Confederate Spy Buried in Dells Cemetery

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

A hundred and six years ago, very early on Memorial Day May 30, 1905, a young man with a plank could be seen entering the Kilbourn (now Wisconsin Dells) cemetery. Painted on the plank were the words “One Country, One Flag”, along with a rough depiction of the American Flag of the day.

With the aid of the Sexton, a hole two feet deep was dug over the unmarked grave of a woman, and the plank set up. She had died five years previously while on a lecture tour in the Dells, but the grave remained unmarked.

The Confrontation

As the men left the area they were approached by three Civil War veterans. After an argument, the veterans were led to the grave, having announced they would destroy the marker since they considered the presence of this body in the cemetery was a desecration.

After reading the marker, their leader banker Thomas Coon declared: “Well, comrades, I guess the boy has beat you. I guess you won’t haul the plank down.” Flowers were then placed, possibly reluctantly, on the grave, along with those of ten Union soldiers, local boys who had fallen in battle.

Why the fuss? This was the grave of Belle Boyd, one of the great female spies in history, whose information to the rebels had led to the decimation of Sauk County and Wisconsin’s Iron Brigade at the battle of Gettysburg. Despite the end of the Civil War 40 years previously, feelings against the South still ran high, and the grave had been ignored and left unmarked, perhaps even despised, since Belle’s sudden death in Kilbourn on June 12, 1900.

Indeed tension had been high for several days, ever since Glazier stated his intention to mark the grave. Official of the Civil War Veteran’s organization, the GAR, along with their auxiliary, the WRC, had refused to cooperate with the plan, and Glazier had been denounced.

How do we know this? An article in the Baraboo News of May 22, 1952 quoted at length the story as told by the man himself, former Dells resident Gus O. Glazier. He had written of the event on October 6, 1905 in a dispatch to the News. In far more detail than this article allows, he recounted both the refusal of the GAR to participate and the altercation with the veterans at the cemetery.

The Sordid Life of Belle Boyd

There is no doubt that Belle Boyd was a self-admitted spy for the Confederacy during the Civil War. Thirty Five years had passed, and now in 1900 she was on sort of a lecture tour. We
don't know what her message was—repentance and hope for forgiveness, or continuous defense of the South. Her appearance in Kilbourn obviously was strongly resented.

The age of eighteen had found her in South-leaning Baltimore. It is inferred that she was more than popular among the young military men of that city. A 1913 Baraboo News tells us that she was a Confederate lover, but then married a Union soldier and converted him to the Rebel cause, making him a traitor.

Born in Martinsville, Va., she grew to 5 foot seven, had an aquiline nose and hair of a reddish-brown hue. She completed her education in Baltimore at age nineteen and, knowing many Union officers “used her acquaintance and blandishments to gain information...which she conveyed at every opportunity to the South—especially to General Stuart and later to Stonewall Jackson.”

Arrests and conviction occurred followed by imprisonment. At one time she was sentenced to be shot. Finally she was banished to England by President Lincoln. She then began an acting career using the name Nina Benjamin. Here the article becomes confusing for the second husband, whom she converted to the Rebel cause, is mentioned as returning to America to become a spy. What happened to him is not known, but by 1869 she married a Colonel Hamilton and returned to the States.

Apparently her Rebel past did not prevent her return, but she was in ill health. Sent to an insane asylum in California, she had a son but he did not survive. However, in subsequent years she had three children. For unknown reasons she now divorced Hamilton and married Nat R. High. It was he who traveled with her on the lecture tour which brought them to Kilbourn.

Her illness and very sudden death the evening of her arrival accounts for the presence of her grave in Kilbourn, since apparently Nat High did not claim her body or have a part in its disposal, nor is he mentioned again.

Belle Boyd Today

So what are we to make of the compassionate action of Gus Glazier, who decorated her grave “in respect...although on what we felt she was on the wrong side, we should forgive her.” How do the people of Kilbourn, now Wisconsin Dells, feel about her now?

Well, never adverse to an opportunity for publicity, a Dells newspaper reports that in 1932, many tourists including some from Virginia visited the grave (and the Dells) every summer. It is said that her reputation enjoys a fair amount of favorable publicity in the South.

By 1929, efforts to send her remains “back home” went unfulfilled, and a 1952 story in the Rochester Democrat reported that on the 107th anniversary of her birth (perhaps 1844) the State Bars (Confederate Flag) was flown over her Wisconsin grave. Soil from Virginia was spread over the site.

Delegates from Virginia came for the occasion, the Dells Legion participated, and an excursion boat was named in her honor. By 1955 a report from Wisconsin Dells stated that the Stars and Stripes now flew over the refurbished grave site also, along with the Confederate Flag.
The Dells report stated that despite talk of moving her remains to Virginia, Wisconsin Dells "believes it has earned the right to claim her for its own". It is assumed that the Union soldiers in the cemetery receive appropriate recognition also.

Guy Glazier would be pretty surprised at all of this, and (hopefully) pleased.
Plan Unique May Ceremony At Wisconsin Dells

A unique ceremony is being planned at Wisconsin Dells on Memorial Day—a tribute to southern women to the famous Civil War Confederate spy, Belle Boyd, who was imprisoned in the Wisconsin Dells cemetery and whose grave is on the Wisconsin side. The grave has been marked only by a worn monument, bearing the inscription: "Belle Boyd, Confederate spy. Born in Virginia, died in Wisconsin. Erected by a comrade."

Monuments have been erected to Belle Boyd south but it was not until Milwaukee's Parks and Recreation man conceived the idea of honoring her here that the contemplated ceremony was started. "The Milwaukee Art Council suggested attending the facts to Virginia's Governor, John S. Brittle, who, in turn, asked the United Daughters of the Confederacy to do something about it. The public recognition for the famous woman's grave was a joint effort of the Wisconsin. Gray Feather of Richmond is sending three women, to take part in the ceremony commemorating Belle's life and destiny. They will arrive at the Dells May 30th.

The Legion post at the Dells is to take part in the ceremony and it is to include dedication of a new excursion boat, to be christened the Belle Boyd by Mrs. Phillips for the Riverview Boat company. Plans include a rose garden and a fence to be placed at Belle's grave.

The famous woman spy died while on a lecturing tour in Wisconsin Dells. She had been lecturing in Portage and then went to the Dells, where a sudden heart attack ended her life on June 11, 1900, at the age of 58 years. The experiences of which she told in her lectures included being captured and imprisoned several times but she was either released or her Union guards fell in love with her and he was allowed to resign his commission as navy lieutenant and follow her to England, where she had escaped in the meantime, and there they married. She was on the stage for a time after returning from England but apparently at the time she died she was without relatives or friends to return her body to the south, and so she was buried in the north.

Belle Boyd Gets Wisconsin Tribute On Memorial Day

WISCONSIN DELLS, Wis. (UP) May 30, 1955

Belle Boyd, the beautiful Confederate spy of the Civil War, received a Wisconsin tribute on Memorial Day.

Belle's fellow Virginians have lately taken time to pay a Memorial Day pilgrimage to her grave here. But Wisconsin Dells residents took over the ceremonies Monday.

It was their way of serving notice that Belle will stay buried in Wisconsin.

The stars and bars of the Confederacy, as well as the stars and stripes, were held over her grave. Flowers were placed upon her grave.

The red-haired Belle became the pride of Martinsburg, Va., and one of the most famous women spies in history when she was only 17 years old.

She shot a union soldier who invaded her home while she and her mother were alone. Union authorities were so taken with her beauty that they cleared her of all charges and even placed a guard around her home to protect her.

But Belle was loyal to the South. She took advantage of her favored position to spy on her Yankee friends.

Union forces arrested and imprisoned Belle twice and she became too notorious to do much more spying. So she turned to the stage under the name of Nina Benjamin and started going through a series of husbands.

Belle was in her 50s when she came to the site of Wisconsin Dells in June, 1900, to deliver a narrative of her life as a spy. She died of a heart attack and was buried here.

For years, the Wisconsin Dells Legion post tended Belle's grave while her fellow Southerners apparently forgot her. But in 1953 a delegation from Richmond, Va., came on Memorial Day to scatter soil from the banks of the James River on her grave.

Since then, there's been talk of Virginia of bringing Belle home.

But Wisconsin Dells believes it's earned the right to claim her for its own.

The Wisconsin town received support this year from Belle's granddaughter, Mrs. Virginia Montgomery Hammond of Los Angeles.

She sent a message saying "My grandmother shall rest forever in her scenic and eternal resting place in Wisconsin Dells despite rumors that some misguided Southerners wish to remove her remains to Virginia."

Jumping Dog At Dells Now Has Stand-In

WISCONSIN DELLS, Wis. (UP) June 12, 1954

Quite a few tourists who have seen Watch I make the leap at Stand Rock may think they're seeing double this summer. The jet black labrador-schnauzer has a stand-in.

Watch II will be making the leaps which have drawn the fire of one million amateur photographers in the last six years.

Lester Jones, the owner of the Dells, after making sure his protege has things under control, Watch I plans to just sit back and take it easy, according to Willie Meeker who has spent the winter and spring training the newcomer.

Meeker said he has been working with a high wooden platform at his training school in Wheeling, Ill., but he depended on Watch I to take the new labrador through the actual jump the first few times.

The five-foot leap over a 50-foot chasm has been made by Watch I thousands of times for visitors to the Dells.

"He fell only once in the early days," said publicist Bellman Jones. "But he landed in the net we have below without injury."

Both dogs are now owned by the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation which received most of the scenic area, the boat lines and the hotel recently.
Planned Back In 1929
To Take Belle Boyd 'Home'

Old files of the Baraboo News-
Republican bring to light the fact
that Belle Boyd, Confederate spy
buried at Wisconsin Dells, was not
entirely forgotten in her homeland
all these years. Back in 1929 there
was quite a movement to try and
recover her body. One plan was to
open the old grave and return the
body to her native south, but that
idea was dropped.

The article continues:

"And in the future our own people
of the South will care for her
grave and see that it is properly
marked.

We learn that Belle Boyd was not
only an actress but she wrote a
book, the theme of which was her
life in the Confederate States of
America. She later returned to
England and married a man named
E. A. B. H. She had three sons, one
of whom died in young age. Belle
Boyd joined the Confederate Army
and was taken prisoner in Maryland.

However, her spirit was never
broken. Perhaps the most
memorable event was when she
was visited in her cell by a
Confederate soldier who
promised to come for her when
the war was over. She died shortly
after the announcement of
African American freedom.

In 1929, there was a plan to
return Belle Boyd's body to her
native southern home. However,
this plan was never put into
operation. It was finally decided
that Belle Boyd's body should be
buried at Wisconsin Dells, the
place where she is best remembered.

Guy O. Glazier
Recalls Death Of Belle Boyd

"I certainly stirred up a hornet's
nest when I suggested the marking
of Belle Boyd's grave," writes Guy
O. Glazier from Boulevard, Calif.,
where he has lived for many years.

"I know a lot about her death and
burial and the aftermath of erecting
the first headboard."

Enclosed is a clipping which Mr.
Glazier has kept for years. It
states that Mr. Glazier prepared for
Editor Cole back in Oct. 6, 1958,
and in the clipping he said:

"I notice an item regarding the
reopening of the grave of Belle Boyd
in which it states that she was buried
there by the Grand Army of the
Republic and the Relief Corps. Now,
I am perfectly willing to give the
death his due but I would like to give
the people a few facts which have
never before appeared in print.

Belle Boyd died at the Hille House
in Killbourn, June 11, 1900. Her
husband, Mr. E. H., was with her.
In Killbourn, the G.A.R. had
place upon it a wooden marker.

So the Grand Army of Killbourn
was appealed to: No, not one
recent would they give to bury that
rebel, and so the body lay all day at
the Hille House. Late in the day the
condition of the body was heard by
a young Episcopal minister the Rev.
Arthur Gorter, who willingly lent
his assistance. Word was sent to her
relatives, also to the Theatrical Union,
both of whom sent money by tele-
graph. The next day a lot was pur-
chased in the Spring Grove cemetery
and Belle Boyd was buried by Father
Gorter conducting the funeral
services. I was told by Father Gorter
that there was not a single member
of the G.A.R. or W.R.C. attending
the funeral.

"For five years the grave laid
untouched and uncared for, with
not a headstone or slab to mark
the resting place of one of the
most daring spires in the rebel
army. Her deeds of daring among
the Union armies would have
filled a volume of many pages."