kindly to being threatened.'

He shot back, 'I didn't threaten you.'

'You just said you'd knock my head off,' I replied. I could see in his face Bevin knew he'd made a mistake, not that he'd admit it. Ever. Instead, he shook his head and scoffed, 'Is this how you people act?'"

It turns out "you people" are Democrats, and Beshear uses the moment to further explore the ongoing political divide expertly manipulated by Trump and the ever charming Trump Lite.

But Bevin is not the only politician who doesn't like to admit he made a mistake. In the book, Beshear mentions only a few of his own, such as Tupac Shakur's unemployment application during COVID. He does not write about the entire debacle over unemployment benefits, or the many problems in his Department of Juvenile Justice so aptly documented by the Lexington Herald-Leader, or the various travesties around the Kentucky Wired program.



"Go and Do Likewise: How We Heal a Broken Country," was released this week by Gov. Andy Beshear. | COURTESY OF ST. MARTIN'S PRESS

But generally speaking, people writing books before they run for president aren't going to explore those themes.

The most affecting chapters are about abortion rights advocate Hadley Duvall, who almost certainly made the difference in his second gubernatorial election, the mass shooting at Louisville's Old National Bank that killed one of his closest friends, and America's civil rights history, and the removal of the Jefferson Davis statue from the Capitol.

I think it's smart of Beshear to talk about his faith because so many people perceive the Democratic Party as one full of atheists; his willingness to talk about God is part of what has created a genuine rapport with Kentuckians. One of Beshear's greatest strengths is his ability to do the right thing while seeing clearly how to reap political rewards from it. For example, his daily COVID briefings brought real comfort to thousands of people, and beamed his awkward dad jokes and Mr. Rogers persona into an indelible image that clearly helped him win a second term in a deep red state.

What's still unclear is whether Beshear, despite the sharp political instincts and prodigious fundraising, has the charisma to appeal to people outside Kentucky, and whether this book will help him do so. He'll sell plenty of copies; Tom Loftus recently reported that in addition to the Kentucky Democratic Party spending $10,000 to buy books, Beshear's PAC, In This Together, bought $9,000 worth of them. Will your average voter in Iowa or South Carolina join this group? In the runup to a presidential campaign, does it even matter?

Linda Blackford is an award-winning journalist and editor who spent the past 30 years at the Lexington Herald-Leader covering education, government affairs and numerous other topics.