



THE HOLCOMBE LEGION

By Curtis Blackerby

What was in the mind of the Russian Czar? Did he realize portending events might result in his crown jewels helping to finance the American Civil War, soon to begin. What was in the mind of the beautiful wife of Francis Wilkinson Pickens, the American Ambassador to Russia? Her uncanny ability to foretell future events may have persuaded her that the Czar's gift to her as a part of the crown jewels could be of value to the South, once South Carolina seceded from the Union. She was well aware of her husband's leadership in the move that would place South Carolina at the head of the line of seceding states.

She had no need of the Czar's gift. She had enough money. Her home at Edgefield (South Carolina) was something of a palace in its own way, so much so that in a later generation a wealthy purchaser move it, piece by piece, to Aikens, where it was reassembled at great cost.

The Ambassador and his new bride took with them to St. Petersburg a retinue of household slaves and brought them back to South Carolina when they returned. The Pickens owned several plantations in South Carolina and Mississippi. The Czar's gift was just another luxury, unneeded but fully appreciated by its recipient.

Lucy Pettway Holcombe with her light brown hair, her blue eyes, and lithe figure, was a girl to be noticed with even before she married the ambassador. In addition to being beautiful, she was talented. Her grapevine, built-in antenna, or what ever it was, told her that her betrothed Francis Pickens would be appointed ambassador to Russia. Lucy was so certain of the future that she began to brush up on her French, and to study Russian while selecting her wardrobe that was to assist her in her many triumphs at St. Petersburg. Colonel Pickens was appointed ambassador in 1858. He and Lucy were then married, and soon after the couple arrived at St. Petersburg, Lucy became so popular in fact, that the Czar danced with her, and presented her with a substantial part of his crown jewels. The Czar then ordered a marble cast of Lucy's features. He and the Czarina Catherine insisted that Lucy move into the palace with them, where she gave birth to her daughter: Eugenia, Francis, Dorothea. The Czarina added the names "Olga Neva", and as a term of endearment, "Douschka" for "Little Darling". The Czar was little Neva's Godfather. By this time, Lucy was looking deeply into the future once again.

The Ambassador resigned his post in 1860 and the family moved back to South Carolina. The Legislature elected Lucy's husband Governor the same year. Soon thereafter, the secession convention was called, Fort Sumter was fired upon, and the great war was on. Lucy sold the Czar's gift jewels to help pay the cost of outfitting the *Lucy Holcombe Legion*.

There were several Holcombe units in the Confederate armies. The *Lucy Holcombe Legion*, named in her honor, comprised of seven companies of infantry and one of infantry, may have had its inception in Lucy's intuitive and attractive little head months earlier, during her stay in Russia. The *Lucy Holcombe Legion* was recruited largely in Abbeville, Anderson, Barnwell, Newberry and Spartanburg counties of South Carolina. It was commanded in turn by Colonels P.F. Stevenson, William L. Cromptley and Major Andrew Woodruff. There was only 300 men remaining in the Legion at the end of the war.

At Adams Run, below Charleston, Lucy presented the Legion with its flag of blue silk, 8' by 5' edged with heavy gold bullion fringe. Lucy had many cousins and relatives in most counties of what was the United States, one of whom was Beverly Holcombe Robertson, a captain in the U.S. Army, who resigned in 1861 to join the Confederacy. First as colonel of the 4th Virginia Cavalry and later as Brigadier General with J.E.B. Stuart. Another cousin, William Holcombe, was captured at Fort Donelson, while serving with the 15th Arkansas, and was later to find another cousin, Silas Holcombe, who guarded him. Silas managed to arrange an exchange for William, and then obtained a furlough for himself to visit with his Confederate cousin in Arkansas.

A few years after the war, in January 1869, Governor Pickens, Lucy and daughter Neva joined with former family slaves at the funeral, among them some who had been with them in St. Petersburg.

As the military occupation of South Carolina became prolonged, Edgefield plantation grew tenuous. During a trying time, when scalawags and carpetbaggers were stirring up trouble for both races by persuading former slaves to create disorder, Neva (now sixteen years of age), led out of the darkness into Edgefield's streets 1,500 of Wade Hampton's mounted *Red Shirts* to disperse an uprising. This incident led to the beginning of the removal of Federal troops and resulted in a newspaper account of her charge at Edgefield as being "*as inspiring as Joan of Arc leading her soldiers into battle*".

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Military belt buckle of South Carolina