

GOV. GILPIN'S PASSIONATE DIVORCE FROM JULIA

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Our first territorial Governor, William Gilpin, still sparks interest. In his little over one year as Governor he sowed some of his buoyant hope for Colorado and the county named for him.

Alas, when Lincoln appointed him in 1861 a crisis was on the horizon. War between the Union and the Confederacy looked more and more inevitable. When the south seceded from the union, war was here and his term as governor was inevitably over. It was also a time of great emotional fireworks with Julia, the love of their lives.

Gilpin, of course fought for the Union and President Abraham Lincoln. The war was all about slavery. Slavery could never be reconciled with Gilpin's hope for a new and improved humanity emerging in the Rocky Mountain West.

Even as the cannons began to sound Gilpin wrote three articles and finished a book. His "The Central Gold Region" was popular. His ideas about how the various "peoples" would debouch from the "cosmopolitan railway" caught attention.

His educated and cultural writings were what today we'd call progressive. One of his contemporaries called him "a man of rare genius, and advanced thought, a prophet and pioneer of civilization." It's still stunning to read his ideas on how Colorado and the west could put out a welcome mat to the world. Remember this was the 1850s and sixties when "lesser races" were refused entry.

Gilpin lacked basic political knowledge. He feared the Confederate troops advancing north through New Mexico. Obviously they had to be defeated immediately and not after troops could be authorized through the Washington D. C. bureaucracy.

He issued letters of credit and troop recruiting and joined with the New Mexico militia. The vouchers were too slowly paid. Some waited two years. This earned him enemies in the merchant class. He quickly became a political liability. The Confederates had been stopped, Gilpin's ideas had won, but his career was over.

Gilpin's choice of a female companion was news too. He had a mutual love affair with Julia Dickerson, but her family would have nothing to do with him. She had married and had two boys and a daughter the day she was widowed. She and William had always been in love. Now she was free

William was 46 and she 37. Polly Pry and other scandal sheet writers had a field day with all of the age and personality differences. He wrote to one friend that they had been "deeply in love" and had "long mutually and absolutely loved each other." Had they also been in contact all along? Some of the gossip writers thought so.

Especially juicy were accounts of where her carriage had been. Apparently it dropped her at William's house and came back for her much later, possibly the next morning. Also the lamps were lit on low in his apartment at night. The sparks were there between two very passionate and sparky people.

Why did things degenerate between them after they were married for a few years? Why were there public rows, even shouting matches? Possibly her boys were part of the problem.

Her two boys opposed the marriage. Did they think he was after her money? She had some, but he owned most of the San Luis Valley. That was, however, not fungible. He couldn't easily sell most of it. Was he land rich but cash poor? He had promised much to the existing Mexican population. That is another story.

Julia was not very rich but did inherit a comfortable amount. There was gossip a plenty about money matters, but there were other arguments, often loud ones. Once when William came home inebriated after some affair of jollity the boys grabbed him and beat him up. They wished he would go away.

Religion was a topic they fiercely fought about. It was a red hot romance before her marriage. Her strict Catholic morals opposed sex out of wedlock. He also wrote often about how religion was slowing the coming of the "new humanity" he saw as emerging in the west. He especially disliked money going to her Catholic Church.

William and Julia married as soon as they could and soon little Willie Gilpin came along. William loved taking Willie on trips and learning to ride horses. They both loved the mountains and Willie was soon mountain climbing.

Then tragedy struck. Willie died in a mountain climbing accident. For a time the columnists extended only calm words. Possibly that changed the tone of the relationship. The quarrels reached their usual high levels, but seemed more serious. William wanted out. At any rate, William sued for divorce, setting off a decade long legal marathon. Julia vowed she would never divorce him as that would be a sin.

After the many suits, hearings, trials and failed settlements, William was granted his divorce. Surprisingly enough it was the only divorce to make it all the way to the Colorado Supreme Court. Also amazing was the fact that the mansion lights (in the individual bed sitting rooms) were still on at odd times. The servants did talk about how they never stopped keeping company. Gossip columnists loved that.

Just at the time the divorce finally came through it was all a moot point. William was run over late at night coming home from a party. He was never the same and died fairly soon after.

Colorado has had many fascinating tales told and William Gilpin and Julia's love story is certainly one of them. I believe that despite their vast differences and the crisis William faced they were passionate lovers until the end.