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More about William Gilpin

Fiction writers often create an antagonist and a protagonist among their characters. When writing pure fiction that task can be a straight forward, but when a story is based on fact it becomes more difficult. Fortunately, William Gilpin, on his own, gave me an ideal foil for Nathaniel Hill. It would be simplistic to label one a villain and the other a hero—their personalities were more nuanced than that. But it is safe to say that William’s moral choices were more injudicious than Nathaniel’s. Gilpin was often consumed by his enthusiasm about the rewards to reap from everything he did.

Originally from England, the first Gilpins came to America in the late 17th century. They settled in the Wilmington and Philadelphia area where William grew up. Even as a child he liked to learn, a trait that continued throughout his life. In 1826, when he was 13, his father sent him to a boarding school of 60 boys in Yorkshire, England near the Gilpin ancestral home. At first William had trouble with math, but when the schoolmaster threatened to prevent his advancement, William studied so assiduously that after graduation he was accepted into the University of Pennsylvania as a junior. He graduated from college at age 17.

Not sure what to do next, he decided to live with his older brother, Henry, and read law. However, when he had a chance meeting with President Andrew Jackson, who was traveling through Philadelphia, William became smitten with the possibilities of military service. He begged his father to use his connections to gain admittance for him to West Point. His excitement about attending soon turned to disappointment. The military academy wasn’t at all what he expected with more emphasis on what he had already studied than military strategy. Much to his family’s embarrassment, in early 1835, he left after only one semester. Instead, he decided to join the army to fight the Seminoles in Florida after an uprising there. As a First Lieutenant with the Second Dragoon, most of his assignments were scouting expeditions. He stayed with the army until 1838.

Ignoring family opportunities, William decided to move to Missouri to finish his law studies. At the age of 24 he became a lawyer and also the editor of the *Missouri Daily Argus*. Throughout his life he connected with influential people and used those connections to his advantage. In St. Louis he met Thomas Hart Benton, one of the first U.S. Senators elected after Missouri became a state in 1821. Benton was a fervent believer in westward expansion. Gilpin not only embraced Benton’s zeal, but went beyond it, believing that America should fulfill its destiny by linking Europe and Asia and spreading the dream of self-government around the world. In St. Louis Gilpin also met Benton’s son-in-law, John C. Fremont, the indefatigable American explorer who later became a presidential candidate.

In 1841, restless again and out of favor because of his vehement editorials in support of the common man, Gilpin moved to Independence on the other side of the state. He began practicing law, but found the lure of western possibilities too tempting to stay. When he learned of the rush to Oregon, he sold his books, borrowed money, and joined Fremont’s scientific exploration party. He became an ardent spokesman for the South Pass route west, south of the treacherous northern route taken by Lewis and Clark in 1803-05. After they reached Oregon, Fremont tried to persuade William to go with him to California, but ideas of riches in the Northwest danced in his head. Most were ill-conceived schemes that came to naught, so he eventually moved on.



He traveled down the Green River to Gunnison, Colorado where (until 1921) the Colorado River began. He was doing odd jobs while searching for valuable land and meeting with Indians to negotiate peace. He continued southward through the San Luis Valley and over the Sangre de Cristo Range, on to the Arkansas River and Bent’s Fort. During his travels he noticed something that looked like gold and questioned fort owner George Bent about any “showings” and also about Spanish land grants. Information he would tuck away for future use.

Gun shots at the Mexico border in 1846 changed Williams’s course and beckoned him south to volunteer in the Mexican war. For once he excelled. As a result of his commendable service he was given command of a volunteer force organized to suppress Indian uprisings in the West and to protect the Santa Fe Trail. At war’s end he returned to Independence, Missouri to again practice law. Once there he was also active in politics although never successful in being elected to office. All this time he continued his promotion of the West, even writing a euphoric history about the climate and conditions that was more fantasy than fact.

{I will skip describing Gilpin’s governorship and exploration of the Sangre de Cristos in the early 1860s because they are chronicled in *Hill’s Gold* and further descriptions of his role in the battle of Glorietta Pass will be expanded in a future Clio Muse News.}

After William was forced to relinquish the office of Colorado Territorial governor, he remained a prominent figure in demand for speaking appearances but never quite free of litigation. His land speculation and self-promotion continued in the 1860s and 1870s. He was deeply involved in the 12-year battle for Colorado statehood.

At age 59 he fell in love with Julia Pratte Dickerson, a 37-year-old St. Louis widow whose husband had died in a mental institution. William and Julia were married in 1874 and the following year added to her four children with the birth of twins, William and Marie. In 1877 Louis (Bogy) Gilpin was born. The Gilpins lived an entertaining life of parties and socializing, but their marriage was contentious. They separated in 1887 and then divorced, only to briefly reconcile 14 years later.

In 1893 William Gilpin was run over by a buggy and died from his injuries the following year at age 80. The Gilpin name was not passed down. In 1892 young William Gilpin died at 17 during a vacation in the mountains. Neither Louis nor Marie had children.

William Gilpin was not unlike so many who went west for a new life, some escaping hardships, others seeking something different, and all desiring opportunity. They often hoped for what they imagined more than what was possible. The West in the 1860s was a harsh land that demanded much of those who tried to benefit from it. Aspirations and environment cast individuals from a different mold than the life where they had originated. The West created its own brand of people.

Ellen

Thanks to Thomas L. Karnes, *William Gilpin: Western Nationalist* for details of William Gilpin’s life.