

WOMEN OF THE PHELPS FAMILY

RHODA LEBOW PHELPS

Introduction:

From as far back as family records have been kept, the Phelps family has been blessed with strong capable women, but for three principal reasons, far less information has been gathered on them in our family research effort. The reasons are these: First, the custom of the woman taking the last name of her husband in our culture makes researching women more difficult, sometimes impossible. Second, in the past men ordinarily owned property, held public office, served in the military, and led in church life. Records in these areas provide the critical paper trail for family research and carry mostly male names. And third, the genetic makeup of we humans which we have come to better understand scientifically in recent years lends itself to following the history of men more readily than women. Regardless of the difficulties in research, we know a great deal about the Phelps women. Added emphasis in future research is in order.

These are our grandmothers to whom we owe eternal gratitude:

Maria Magdalena Guldig Volp - Born in southwestern Germany. Immigrated to Pennsylvania in 1751 with husband Georg (Jorg)Volp (Fulp). Later known in North Carolina as Mary Fulp. Mother of Valentine Phelps and other children. Sent sons Peter and Michael off to fight in the American Revolution. Died in North Carolina.

Name Not Known – Wife of Valentine Phelps. Mother of Henry Phelps and other children. Likely born in America, but possibly Germany. Probably died in Tennessee or Illinois Territory, or enroute. No documentary evidence to date.

Rhoda Lebow Phelps— Born in Illinois Territory in 1815. Daughter of Daniel Lebow. Wife of Henry Phelps. Mother of Daniel Richard Phelps (Felps) George Henry Phelps, James Jefferson Phelps, and other children. Widowed in 1857. Died in Blount County, TN in 1880.

Sarah Jane Lebow Phelps – Born in Illinois in 1865. Daughter of Taylor Lebow. Wife of Daniel Richard Phelps. Mother of Rhoda Ethel Phelps, William Esco Phelps, Richard Earl Phelps, Vola Beatrice Phelps Talbot, Vivian Blane Phelps, and Henry Verlan Phelps. Widowed in 1910. Died in Blount County, TN in 1927.

Rosa Honor Davis Phelps— Born in Blount County, TN. Daughter of John Brownlow Davis and Mahaska Bright Davis. Wife of William Esco Phelps, Mother of Geneva Phelps Sturgeon, Edna Phelps Stoutt, Daniel Edward Phelps, Anna Reva Phelps Davis, William Darrell Phelps, Juanita Phelps Jackson, Jerrod Gilbert Phelps. Died in Blount County, TN. in 1986.

The focus of this paper, the first in a series, is on Rhoda Lebow Phelps.

Rhoda Lebow Phelps – The Maiden

“LeBeau” is a French name variously translated to English as “Lebo”, “Leabow”, and most commonly “Lebow”. Family tradition holds that the Lebows came to America from Normandy or the Rhine River Valley of Europe, either as soldiers in the French military during the Revolutionary War or in the early 1700’s As seekers of religious freedom.

Our great, great grandmother Rhoda was born in Illinois Territory on April 18, 1815. She was the daughter of Daniel Lebow and Sarah Thompson Lebow who were early settlers (1808) in the Lone Mountain community of Claiborne County, TN. before moving to the western frontier of Illinois. Daniel came with his brother John (Jack) from North Carolina to Tennessee. Jack did not go on to Illinois, but lived the rest of his life in Tennessee. Some of the Lebows, including Daniel and family, returned to Tennessee

Another immigrant family on the move westward in the early 1800’s was that of Valentine Fulp (Phelps). The Fulp (Volp, Phelps) family lived in North Carolina after about 1765 after migrating in 1751 to Pennsylvania from the tiny town of Sindrigen, Germany. In 1786 Valentine’s father George died and bequeathed him

a horse and a sum of hard cash. We do not know the details, but all indications are that he took his horse and headed west across the mountains to Tennessee. In 1799 Valentine and wife had a son they named Henry. It was their second son, the first having been named Michael. Both later went west to Illinois with the family. Michael stayed, married, and raised a family there. Henry returned to Tennessee.

Rhoda Lebow Phelps – The Bride

In 1828 Henry Phelps and Rhoda Lebow were married. We don't know whether Henry and Rhoda met in Illinois and moved back to Tennessee and were married in Tennessee. Or if their moves back to Tennessee were coincidental and they met and married in Tennessee. Or if they were married in Illinois and then moved back to Tennessee.

Rhoda Elbow Phelps – The Mother

The 1830 U. S. Census shows Henry and Rhoda with two children (Mary Jane and William Thompson). They are listed on the line in the census next to Daniel which indicates that Henry and Rhoda and children were living with or very close to her father Daniel and family. In the 1830's Rhoda, Henry and family moved from Claiborne County, TN to Blount County, TN. Their later years were spent in the Middlesettlements Community on a farm with a big spring now called Lovingood Spring. Father Daniel Lebow and his family moved to Blount County as well.

Rhoda and Henry went on to have a total of eleven children – seven boys and four girls. Their third son born April 20, 1839 was named Daniel Richard. He came to be our great grandfather.

Rhoda – The Widow

Oral history has it that small pox swept the Middlesettlements community in 1857. Henry Phelps is reputed to be one of the men of the community who met the crisis by keeping a grave dug ahead. According to oral history Henry later fell victim to the illness and is buried in a grave he had dug himself. Though no headstone in the Middlesettlements Church Cemetery bears his name, it is very likely that his grave site is near the site of the original church house located near the middle of the cemetery,

Rhoda – The Mother of Soldiers

The issue of slavery had not been confronted by our founding fathers, either in 1776 in our Declaration of Independence or in the Constitution hammered out in Philadelphia in 1787. Civil war loomed for America in the 1850's and exploded into reality with the rebellious bombardment of Federal Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor in April, 1861. Regarding the Phelps feeling to the politics of the Civil War, we have the recorded words of Rhoda's grandson William Esco Phelps who got his information, first hand, from his Civil War veteran father. William Esco states emphatically that "they (the Phelps family) tried to stay out of it (the war)" and for good reason. They had their hands full raising a family of eleven and making a living on a farm they did not own. They, of course, owned no slaves and had little time to consider the ideology of "states' rights", the basis on which wealthy plantation owners of the south led us into war.

Though the people of East Tennessee were against the secession two or three to one, the state of Tennessee voted to secede and without mercy, war came to Rhoda's household in late 1862. For refusing to be taken into the Confederate Army, her son James Jefferson was shot in the back and left for dead in nearby Mt. Tabor community. (Fortunately, he was found by family, taken home, and nursed back to health over a long period of time.) Later the same year Rhoda's son Daniel Richard was captured in the Miser Station community by a band of more than a dozen armed and mounted Rebel conscriptors and was taken to Knox County for induction. (He escaped within days with several other Blount County men. All made their way back home. In January 1863 Daniel Richard walked to Kentucky to join in the 6th Tennessee Volunteer Infantry (Union).

In the summer of 1863, Rhoda's son John Michael and William Thompson, her oldest son and "man of the house", traveled on foot over 100 miles to Somerset, Kentucky to enlist in the 3rd Tennessee Volunteer Cavalry (Union). Later that year her son, George Henry, barely eighteen years old, joined the 2nd Tennessee Volunteer Cavalry (Union).

By the end of 1863 with four sons off at war, one recovering from gunshot wounds, and several children still at home, Widow Rhoda Lebow Phelps faced the daunting task of survival. Both Confederate and Union armies "lived off the land" and both were active in Blount County at one time or another during the four-

year war. One column of General Sherman's army of 30,000 marched very near the Phelps home in late 1863 on their way from Atlanta in relieve besieged Knoxville. The communities through which they marched were obliged to provide them food and anything else they that was present and needed.

By 1864, most of the town of Maryville had burned, Maryville College had long since closed, and most young men of fighting age who were still alive were away in one army or the other. The countryside was ravaged and lay destitute to the degree that President Abraham Lincoln became aware of it and ordered relief.

Letters home from the soldiers to Mother Rhoda told of the horrors of war. Son Daniel Richard had taken ill and was hospitalized with a stomach disorder and neuralgia at Carthage, Tennessee, ailments that would plague him for the rest of his life. Later, he took a spent musket ball to the chest at Lookout Mountain which was of little consequence. He reportedly fished the ball out of his shirt, discarded it, and continued to fight. Rich Phelps, as he was called in the family, was with Sherman's army at the battles of Kennesaw Mountain, Rocky Face, Atlanta, and Lovejoy Station. Later he was at the battle of Nashville. His unit traveled over 10,000 miles during the war and the wear and tear of battle came home with him to plague the household as he stepped-up to replace the fallen William Thompson as "man of the house". We have some of the letters written from the battlefield by Rich Phelps who was to marry another of the Lebow women, Sarah Jane Lebow.

Rhoda Phelps would have known that her sons John Michael and William Thompson were captured in the fall of 1864 by dark-genius cavalryman General Nathan Bedford Forrest and imprisoned in a makeshift prison in Cahaba, Alabama. Forrest was known for his harshness with prisoners, so it may have been that the news received by Mother Rhoda was seen as good news instead of bad. Both sons were transferred at war's end to Vicksburg, Mississippi for mustering out after a rail and steamboat trip to Ohio. With sons John Michael and William Thompson aboard, the steamboat "Sultana" in poor repair and criminally overloaded blew up just north of Memphis around 2 AM on April 27, 1865. John survived, but oldest son William Thompson perished. His body was never recovered. To make matters worse, if that is possible, the tragedy occurred more than two weeks after Lee had surrendered to Grant at

Appomattox. No one was ever held to account for the gross criminality that caused the loss of over 1700 war-weary soldiers on their way home from war.

Rhoda – Post War Matriarch

After the war, the task of recovery by the Phelps family began on the 166 acre farm at Lovingood Springs. Daniel Richard was the obvious choice for the “man-of-the-house” role. He was the oldest unmarried son and by any standard a very responsible family member. But Rhoda, now fifty years old and with much life experience, must have still been the guiding hand. Since she had lost her oldest son William Thompson who had headed the household before the war, Rhoda filed for a war pension to compensate her for her loss. The small and much deserved pension (\$ 8.00 per month) was granted and payments were received until an ex-convict in Friendsville named French who must have had a grudge against the family, informed the War Department that the claim for the pension was fraudulent. The pension stopped.

The degree of insult and pain to Rhoda Phelps must have been excruciating. She had lost her husband and her oldest son. Her son James Jefferson had been shot in the back, her son Daniel Richard suffered from war injuries and was haunted by all he had been through in two years of combat. Her son John Michael had seen cavalry combat before he was captured and he thrown into a filthy Confederate prison for months only to be released and see his older brother drown in the Mississippi River. The children left at home were no doubt malnourished and emotionally scarred for life by experiences no child should see. How much can one woman stand?

Grandmother Rhoda’s response to the pension issue showed cool courage, resolve, and wisdom. She marched up to Maryville (it is imagined), got herself a lawyer and fought back. Mind you, Rhoda could not read or write. (But who would have had time to learn to read and write when a mother of two at age fifteen, with nine more children to come?) The lawyer who took her case happened to be a former Union army officer who was well aware of the service of her sons and knew the family. He was more insulted it seemed than Rhoda herself, taking her case without charge and firing off a personal letter on her behalf with withering outrage. The pension was expeditiously reinstated.

Rhoda Phelps' handling of the pension affair was only a precursor to what may have been her finest hour. **Only two years after the Civil War was over, she managed to put together enough money to buy the 166 acre farm on which they had been living for years as tenants!!**

The price of the farm was \$1450. Certainly there had been no surplus money from farm operations during the war, but there is no evidence of debt either. The cash to buy the farm is assumed to have come from the meager army pay brought home by the sons. There may have been a death benefit for William Thompson. He and John certainly would have been due back pay from their time in prison and perhaps before. John Michael was a witness to the real estate transaction and it seems likely that he would have contributed. And Daniel Richard would have gotten home with some money. His discharge papers shows small bonuses paid for certain services. The details we will never know, but the purchase had to have been a family effort. To move from the status of tenant farmers to that of land owners was an accomplishment at any time, but coming only two years after the Civil War was near miraculous.

Rhoda – Her Last Will and Testament

Son Daniel Richard delayed marriage to manage the family farm and care for the family from 1865 until his mother Rhoda died in 1880. Before her death Rhoda dictated a will that seemed to personify her. It demonstrated her frugality and ability to manage under extremely trying circumstances. It also demonstrated her thoughtfulness, sense of fairness, and wishes for wellbeing for the family after her passing.

When she died Rhoda Lebow Phelps had money for her own funeral expenses and then some. She left the farm free and clear to Daniel Richard and Hiram, the two male children who were unmarried and still living at the home. She left George, John, and Jeff \$30 each. Mary and Sarah received \$35 each. All the household furnishings and personal property was left to Daniel Richard, Hiram, Martha, and Elizabeth jointly. Her last wish was that those who were unmarried remain together on the farm.

Corrections, additions, and suggestions welcomed!!
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