



The Archer from the Cherokee Hills

By Mauriel P. Joslyn, June 12, 2020
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Will Thompson, H. H. Talbot, Maurice Thompson, and Paul Huges, ca 1870, Crawfordsville, Indiana

No doubt hunters of today, as they sit patently with bow in hand, find they can relate to these words: "We are nothing better than refined and enlightened savages. Sport ... is a requirement of this wild element, this glossed-over heathen side of our being and the bow is its natural implement."

James Maurice Thompson was born in Fairfield, Indiana, in 1844. His father was a Primitive Baptist preacher who eventually moved the family to Gordon County, Georgia, near the city of Calhoun. In 1849, Maurice's brother Will was born.

In the remoteness of the North Georgia hills, the brothers received their academic education from a variety of tutors. Though not wealthy, the family was well read. Their mother, Diantha Jaegger, was an exceptionally cultured woman, intellectual and versed in the languages and sciences. The education having the greatest impact, however, came from the land. The boys spent days in the woods with books in hand, identifying wildlife, birds, and flowers.

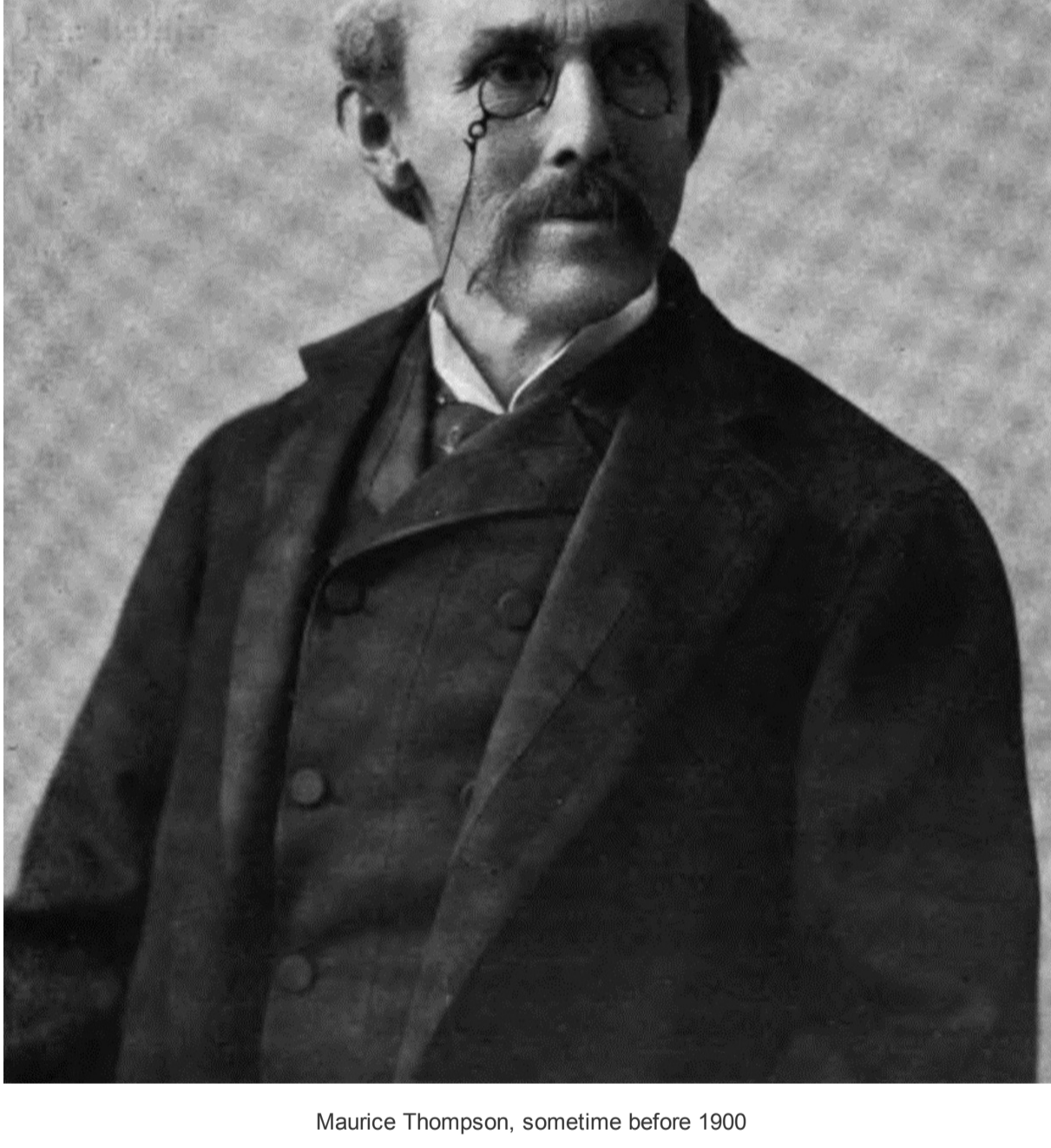
Like many antebellum southerners, the brothers found pleasure in the wonderful stories of Sir Walter Scott, particularly the adventure stories of English history, of Ivanhoe, and of Robin Hood and the romance of the days when the longbow ruled. With Will as a companion, Maurice set about crafting longbows with which to play out the skills they admired so much in their heroes. They spent hours fashioning the crude arrows and shaping the bows to a point where they would at least shoot.



Maurice Thompson as president of the National Archery Association of the United States, Chicago, 1879

One day, while the boys were practicing at a target in a clearing near their house, an old man appeared. He watched intently as the boys shot. But when Thomas Williams introduced himself and proceeded to recount to the boys about his life in England and shooting, they knew they had found a treasure. Williams took the bow and assumed the stance of an accomplished archer as Will and Maurice gazed at each other in awe. Williams, a hermit who lived in the woods, became the boys' mentor, teaching them about the noble heritage of the English longbow and improving their skills with guidance.

Like many other southerners, the Civil War became a dividing line in Maurice's life. His service in the Confederate Army started at Christmas 1862, when he enlisted in the Sixty-third Georgia Infantry and was soon on duty at Thunderbolt and Rosedew batteries in Savannah. His regiment was sent to Dalton in May 1864 to face the invading forces of General Sherman. At some point, Maurice was wounded in the chest around Atlanta and discharged. He returned to Gordon County but soon joined a local cavalry regiment commanded by Thomas Edmondson. Using guerilla tactics, the band became necessarily ruthless in its fighting against irregular Unionist forces. Maurice surrendered with Edmondson's North Georgia Scouts at Kingston, Georgia, in May 1865. His brother Will served with the Fourth Georgia Infantry after graduating from the Georgia Military Institute.

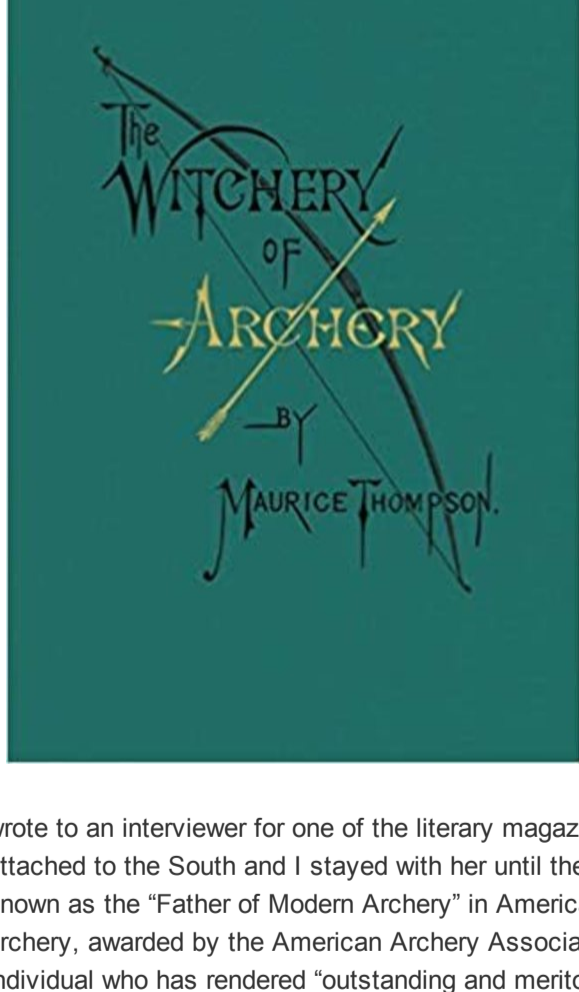


Maurice Thompson, sometime before 1900

The devastation they witnessed warned of what they would find at the family home place. Indeed, their fears were realized; the library accumulated by their mother, and so loved by the boys, had been destroyed by northern invaders. Moreover, as former Confederates, their rifles were confiscated, leaving the ex-soldiers defenseless against local Union sympathizers. The lack of weapons also hampered their ability to hunt and put food on the table. However, this handicap did not deter Will and Maurice long. They promptly created bows, took to the woods, and began to earn a little money by killing and selling game.

The two young men wanted to complete their education. The first summer after the war, Will and Maurice worked as field hands during the day and pursued their studies in mathematics, engineering, and law at night. Maurice began to write a few stories, submitting them to Scott's Monthly Magazine, a literary review in Atlanta

The bow was still a large part of his life, and he and Will organized excursion trips to South Georgia and Florida for tourists and hunters. These various exploits became good story material, which Maurice submitted to the most popular magazines of the time: Harper's, Spencer's, Century, and Atlantic, to name a few. The money he made from these publications became a regular source of income, and Maurice finally finished his law studies. He opened a practice in Calhoun, but this career was short lived. Reconstruction Georgia belonged to the Radical Republicans. If the carpetbaggers were in the South, then the Thompson brothers would go North. In 1868, they arrived in Crawfordsville, Indiana. The strangers provoked curiosity from the on-lookers. They spoke with a Georgia drawl and had the casual ease and innocence of farm boys. It would not be an easy acceptance. At the ages of 19 and 24, respectively, they were veterans of war, survivors of poverty and oppression, and drifters looking for a new beginning. The two brothers courted and married two sisters, Ida and Alice Lee. The girls' father was the only employer in town who would give the young southerners a chance, and prosperity came slowly.



Maurice continued his writing, eventually publishing his hunting stories in 1878, in a little book called *The Witchery of Archery*. Later on, he wrote a story called "In Sherman's Path," recounting the devastation inflicted on Gordon County. He published 38 poems and 21 pieces of prose between 1870 and 1880.

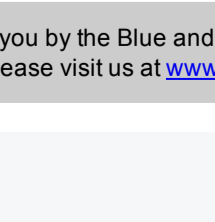
In 1874, the brothers founded the Wabash Merry Bowmen, an archery club that gained local popularity. Their abounding enthusiasm gained the bow a following in America as a recreational sport. Maurice's election to the Indiana legislature in 1878 as a Democrat in a Republican state revealed his acceptance in local society. In 1885, he became the State Geologist and Chief of the Bureau of Natural History for Indiana. He bought 5 acres outside Crawfordsville and named it Sherwood Place.

Maurice never felt anything but pride in his southern heritage. Many of his poems dealt with battles and southern valor. In 1887, he

wrote to an interviewer for one of the literary magazines: "I was and am still passionately attached to the South and I stayed with her until the fight closed." Maurice died in 1901 and is known as the "Father of Modern Archery" in America. The J. Maurice Thompson medal for archery, awarded by the American Archery Association, bears his image. It is given to an individual who has rendered "outstanding and meritorious service to archery without expectation of reward."

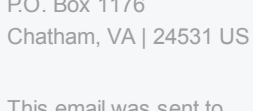
As for Will, he moved to Seattle, Washington, where he became the legal counselor for the Great Northern Railroad. A competent poet in his own right, one of the most famous of his works was on the battle of Gettysburg. He died in 1918, the founder and commander of the John B. Gordon Camp, United Confederate Veterans.

This story was excerpted from "The Archer from Cherokee Hills" by Mauriel P. Roslyn, published in the Georgia Historical Quarterly, Vol. 86, No. 1 (Spring 2002). Top two photos courtesy of the Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University.



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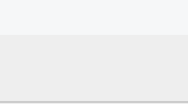
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