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Arkansas's One and Only Hero

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ALBERT PIKE WAS the only hero Arkansas ever had.

"Hero" has to be understood not in the modern sense of valiant and self-sacrificing, which Pike was not, but in the classic sense: celebrated for bold exploits and favored by the gods. Mythic. Legendary. Larger-than-life. Bill Clinton is much more famous and mighty, but his life story lacks the color of Pike's.

Today, Pike is remembered only in Masonic lodges all over the country which were named after him. In his hometown, Little Rock, there is the huge neoclassic Scottish Rite Temple on Scott Street, and nearby the remains of the once-grand Albert Pike Hotel, which had the finest lobby and the finest dining room in the state, and, of course, his gorgeous antebellum mansion at Seventh and Rock, converted into a museum of decorative arts.

But not an awful lot of places and things have been named after him. Neither Arch Street Pike nor Twelfth Street Pike get their names from him. Many towns do have a Pike Street, and North Little Rock has its Pike Avenue, which led to Camp Pike, as the army base was known for years before changing into Camp Robinson. Hot Springs has its Albert Pike Avenue, home of McClard's Bar-B-Q, Cook's Ice Cream, and the Lake Hamilton Resort.

Elsewhere in Arkansas, there is the Albert Pike Recreation Area in a remote corner of the Ouachitas, and the Albert Pike log-cabin schoolhouse at Van Buren. Few public schools have been named after Pike, who began teaching school at the age of sixteen in Massachusetts. Pike County and its lost town, Pike City, were named not for Albert but for his cousin Zebulon Montgomery Pike, after whom Pikes Peak was named.

Most Arkansawyers have heard of Albert Pike. Few know just who he was, and, as the review of the new biography of him makes clear, few general readers would want to wade through a 600-page book about him.[1] At a time when even Roy Reed's magnificent biography of Orval Faubus is having trouble with the name recognition that younger generations withhold from such an old codger, there are not going to be lines of people at the bookstores which carry the Pike book.

In his own lifetime, Pike, who, like most great men, was quick to bear a grudge and slow to let it pass, often bemoaned what was happening to his reputation. Unlike most great men, he often sulked and sought retaliation. After the battle of Pea Ridge, the South accused him, a Confederate general in charge of reluctant Indian troops, of responsibility for the South's defeat, while the North accused him of allowing his Indian troops to scalp the dead and wounded Union soldiers. He spent years seeking vindication.

Literary critics have easily dismissed his poetry, Byronic though it was, and bad though much of it was. The simple truth was that Pike may have possessed the talent to become an American Byron, but was too busy with all his other undertakings to devote himself to poetry.

He grew up with the state of Arkansas, having become an Arkansawyer in 1832 when it was still a wild territory. After a hectic adventure on a trip to Santa Fe that reads like Wild West fiction (and inspired my own second novel, not published), Pike taught school in the Ozark wilderness before moving to Little Rock to become a successful if highly controversial newspaper editor.

He not only observed and commented upon but actively participated in most of the political activities of early Arkansas during its transition from territory to statehood. This was the gallant era of duels, and Pike himself fought one, challenging a man who had impugned his honor. He smoked a cigar during the combat, which, after both parties missed each other twice, was stopped inconclusively.

Physically he was a giant of a man and had enough quirks, habits, and eccentricities to charm a novelist or give gainful employment to a political cartoonist. If only John Deering had been alive in those days! As a teenage frontiersman, Pike began cultivating a Buffalo Bill demeanor that segued into the permanent image of Pike that looks out at us from many photographs, from Charles Elliot Loring's painting, and from a full-length monumental statue in Washington, D.C.: long dark flowing hair, full beard and mustachios not quite concealing a sensuous mouth,

long and strong nose, highbrow forehead, and piercing but romantic dark eyes.

When he was an old man living in Washington as the Supreme Grand Commander of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry, he fell in love with a remarkable girl of nineteen, Vinnie Ream, a sculptress (rare in American art), and he maintained a relationship with her for the rest of his life that was supposedly "pure" but unquestionably intense.

The best sources of his biography come from his *Essays to Vinnie*, five volumes of fine-ruled paper, each lettered on the front cover, "Vinnie. Pegni d'affetto"—peg of my heart. But she married a much younger man, and he had to add jealousy to the afflictions of old age—neuralgia, gout, dyspepsia, rheumatism, lumbago—that beset his last years, which he lived as a recluse in the Masonic House of the Temple, where he died in 1891.

His masterpiece, to which not even the Masons themselves give much notice any more, was called "Morals and Dogma of The Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry"—a formidable mouthful for what is some of the best poetic philosophy ever thought and penned. This volume of a thousand-plus pages was printed so often as a Masonic manual that you can still find it cheap in second-hand bookstores, with a warning on the title page: "ESOTERIC BOOK, FOR SCOTTISH RITE USE ONLY; TO BE RETURNED UPON WITHDRAWAL OR DEATH OF RECIPIENT."

The book, in the process of raising the mason from apprentice through thirty-two degrees culminating in "Master of the Royal Secret," contains a lot of Masonic mumbo-jumbo, but it also contains splendid wisdom, some of the finest philosophy ever written by an American . . . and ever ignored by the public and intelligentsia alike.

But computer-users are probably familiar with "The Wisdom of the Ages," a shareware resource of thousands of quotations from all the world's great thinkers and writers. There are more from Albert Pike than any other person. A sample: "Faith begins where Reason sinks exhausted."

Pike's reason was exhausted after the debacle of Pea Ridge, when he went into seclusion at a remote hideaway in the Ouachita Mountains called Greasy Cove . . . not to be confused with Faubus's Greasy Creek. "The attachment to solitude is the surest preservative from the ills of life," Pike wrote.

At Greasy Cove, Pike brooded and wrote the "Morals and Dogma," and there I attempted to find him in the novel I wrote about him, which I discuss elsewhere on this page.

My favorite passage from "Morals and Dogma":

Action is greater than writing. A good man is a nobler object of contemplation than a great author. There are but two things worth living for: to do what is worthy of being written; and to write what is worthy of being read; and the greater of these is *the doing.*