



Episode 802, Story 2: Copperhead Cane

Wes Cowan: Our next story takes us inside a political uprising by northerners against President Lincoln during the Civil War. Spring, 1863: the Union suffers loss after loss – over 17,000 casualties at Chancellorsville alone. The carnage on the battlefield helps galvanize a group of Northerners who demand President Lincoln put an end to this war. They are called ‘Copperheads’. Lincoln fears this protest movement will not only cost him the 1864 election, but also the hope of a united nation. Now, a woman from Lancaster, Missouri, holds a cane that may have once helped bring Lincoln’s presidency to the brink of political disaster. I’m Wes Cowan, and I’m starting my investigation with a few questions for Cynthia Wilcox.

Cindy: Well, hi Wes, it’s wonderful to meet you.

Wes: Thank you.

Cindy: This is the cane that was handed down. Some families have bibles they pass down over the years but ours has a cane.

Wes: What do you know about it? Cindy says that family legend holds that the cane once belonged to her great-great grandfather, Henry Clay Dean. What do you know about Henry Clay Dean?

Cindy: He was a lawyer, a Methodist preacher, and a Copperhead back at the time of the Civil War.

Wes: Cindy believes her relative may have been a leading member of the Copperheads, and opposed Lincoln during the war.

Wes: So what is it that you want to know about this cane?

Cindy: We want to know, how did he get it? Where it came from? Is it real?

Wes: I’m excited to get started. I’m going to have to take it with me.



Cindy: Okay, we've guarded it for many years, so be careful with it.

Wes: I promise I'll take care of it. I'm heading back to my hotel to take a closer look at the cane. I have sold hundreds of antique canes over the past 15 years, and this is a great cane. But I'll tell you, I'm a little bit suspicious of it. A decorative, figural cane such as this would have been highly unusual during the Civil War. Canes didn't become really popular as a gentleman's accessory until the late 19th century. Did Cindy's distant relative own this one? It's impossible to tell just by looking at it. There's nothing here anywhere to indicate that it belonged to any person, and particularly, Henry Clay Dean. If it's as old as Cindy suspects, I'd expect the metal to have more of an oxidized layer known as a patina, which would give it a dull color. I'm also struck with the difference between the head, which is this great casting, and this relatively crude shaft. It's just an oddball sort of combination. I'm beginning to suspect Cindy's story might have gotten a bit muddled over the years. I'll need to have a metal expert examine the cane. But first, I want to see what I can find out about Cindy's great-great grandfather. I'm in New Jersey to meet Pulitzer-prize winning Civil War historian James McPherson at the Camp Olden Civil War Museum. Here's the cane I was telling you about. Now supposedly this cane belonged to a gentleman named Henry Clay Dean. Have you ever heard of him?

Jim: Yes, I've heard of him. Copperhead in Iowa. Somewhat eccentric character.

Wes: Jim says Dean was a gifted speaker who was known for his fiery oratory. But he can't tell me much more about Cindy's relative.

Jim: I don't know that much about him. I know a lot more about some of the other Copperheads.

Wes: Whatever Dean's personal role may have been Jim says there's no doubt that the Copperhead movement came close to changing the course of American history.

Jim: Lincoln himself called them the "fire in the rear". Which he feared more than he feared the Confederates themselves. Because they were trying to undermine the union war effort.

Wes: Jim, if I were a Copperhead what would I believe in?



Jim: You would believe that this union could never be restored by a war and that there ought to be some kind of peace negotiations to restore the union the way it was before the war began. Second, you would be opposed to the radical expansion of the power of the national government.

Wes: And the list goes on: opposition to Lincoln's suspension of habeas corpus, the wartime creation of military courts, and the institution of the draft. Jim says the term 'Copperhead' was chosen by their political enemies.

Jim: This was the Republican's effort to stigmatize them as snakes in the grass. As everybody realizes, snakes have an image problem. And poisonous snakes an even greater image problem.

Wes: The moment of truth came in the summer of 1864. In August, a leading Copperhead, George Pendleton, was nominated as the Democratic Party's vice presidential candidate. The war was issue number one. Over the course of six weeks that summer the Union Army had suffered 100,000 casualties. And with the November election approaching, Lincoln himself was certain he was going to lose the White House.

Jim: The whole idea that this war was just killing off the flower of American youth without achieving anything began to have an appeal to broad segments of the electorate.

Wes: What turned the election of 1864 in Lincoln's favor?

Jim: Dramatic change occurred: Sherman captured Atlanta.

Wes: That victory inspired confidence that the Union could win the war, and win it quickly.

Jim: And that turned things around 180 degrees and Lincoln was triumphantly re-elected and that pretty much buried the Copperheads.

Wes: But something still puzzles me...Jim, if this name Copperhead was so insulting, why in the world would Henry Clay Dean have at the head of his cane this coiled snake?



Jim: He may have done this as a kind of “in your face” gesture. You call me a Copperhead, okay, I’m proud of it. It’s a way of sort of thumbing your nose at the enemy.

Wes: It’s a little baffling. The Copperheads almost changed the course of American history. But so far, I’m not having a lot of luck finding much about Henry Clay Dean. And is Cindy’s cane even from the correct period? I’ve come to Kalona, Iowa to meet Steve Maxon at Max-Cast, a metal foundry. For 30 years, Steve has worked with molten bronze and copper to cast figures much like the snake on our cane. Foundries like this one used to be common; today, they are few and far between.

Wes: Hey Steve, Wes Cowan.

Steve: Oh, great to meet you.

Wes: Here’s the cane.

Steve: Hey, great snakes, holy Moses.

Wes: Yeah, it’s a great stick.

Steve: It’s an amazing thing. Well, let’s get out of here, it’s a little warm.

Wes: Great. Let me just take this off. Steve, I’m trying to figure out when the head of this cane was cast. I’m puzzled by the patina on that. Steve suggests that because Cindy’s family kept handling the snake head, any patina was either rubbed away, or never had a chance to form.

Steve: It’s been handled a lot so that would rub off the patina.

Wes: So the lack of a patina doesn’t really mean anything?

Steve: No it doesn’t really.

Wes: Okay, what else can you tell me about it?



Steve: Well there's sort of a texture of sand here in the mouth. You can see a little mold line right there.

Wes: Oh yeah, sure. Sure.

Steve: It looks like it was sand cast.

Wes: What do you mean, a sand cast? Steve shows me how this is done. A wood pattern is pushed into wet sand. More sand is packed on top of that pattern. The pattern is removed and the mold re-assembled. Then molten metal fills the hollow space left inside. The mold is destroyed to release the casting.

Steve: There it is!

Wes: So is this the kind of casting that could have been done in the 1860's?

Steve: Well it could have very easily been made in the 1860's, but then again we're using these techniques today too.

Wes: I ask Steve how else we might figure out the age of the metal?

Steve: Well, we could run a test, see if there's some metal in there that wasn't in use during those days.

Wes: Okay, great. Well, so how do we do that then? We send a small scraping from inside the head of the cane to Semtec lab in Arizona. They promise to call me in a few days with the results. Meanwhile, the History Detectives office has made what may be a breakthrough. A researcher at Iowa Wesleyan College has also been following the trail of Henry Clay Dean. Hi, Wes Cowan. I'm so thrilled that you've heard of Dean. Several years ago Joy Conwell, Special Collections Associate at Iowa Wesleyan, made a surprising, and largely accidental, discovery. The name Henry Clay Dean leaped off the page of none other than Mark Twain.



Joy: I was reading *Life on the Mississippi*. It's one of my favorite Twain books. And his account of Henry Clay Dean is really amazing.

Wes: It's 1861 in Keokuk, Iowa. Twain writes: "a great crowd has gathered and none other than Henry Clay Dean takes the stage.... Dean warmed to his work and began to pour his words out like Vesuvius, spouting smoke and flame, lava and ashes, raining pumice-stones and cinders, shaking the moral earth with intellectual crash upon crash while the mad multitude stood upon their feet in a solid body, answering back with a ceaseless hurricane of cheers. When Dean came, the people thought he was an escaped lunatic; but when he went, they thought he was an escaped archangel." So he was an eccentric character?

Joy: Very eccentric. You have to understand that his nickname was "Dirty Shirt Dean". He was known for having an aversion to cleanliness. He was a performer. He was an old fire and brimstone minister. People came from great distances.

Wes: So was Dean in fact a Copperhead?

Joy: He absolutely was. He epitomized the typical Copperhead. Very much against Lincoln's policies. He felt that the Republican Party had caused the southern states to secede from the union. He actually truly believed that the African slave was an inferior race.

Wes: Dean is repugnant to her in different ways, but Joy's own family has a Copperhead past.

Joy: My own great-great-grandfather was a Copperhead and a Baptist minister. So there's been a lot of feel for this project.

Wes: She says she's compelled to rescue Dean from being a historical footnote.

Joy: This is a man I've come to know, and there are those that hated him. There are those that loved him. But I think he speaks so much to a part of American history that really has been forgotten. And I think it's a part of history that we need to remember, so we don't repeat.

Wes: Can you imagine him carrying this?



Joy: Wow. You know I can. It kind of fits his personality. I think he's eccentric enough that I could really see him raising it up and using it during his oration.

Wes: But was this Dean's cane? Joy's being a little coy. She suggests I take a look at this box she's recently received from the State Historical Society of Iowa. Ok, let's see what joy has got me here. The researchers combed through their archives looking for articles on Henry Clay Dean. Wow, these papers have such colorful names: *The Muscatine Journal* and *News-Tribute*; *The Burlington Hawk-Eye*. And even better: photographs. Here's a picture, he's an old man here, and he's holding a cane. But it's not our cane because it's got a crook. Here's the obituary of Dean from the *Keokuk Daily Constitution* in 1887, written by somebody who knew him really well. "When a mere lad I heard him address a large political meeting at Carthage, Illinois. I doubt if any orator of his generation possessed a finer gift of metaphorical illustration. During the delivery of this remarkable speech...Mr. Dean..." Oh boy. Cindy's going to really like to hear this.

Wes: Well, Cindy, this is a great story and this is an exceptional cane. I got to tell you, it's just a remarkable artifact. I tell Cindy how her great-great-grandfather, Henry Clay Dean, was famous in his day. But I'd been skeptical her cane was even from the correct period...until I'd gotten results back from our lab test. If it were 20th century bronze we'd expect to see silicone and lead. Neither one of those elements were there. So it's a 19th century cane head. But did it belong to the great Copperhead himself? What I found next though I think you're going to really enjoy. And this is from the *Keokuk Daily Constitution*, February 23, 1887. Now this is Henry Clay Dean's obituary: "Mr. Dean part of the time flourished in his right hand a large cane, the head of which was a snake with head raised ready to strike. A close examination showed that the material of this strange device was made of copper." There it is. Got to be the cane, right? Fabulous.

Cindy: This is awesome.

Wes: The information that I found here bears directly to the question you had of 'where did he get the cane?' this comes from *The Standard*, which was a paper in Hillsdale, Michigan. "Henry Clay Dean the popular democratic orator carries a heavy cane. Carved in imitation of a great snake. The head of which is covered in copper. It was presented to him by rebel friends."



Cindy: His rebel friends, huh? I always wondered; the whole family has. You feel like you're connected to the generations, really. I do. You know my great-grandmother was his daughter. So here I am, you know holding something that she may have played with as a kid, you know. And that he used to really to exemplify his beliefs. It's pretty exciting.

Wes: It's an absolutely fantastic story. I want you to take care of that cane. Henry Clay Dean never regained the prominence he had in the mid 1860s, but neither did he go quietly into the night. In 1865, he was nearly lynched when he proclaimed Lincoln's assassination a good thing. In 1868, he published a 512-page book entitled *Crimes of the Civil War*. He found work as an attorney after the war, and continued to speak at political rallies. But no longer feeling so welcome in the north, he moved south to Missouri, where he built a home that he named 'Rebel's Cove'. He died there in 1887, at the age of 64.