

THE FUNERAL OF JOHN QUINCY ADAMS MESELIN

Second Thoughts

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I returned last summer to the community where I grew up, searched for and found the little hillside cemetery where rests in eternal serenity the remains of John Quincy Adams Meselin.

The little cemetery no longer is fenced, honeysuckles and blackberry vines cover most of the graves, a hackberry tree grows perilously close to John Quincy's grave, and many headstones are broken or missing.

Strangely, John Q's grave was free of vine and briar. Only the hackberry encroached. Slabs mark most graves in the Meselin plot, but a small marble stone proclaims to the few who visit the remote site: "Here Lies Mr. John Quincy Adams Meslin. 1908-1933. Asleep in the Arms of Jesus."

I studied the legend in amusement. Except during the trial when judge and lawyers referred to him as Mr. Meselin, nobody had ever called John Q "Mr.," either before or after he served three years in the state prison. But in death he had the dignity of a title he may have yearned for in life.

I was amused at the thought of John Q sleeping in the arms of Jesus. All of his life, he had shunned Jesus, Sunday School and anything else that related to religion. If there was anything to what our teacher told us in Sunday School, old John Q wasn't sleeping in anybody's arms. He more likely was raising hell in hell. But, in violation of our teacher's warning, I was judging. Judge not lest ye be judged, she would say. Then she would proceed to do a little judging herself.

Above the cemetery was a big ash that once bore my initials "+ESE." Emma Sue Easley and I carved those letters just before the funeral and while a few gathered early for the ceremony. Emma Sue and her mother were visiting Aunt Flossie. They were friends of Aunt Kate who had a job in Akron, Ohio.

Needless to say, Emma Sue and I spent some time together. At age, 13, we dared to hold hands, and I believe I could have kissed her that day just before the people gathered at the grave. I almost tried but changed my mind. After all, she was going back to Akron next day and I would never see her again. Too, maybe it wasn't right to be kissing a girl just before the earthly remains of John Quincy Adams Meselin arrived for burial. Still...

A fairly large crowd followed the coffin, transported in a wagon drawn by two bay mules. Mr. and Mrs. Meselin rode in a buggy behind the wagon. Mr. Meselin wore a black suit he had bought for the funeral – and a tie, the same one he wore to his wedding.

Mrs. Meselin wore a stark black dress, embellished by a white crocheted collar. It was the best they had.

Abigail Barnow, six months pregnant with John Q's son, remained in her brother's wagon a short distance from the cemetery. Shy and afraid of exposing her pregnancy, she avoided prying eyes and gossiping tongues. I liked Abigail and sometimes she would talk about John Q, saying he wasn't all bad. She hoped her child would "make something of himself."

At the funeral she was crying, softly sobbing, but nobody noticed her sorrow because few noticed Abigail. I spoke to her but did not start a conversation. She was in no condition to talk.

After Brother Lovelace said what preachers say at graveside funerals, Emma Sue and I walked back to the ash tree, noting that nobody was crying except for Abigail. I thought that was strange, but at the point I was more interested in Emma Sue and her pending departure for Ohio. Then, mingling with the noise of dirt falling on a homemade coffin, came the most anguished wail I had ever heard. Just one long, chilling, penetrating wail from John Q's mother. Startled and not knowing what else to do, people began leaving. Mrs. Meselin remained and watched every spade of dirt fall.

Last summer, as I visited the tiny cemetery, I wondered why this one outburst of grief. And I wondered why the grave of John Q, bully and rascal in life, was marked with a marble stone when all others were marked with slabs.

And I tried to call up the face of Emma Sue, but time had erased from my mind all of her features. She is only a little girl, a faceless blue in my memory.

But I wondered if she remembers an ash tree where our initials were linked by a plus sign.

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