

The Fall of Pompey

By Leslie Linwood Thomas

One brilliant patch in the Lamphere/Mitchell family's quilt of experience involves a pet crow who learned to talk. This story has a bright beginning, thanks to my great-uncle Willie Mitchell's fondness for taming a galaxy of pets.

My grandmother Abbie Flood's memory featured a parade of her youngest brother's optimistic attempts to alter nature's feeding chain. She remembered chipmunks whose cheeks bulged with purloined seed corn needed for next year's planting, a seal named Lorelei who got mackerel handouts from Willie's daily catch, incidental amphibians or reptiles to startle his sisters (especially the dainty and impressionable Marietta), and an assortment of rapacious barn cats who shunned all human contact except for the youngest of six Mitchell progeny. He alone was allowed to see and even fondle successive generations of mousers-in-training. Supreme in the progression of Willie's successes, however, was Pompey the crow.

This pre-Disney character fell literally into Willie's hands when its nest was dislodged from a lightning-riven tree behind Jordan Farm, now Stella Maris on the University of New England campus where Hills Beach Road branches off lower Pool Road in Biddeford, Maine. Rescued from risk of marauding foxes, its broken wing healed but not before it became deeply attached to its caregiver.

Local lore affirmed that splitting its tongue might lead to closer communication; Willie did not hesitate long. Surgery with a filleting knife opened new possibilities. Soon an apt pupil mimicked the nasal phrases of lower Pool Road, not excluding its trainer's burgeoning ability to cuss.

There are certain ironies attached to the choice of a name for this winged prodigy. How a Yankee boy, whose father launched a fishing boat reverently christened *Abraham Lincoln*, so thoughtlessly memorialized the Southern custom of classically-educated slave owners displaying their erudition by naming their blacks after free Romans of distinction and power is unclear? Surely the compassionate Willie followed custom blindly and without malice!

The fact that this Pompey was never caged led to lively episodes in the family history. It also led to his eventual downfall, a doom strongly reminiscent of the pathetic end of another caged bird – Mary, Queen of Scotland and the Isles.

Like many vain and glossy predators, the newly verbal star of Willie's menagerie tempted fate by compulsively acquiring glittering objects to deposit in his private treasury located behind louvers in the barn cupola. After he snatched a shiny key chain belonging to my great-uncle Alonzo's second wife, who lived next door, she chased Pompey with a broom while declaring open warfare on such arrogant thievery. In due time, he retaliated by wading in mud from the ice pond across Newtown Road, hopping the length of all her fully occupied clothes lines and laughing derisively to further instill hatred in this housewife's heart. The domestic crisis was compounded by Uncle Lon's delight at her discomfort, she, having absorbed WCTU propaganda recently, had destroyed several bottles of his carelessly concealed home brew -- an act not guaranteed to evoke much sympathy for her distress at Pompey's attack on wash Monday.

Other examples of avian chicanery enlivened the neighborhood and generated a modified anthropomorphic flavor to Pompey's reputation. In a way, he did seem to acquire less-than-desirable human characteristics, especially an inflated ego, plus a total lack of remorse. His predatory instincts lurked unabated beneath a veneer of calculated innocence. Talk could not conceal his revengeful succession of sins. As with many glib felons, mass murder led to his early demise.

Great-grandmother Miriam Mitchell had been mystified by serial killings of newly hatched peepers in the hencoop. Rats would have left bloody traces; foxes would have swallowed them whole; hawks would have carried off the evidence. After discovery of the fourth heap of hatchlings with wrung necks, family vigilance led to the discovery of a jealous Pompey in action one rainy afternoon.

Retribution loomed, but how and when? Could Willie bear to part with his infamous companion when he returned from Biddeford Pool?

My diminutive but determined great-grandparent was stern and pragmatic. Her duty was clear. Reluctantly, she positioned Pompey's neck on the chopping block and grabbed the always well-sharpened kindling hatchet. Just as she raised it, Pompey grasped his bill in his talons, gave her a reproachful look, and muttered plaintively: "Poor Pompey".

His nemesis struck with precision even as tears flowed. She recalled in later years an impression of rueful resignation. That necessary blow hastened the end of Willie's childhood and triggered her old age. Thus, more than Pompey faded from the scene. Willie never lost his compassion, but trust and hope diminished during a hard life at sea.

Scarred by regret and early loss, too soon do life's illusions disappear.

Fortunately, my father managed to take a different road in life. As far back as I can remember him, he seems to have supplied a conscious measure of trust, hope, encouragement and generosity to those he met and walk among. This is the life we celebrate.

May he now rest in peace, and may we go forward with a lighter step for having known him.