

“If we forget our past, we won’t remember our future and it will be as well for we won’t have one.”

Some time ago, as noted in Flannery O’Connor’s story “A Late Encounter with the Enemy”, George Poker Sash, 104 years old and having served probably as an infantryman in the Confederate Army during the Civil War, was chosen by Hollywood to serve as a relic and symbol of that War. There was to be a premiere showing in Atlanta of an epic Civil War film (*Gone with the Wind?*) and he would be a perfect promotional prop as “General George Poker Sash”, ceremonial sword and all! George didn’t even remember the War, didn’t even want to. Not that he could if he tried. He lived in the present – on the premiere stage displayed in a general’s gray uniform and surrounded by Hollywood models in short skirts. He liked to be at such events with nothing to do but enjoy floats full of Miss Americas and Miss Daytona Beaches and Miss Queen Cotton Products.

Not so his daughter Sally Poker Sash – 62 years old, a woman of traditions. She had been a schoolteacher for the past twenty years – but un-credentialed. Now she had just completed twenty years of summer school sessions to have her skills updated – and she wanted her grandfather to appear in all his regalia at her graduation. His presence would confirm her worth – as coming out of that early time of Southern “culture” and courage. She could hold her head up high, saying, “See him! See him! My kin, all of you upstarts! Glorious upright old man standing for the old traditions! Dignity! Honor! Courage! See him!”

Indeed, come graduation day, with processions of people in black (looking like the mythical river Styx), Sally had placed her grandfather on stage in his Civil War outfit – in the care of a Boy Scout kin. She was dressed *in a long black crepe dinner dress with rhinestone buckle* to be worn with a pair of silver slippers– but she was surprised when she looked down that she wore her old brown Girl Scout Oxfords instead! And then General Sash, on stage in his wheel chair, felt a hole opening in his head. Words began to emerge. A speaker said something like, *“If we forget our past, we won’t remember our future and it will be as well for we won’t have one.”* Sash had forgotten history, the names of his wife and children, their faces, places – but the words kept coming forth: *Chickamauga, Shiloh, Johnston, Lee . . . He couldn’t protect himself from the words . . . He felt he was running backwards and the words were coming at him like musket fire . . . he found himself running toward the words . . . riddled in a hundred places.*

The problem of General Sash and Sally? He didn’t want to remember the past, he preferred modern settings with girls in tights. She wants to remember only a fanciful past, all covered in pastel colors, the “good old days”. Which means she doesn’t want to remember the real past, real history either. But Flannery suggests that the real past will catch up with us (and all the death it has bred before) sooner than we think unless we remember . . . that record of the past that begins with *In the beginning . . . the earth was without form or shape, with darkness over the abyss and a mighty wind sweeping over the waters - Then God said: Let there be light, and there was light.*

As for the General - Sally found the Boy Scout unaware that Sash was dead in his wheelchair – sitting in front of a Coca-Cola machine.