



Episode 806, Story 3: Lookout Mountain

Wes Cowan: In our last case, we investigate the possible connection between this painting and a pivotal battle of the Civil War. November 24th, 1863: at least 13,000 Confederate and Union soldiers battle at Lookout Mountain in Tennessee. The prize: the besieged city of Chattanooga, and the Tennessee River, gateway to the South. How did the Union troops win the upper hand in that mountaintop struggle? And what was the fate of the defeated Confederate soldiers? Almost a century and a half later, Bill Dodge of Portland, Oregon, has a painting that may illustrate how that mountaintop battle unfolded, and what happened when the guns fell silent.

Bill Dodge: Our family has always wondered if the artist was at this battle. Hi, Wes.

Wes: Hey, nice to see you, Bill.

Bill: My grandfather gave it to me. It had been in the family for a couple of generations. His grandmother had been gifted this during the Civil War.

Wes: The painting states it was a gift from Thomas Cocke to Mary Robertson. Bill doesn't know who Cocke was, but he knows Mary lived in Iowa, and family lore has it that she was a Southern sympathizer. So Mary B. Robertson was your great-grandmother?

Bill: Great-great.

Wes: Okay.

Bill: I'm only the fourth person to own this thing in the last 100 and so years.

Wes: Wow that is amazing. The artist is somebody named John Gisch. Rock Island Prison was a Union Prisoner of War camp where Confederates were taken. Do you know anything about this guy Thomas Cocke?

Bill: I know nothing about him. I wish I knew more. It was presumed that he was one of the prisoners.



Wes: And Bill has a question about the artist.

Bill: I'd like to know who John Gisch is. And why he would do this.

Wes: This is a fabulous piece of Civil War era folk art. The crudeness of the figures and the lack of familiarity with perspective and scale all point to the hand of an amateur. John F. Gisch. He's obviously the artist. Rock Island Prison, Illinois. Thomas Cocke. Mary Robertson. These are good clues to get me started. I've never heard of John Gisch, but I find him online as a painter... and, a former prisoner at Rock Island. Here's one that's virtually identical to Bill's painting of the Battle of Lookout Mountain...With exactly the same viewpoint from behind Union lines. You know, it's very strange though. Rock Island Prison was where Confederates were taken. So, why is the perspective here very clearly from the Union side? Gisch also did a painting of the bombardment of Charleston, South Carolina. It, too, is marked "Rock Island". And here's one of Rock Island Prison itself. From what I can tell, he only painted at Rock Island Prison. I want to find out why Gisch's only paintings appear to be from his days as a Confederate prisoner. But first, I'm curious if this is an accurate painting, and why a Confederate soldier would capture the view as seen by Union forces? I think I better go there next. I'm on the steepest passenger train ride in the world, headed to the top of Lookout Mountain, Tennessee, where it's easy to see why this place was so strategically important. The Tennessee River below cradles Chattanooga, a key railroad junction and the gateway to the Deep South. I'm meeting historian Jim Ogden. Well, what do you think? Jim confirms the detailed accuracy of the painting.

Jim Ogden: Very definitely the battle of Lookout Mountain. The fighting in the area of the Craven's house. I can take you to right there where this perspective is done.

Wes: This is the view I've come here for. Stand here, and the painting comes to life. So, Jim...right here, we're standing where that line of Union troops in Gisch's painting are depicted, right?

Jim: That's right. It's part of those final battles fought for control of Chattanooga in the fall of 1863.

Wes: And capturing Chattanooga was pretty important for the Union.



Jim: Right. Chattanooga is the great doorway, gateway, passageway to the Deep South. And without Chattanooga, the drive of the Union Army in 1864, under Sherman across Georgia, would not have been possible.

Wes: So it's safe to say, without Chattanooga, no march to the sea.

Jim: That's correct.

Wes: Jim explains that, as the painting depicts, the house in the background, owned by a farmer named Robert Craven, was a focal point of the battle as Union forces chased the Confederates around the ridge. He says the Confederates of the 29th Mississippi were outnumbered... possibly by as many as four to one.

Jim: Joseph Hooker, the immediate Union commander has 10,000 troops available to him. The Confederates have, actually, a like number on and immediately about Lookout Mountain. But only two brigades are close to the area of this action. And only one of those brigades is really heavily involved.

Wes: Jim says the outmanned and overwhelmed Rebels scattered toward the woods. And they're coming under fire.

Jim: Right. At the same time, Federal soldiers are beginning to move into the open ground around the Craven's farm. And Confederates, some are turning to fire, trying to slow up those Federals as much as possible.

Wes: I'd sent Jim the names of Thomas Cocke and John Gisch. He's done some research, and fighting with the 29th Mississippi that day, was Sergeant Thomas Cocke.

Jim: He was captured at Lookout Mountain on November 24, 1863.

Wes: And, Jim says, Cocke was taken to Rock Island Prison Camp. How About Gisch?



Jim: Gisch wasn't captured here, but I'll show you where.

Wes: Jim takes me to the top of Lookout Mountain. From there, just to the East, we can see Missionary Ridge, where the battle for Chattanooga continued the next day.

Jim: And it's in that fighting that our artist, John Gisch, will be captured. Gisch's service record shows that on the 25th of November, in the fighting on Missionary Ridge, that he is captured by Union forces. And then is going to be sent to the prison camp at Rock Island.

Wes: So, Cocke was our eyewitness to the events here?

Jim: That's correct. Cocke is the actual eyewitness to the Battle of Lookout Mountain.

Wes: So Gisch was actually painting a scene that he had really never seen.

Jim: That's correct.

Wes: Had Thomas Cocke told Gisch about the events at Lookout Mountain? And why had he painted it from the Union point of view? My office has tracked down a relative of John Gisch: his great-granddaughter, Ronnie Janecka.

Ronnie Janecka: Nice to see you. Come in.

Wes: I want to know what you know about your great-grandfather John Gisch.

Ronnie: Well, what I will tell you about my great-grandfather, is a document my mother had on the wall.

Wes: It's the birth certificate for Ronnie's grandfather, and it shows that John Gisch had been born in Aswall Birkenfeld, in Germany.

Ronnie: December the 9th, 1853, he set foot on American soil at the port of New Orleans.



Wes: When did he become a U.S. citizen?

Ronnie: I believe it was 1860, or 1861.

Wes: Ronnie explains that Johann Gisch had fled Germany to escape military service.

Ronnie: And then here he comes into the American War.

Wes: Ronnie tells me that, ten years to the day that he stepped on American soil, John Gisch became a prisoner at Rock Island.

Wes: And then what happened after that?

Ronnie: The next time I hear about John it was a marriage certificate of June the 12th of 1869.

Wes: As you know, he never painted after he got out of Rock Island?

Ronnie: As far as I know.

Wes: You know, I have something I think you're going to be really interested to see.

Ronnie: Ok. Oh my gosh.

Wes: Ronnie had searched for information about John Gisch for eight years, and while she had seen his paintings online, she had never been in the same room with an original, or held one...until now.

Ronnie: This is beautiful.

Wes: Well, did you ever think you'd be able to hold one of his paintings in his hands?

Ronnie: No, oh no.



Wes: Ronnie doesn't know why Sergeant Thomas Cocke would have gotten this from Gisch, or why her relative would paint the Battle of Lookout Mountain from a vantage point behind Union lines. I'm going to Rock Island Arsenal Museum to talk to museum director Kris Leinicke.

Wes: Hey, Kris, great to see you again.

Kris Leinicke: It's nice to see you too.

Wes: I'd emailed Kris the names of the two men in the painting. That's impossible to read.

Kris: It took me awhile to find them. John Gisch. Okay.

Wes: And they spell it G-I-S-H.

Kris: 24th Alabama Infantry, company A.

Wes: That's him. Captured in Missionary Ridge.

Wes: When did Gisch get here, at Rock Island?

Kris: December 9th, 1863.

Wes: Kris has discovered that Cocke arrived at Rock Island on the very same day. She explains how close quarters in the stockade meant that Cocke and Gisch certainly had ample opportunity to meet and share battle stories. When they arrived, how long had the prison been in existence?

Kris: Six days.

Wes: So the camp was basically brand new.

Kris: The camp opened to the first prisoners on December 3rd, 1863. They started to construct the camp in August of 1863. And by December the camp still wasn't ready for prisoners. But because of the amount of men who were captured at the battles of Lookout Mountain and



Missionary Ridge at the end of November, they had no more room at any of the other prison camps.

Wes: Kris tells me that the temperature at Rock Island dropped to twenty below zero that first week, and the men, many already sick with smallpox and other illnesses, were confined to barracks made of uncured wood, with huge gaps between the boards.

Kris: There weren't enough provisions for them, because they weren't really ready for a camp. So there weren't enough blankets for the soldiers. This is what I really wanted to show you.

Wes: That's wonderful. It's signed John F. Gisch.

Kris: It's really spectacular. Yes.

Wes: Boy, the colors are just so vibrant, aren't they?

Wes: Gisch's painting tells us a lot about Confederate life in the prison camp.

Kris: You've got several groups of men playing marbles. You have men carrying barrels to get water for the day. And you also have a work party in the picture.

Wes: Here is my Gisch painting.

Kris: Wow. That's fabulous. Look at the colors in that as well.

Wes: Isn't that great? But I'm even more curious now. Gisch seems to paint what he observes, and yet we know he was not at Lookout Mountain. Kris introduces me to someone she thinks can help — Neil Dahlstrom, a local historian who specializes in prison life at Rock Island.

Neil Dahlstrom: It was dirty. A lot of what you would expect from a prison camp. But Rock Island Prison didn't have overseers who made it a point to punish prisoners. That's not what they were about in Rock Island.



Wes: Prisoners could write home and even receive money from family and friends, and they could purchase supplies from a vendor called a Sutler, a detail Gisch included in his painting.

Neil: And he was allowed to come into the prison and sell goods.

Wes: So do you think that Gisch would have gotten the watercolors from him?

Neil: I do. And depending on who was commissioning the work ...it could have come from guards. It could have come from Confederate sympathizers who were allowed to visit.

Wes: All right, Neil, here's a question that's just been eating me up. Gisch never saw this scene that he painted. How could he have known what this looked like?

Neil: I may actually have an answer to that.

Wes: Oh yeah, *Harpers Weekly*. Very famous weekly Civil War, sort of literary paper.

Neil: That's right. And we know prisoners had access to newspapers... possibly through the prison library. Believe it or not, there was a prison library. And...you've got to take a look at this. I think you'll be interested.

Wes: Pieces from this puzzle are starting to come together. I can't wait to tell Bill. You wanted to know, who was John Gisch? Who was Thomas Cocke? I tell Bill that Gisch and Cocke were Confederate soldiers captured in the battle for Chattanooga. Cocke was captured at the battle of Lookout Mountain.

Bill: So it is an eyewitness account?

Wes: Well...uh, not necessarily. Okay. Oh, yeah, look at that. The *Harper's Magazine* has an illustration of the same battle scene. Although the artist is not identified, the similarity of its overall composition to John Gisch's painting is striking. If Gisch didn't see this, I would be very surprised.

Neil: I would too.



Wes: Tree, tree, tree. Figure crawling all over the wall here. Figure crawling over the wall here. You know, there's some differences in Gisch's painting there are a lot more Yankees that are depicted. Gisch appears to have copied an image drawn from behind the Union position, but he couldn't resist adding his own Confederate point of view. To show that they were overwhelmed and outnumbered, right?

Neil: That's right.

Bill: Ah ha! That's how he knew the house was there.

Wes: See any similarities?

Bill: Yes. Quite a few.

Wes: Then I showed Bill something Neil pointed out while we were at Rock Island. It's an article from *Confederate Veterans Magazine*, explaining that Thomas Cocke taught bible classes at Rock Island prison.

Bill: It's good to see his picture here too, because I've wondered what these folks looked like.

Wes: But I've got one more surprise for you.

Bill: You're kidding.

Wes: Bill...

Ronnie: Hi.

Bill: Hi.

Ronnie: How are you---



Wes: This is Ronnie Janecka. This is John Gisch's great-granddaughter.

Bill: Oh, my goodness.

Ronnie: Yeah. Right, great-granddaughter.

Bill: It's great to meet you.

Ronnie: How are you?

Bill: I'm...doing great. Even more...a lot better now that I've met you. It's great to have this connection like that.

Ronnie: It's really touched me, very, very much.

Bill: Me too.

Ronnie: It really has. My great grandfather's in good hands. Thank you so much.

Bill: Oh, you're welcome.