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**Duelling in
Rhode Island**



Presented by
“The Old Stone Bank”
Providence, R. I.

January 4, 1932

Duelling in Rhode Island

THE duel, named from the Latin words *bellum* and *duo* and meaning "war between two," is not to be confused with simple combat. If such were the case, if it were but a synonym for any fight between two opponents, we could call it a type of violence as old as the race. The duel, however, is something of a decidedly different nature. While it is certainly combat in a sense, it is an institution for the settlement of affairs of honor between gentlemen with the most strict code of rules. In combat two opponents continue to struggle until one becomes the victor, whether death is entailed in the process or not and whether the outcome takes five minutes or two hours. In the duel the two principals have only one chance to settle their differences, an opportunity lasting but a few seconds at best in cases where pistols are used, and though both may do nothing more than face each other and fire their weapons wildly into the air, once done, the affair is over and, like a jury's verdict, will not be given again. The exception to the foregoing may be made in the case where duelling has been done with swords and rapiers. In such cases, which were almost countless during the seventeenth century in France, the duel assumed more of the nature of a fight and lasted according to the skill of the swordsmen.

At one time duelling was in vogue in



nearly all parts of Europe and in America as well. Seitz thinks the custom may have originated with the German tribes which invaded Europe, although he admits that the general facts point to its inception during the age of chivalry. In France, duelling was well established by the fifteenth century. By the time of Queen Elizabeth's reign it was well under way in England.

It is amazing to look up the records of many duels and see just what in the world the argument was all about. The tone in which anything was said made all the difference in the world between insult and simple statement, and there were ears of unusual keenness in duelling days. Yet, silly as some of the quarrels were which frequently had their solution in death, the duel as a rightful means of settling dispute was not the creation of the lower classes but rather the privilege of the highest aristocracy.

The evils of such a debt-settling system are manifold. Most important is the simple fact that the man whose side was right has been frequently the man who was wounded or killed. The poppycock theory that some Divine Power would steady the aim or strengthen the arm of the righteous was obviously foolish, yet it was frequently believed. The issue over which the duel was held remained unchanged afterward as before. Yet the duel was endorsed, especially in military circles and in the higher circles of gentility.

Spain first forbade the practice, issuing a

prohibition as early as 1716, but other countries were much slower. In Germany, duelling was heartily indorsed in the army up to the outbreak of the World War. In German universities it was a substitute for hazing. However we can now consider it generally abolished.

In America the formal duel was practised from colonial days to about 1835. Israel Putnam, having the choice of weapons after having been challenged by a British officer, invited the latter to sit with him beside an open keg of gunpowder in which he had placed a lighted candle.

Although Rhode Island was the scene of several duels, the principals in them were not Rhode Islanders. However, we shall not for a moment suppose that Rhode Islanders never duelled with each other at times, although we have no records of the fact. Newport, in its glory of gentility prior to the revolution, must have had just as many hot-headed young blades as the South and must have understood the etiquette of duelling as well as that of the dance. The very independence of the Rhode Island temperament, evident in so many ways, would seem to argue the chance of many duels, though probably sound common sense was strong enough to triumph over injured vanity.

Rhode Islanders have been known to engage in duels away from home however. One case is sufficient for illustration, that of C. G. Champlin of Newport vs. James A. Bayard of Delaware. Both men were prom-

inent politically, having been members of both houses of Congress. During a speech by Champlin in the House of Representatives Bayard took offense. This was in May, 1800. Formalities were at once observed. Bayard sent Champlin a note, politely asking an explanation of the remarks made by the latter in his speech. Champlin's reply we quote as a typical example of preliminary correspondence.

"Sir— Philadelphia, May 5, 1800.

In reply to your note, which was handed me by General Morris, I think proper to state that I understood you to charge me, in the course of a debate on Friday last, with being in the habit of making trifling motions upon subjects with which it was my duty to be acquainted but of which I was grossly ignorant. My intention, in making the remarks I did this morning in the House of Representatives, was to repel the charge with all the contempt which I thought it deserved. I cannot recall the particular expressions I made use of to convey my ideas.

I am, sir, your most humble servant,
C. G. Champlin."

Ah, the politeness of these notes, decreed by etiquette! Bayard's reply follows:

"Sir—

The rudeness of your answer to my note of the morning leaves me but one course to pursue. My friend, Gen. Morris, will com-

municate to you my expectations, which I presume you will not disappoint. If I could ask any favor of you, it will be that no delay might be interposed in the business.

Your obedient servant,

James A. Bayard."

The result of this parleying was, of course, a duel. Pistols were the chosen weapons. Both parties were very cool and the affair went off smoothly. Champlin was shot through the cheek, the ball passing out at his neck, Bayard through the thigh. Both were but flesh wounds and, though painful, not fatal. With a handshake the debt of honor was concluded.

To return to Rhode Island, we have four duels to consider. They took place between the years 1827 and 1835. In 1838, the General Assembly completely abolished duelling, but before that cases did crop up. There was a law that anyone convicted of duelling should be punished by being publicly carried in a cart to the gallows with a rope about his neck. There he should have to sit for an hour, after which he might be imprisoned for a year. No one seems to have been caught, however. Massachusetts gave the death penalty for conviction of a duelist who had killed his opponent, and New York and Connecticut were equally severe. Rhode Island was then chosen as the place for settlement of debts of honor, although someone of the day remarked that this state was so small that the principals

would have to stand at either side of it and fire across.

The first duel was fought on the Turnpike between Providence and Pawtucket in 1827. The challenge and preliminaries had taken place in Boston. The men were presumably French, the name of one being DeGrand. Pistols were the weapons and the decided distance nine feet. The seconds counted slowly from one to six during which time both men were to fire. One, nervous, fired too soon and missed. The other, DeGrand, took aim and hit his opponent in the leg. The wounded man was hurried to Blake's Hotel in Pawtucket, while the rest of the party rode post-haste to Providence, there embarking on the morning boat to New York. The wounded man easily recovered. No one knew of the affair until it was over.

The second duel happened in Cumberland on December 16, 1832, on Cyrus Cook's farm, a mile and a quarter from Cumberland Hill. The spot chosen was a secluded hollow a short distance from the road. The parties drove by chaise from Massachusetts and, upon learning that they were in Rhode Island, proceeded to make use of the nearest field. While preparing, they were driven off by a bull and went to the hollow instead. Here they took off their coats and even shirts (probably as a precaution against coats of mail underneath), took pistols, stood back to back, and awaited the command of the seconds to turn and fire. The younger began to cry but a few strong

drinks bolstered his courage. At the first word of the seconds one man shot into the ground, the other just missed the head of his own second. A fresh pair of pistols were taken and the same rules observed. This time one man shot himself in the leg and everyone's honor was satisfied. Immediately everyone seized up loose clothing and decamped hastily. However one shirt was left on the ground to be seized at once by a group of small boys who had seen everything from a place of concealment. The wounded man lost his leg.

The third duel happened on the Moses Brown farm in January, 1834. Robert C. Hooper, a Boston merchant, and Shocko Jones, a Carolinian then attending Harvard, were the principals. The argument was over a Miss Marion Marshall, a distinguished Boston beauty. The whole party was made up of leaders of society. The distance in this case was eight paces and pistols were again the weapons. Jones missed Hooper, but the latter wounded his rival in the thigh. The whole party then hurried for Boston. Jones could hardly have been severely wounded or he would not have been able to travel with the rest in their flight.

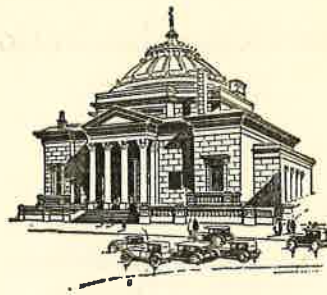
About this affair the Rhode Island authorities were much incensed, but failed to apprehend the parties concerned. A constable had been sent to the field of honor, but too early and he missed his game.

One last duel and we hear no more of this infantile practice in Rhode Island. It took

place near Scott's Pond in Smithfield in October, 1835. The principals were both officers in the navy, one a lieutenant, the other a sailing master. They came to Providence from New York by steamboat and then went by coach to the appointed spot. We have no record of the quarrel, of the weapons used, or of the result except that both men were wounded.

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Proud of its own historical significance, "The Old Stone Bank" has adopted this method of educational advertising to bring to light much that is of value and significance in the colorful annals of Rhode Island and national history.

The sketches and vignettes of old-time Rhode Island and Rhode Islanders that are broadcast weekly and then printed in this form are selected from local historical records which are full of the picturesque, romantic, and adventurous. In the hope that these glimpses into the lives, customs, and environment of our progenitors may be both revealing and inspirational to young and old, this booklet is presented with the compliments of

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