

# Ashe County deserters

Excerpts from a speech of Governor Thomas W. Bickett in "The Ashe County Case," *Public Papers and Letters of Thomas Walter Bickett* (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton, 1923), pp. 174–181.

## As you read...

Eighty-six thousand North Carolinians were called into military service during World War I. Although the vast majority served willingly, four thousand deserted. Most soldiers who went AWOL (absent without leave) either fled the conditions of training camp or had received bad news from home, and most either were caught or returned voluntarily.

In June 1918, a group of forty deserters decided to hide out in the mountains of Ashe County until the war ended. After they shot and killed one of a group of armed civilians sent to arrest them, Governor Thomas W. Bickett went to Jefferson, the county seat, to speak to residents and especially to the families and friends of the deserters. In his speech, he claimed that the deserters weren't cowards, but simply didn't understand the reasons for the war or the fairness of the draft law. America was a peaceful nation, Bickett said, and had been forced into war by German aggression.

After Bickett's appearance, the deserters turned themselves in and asked to be reinstated in the army. The "Ashe County Case" became famous throughout the state, but Ashe County unfairly received a reputation for being a home to deserters. More than 500 men from the county served in World War I, and less than 1 percent of Ashe's draftees evaded the draft — compared with nearly 3 percent statewide.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Why did Bickett believe the men in Ashe county had deserted the army? Do you think there might have been other reasons men might have not wanted to fight the war?
2. How did Bickett try to persuade the men who had been drafted to enter the army?
3. Why did Bickett believe the draft was the fairest way to raise an army?
4. How did Bickett describe President Wilson? Did he believe Wilson wanted to go to war?
5. Why did Bickett believe that America needed to join the Allies and fight against the Central Powers (Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire?)
6. What did Bickett fear would be the consequences if the Central Powers won?
7. What did Bickett believe would be the result of an Allied victory?
8. Did you find this speech convincing? Do you think these were legitimate reasons for America to join the war? If yes, why? If no, what reasons would you need to hear to convince you?



Figure 1. Thomas W. Bickett served as governor of North Carolina from 1917 to 1921.

Men of the mountains: I come to you today to save and not to destroy. I come to save the fair name of a county in which the whole State takes, and of which I have ever spoken with, peculiar pride. I come to save to you, men of the mountains, your birthright of honor and chivalry; I come to save wayward and willful boys from the sad and certain consequences of ignorance and sin.

My heart yearns after these boys even as the heart of David yearned after Absalom<sup>1</sup>. Absalom had in him the elements of a hero. He was beautiful in form and brilliant in mind, but he listened to the whisperings of evil spirits. He deserted the house of his father; he rebelled against the law of Israel; he died as the fool dieth, and the King cried aloud: "Absalom, my son, my son, would to God I had died for thee."

Already in North Carolina three young men, one in Jackson, one in Pitt, and one in Ashe, have followed in the footsteps of David's son. Like Absalom they have died as the fool dieth; and to save others from this tragic and shameful end I am here today.

I have tried honestly to get at the real cause of this unlovely situation. I have put to my soul the question, "Why do these men seek to hurt their country, when every hand should be stretched to help?" Certainly, it is not because they are afraid to fight. The mountaineer loves a scrap. He would just a little rather fight than not, for the same money.

It is not because they are unwilling to do or to give their share. Nowhere on earth will you find truer hospitality than right here in these hills, and if you were to tell any man in this crowd that he was unwilling to pull his end of the single-tree, to tote his end of the log, that he was a slacker who wanted to saddle his job on another man's shoulders, you would-well, in a few minutes you would devoutly wish that you had been born with enough sense to keep your mouth shut.

I speak whereof I know. I have spent much time in these hills, have walked with you along rushing mountain torrents and over rugged mountain slopes, and I know your hospitality and the real joy you take in doing your part and in helping another fellow along.

I am forced to the conclusion that these mountain boys are giving trouble because they have not been told the truth about this war and because they have been told a lot of lies about it. Ignorance and misinformation are at the bottom of all this trouble and all this shame.

It is my purpose to lay before you the everlasting truth about this war.

America did not bring on this fight. You didn't want war. I didn't want it. He that sitteth upon the circle of the heavens and readeth the heart of man as an open book knows that Woodrow Wilson did not want war. The man is a school-teacher, a student, a historian. He loves the quietude of his study, the atmosphere of books. He loves to dig deep into the truths of history and the philosophy of civilization. He never dreamed of military glory. For him there is no intoxication in the thunder of the captains and the shouting. He never carried a big stick in his life.<sup>2</sup> And so we find in the beginning this quiet gentleman shrinking from every suggestion of war. He avoided it. He evaded it. He backed away from it. He taxed to the breaking point the greatest brain in this world to keep out of it. And when at last, with a bleeding and broken heart, he went before the Congress and lifted his voice in favor of war, it was because there was no other way. Peace is entirely too dear when it comes at the price of honor. Men and nations must preserve a measure of self-respect if they would survive the grinding of the years. When a man reaches the point where nobody loves him, nobody fears him, and nobody respects him, he is done for. When he descends

to the point that he is ashamed to stand and look at his own face in the glass there is no good reason why he should not buy a cheap rope and hang himself.

You all remember the long series of injuries and insults the Imperial German Government heaped upon this Nation; how, at the point of the sword, the Kaiser made a solemn pledge that henceforward he would observe the laws of nations and of humanity. It turned out that this pledge was a mere pretense made to gain time in which to build more submarines to do their dastardly work. And when they were builded and all things were ready the Kaiser coolly informed us that he proposed to treat the solemn compact made with this Government as a scrap of paper.

If in the face of this defiant and contemptuous challenge our Government had folded its arms, then today Old Glory would float to the breezes in lonely isolation as the one flag on this earth that no other nation loves, no other nation fears, and no other nation respects. We had to go in to preserve a single vestige of our self-respect and the respect of others....

[T]his war will mold and color the civilization of the world for a thousand years. That far-flung battle line is one vast melting pot in which there is being tried out every theory of government and every ideal of humanity. Into this hissing, roaring cauldron there is being dumped despotism and anarchism, bolshevism, militarism, pacificism. Into the melting pot there is going autocracy, and plutocracy, and democracy; and the thing that emerges triumphant from this ordeal of fire will rule this earth for a thousand years to come. The quarrel between Austria and Serbia<sup>3</sup> has been well-nigh forgotten. The rape of Belgium<sup>4</sup> is remembered as a ghastly dream. The submarine question<sup>5</sup> is but a bubble on a boiling sea. The one vital question is, Who and what shall rule the earth? Suppose Germany should win. Suppose Prussia in shining armor should leap triumphant from the melting pot. Then for a thousand years the ideals of Prussia would reign and men would be taught that a gun is God, and before it there is none other. Every government on earth would of necessity be fashioned after the Prussian model. Nations would be converted into armed camps ever ready as Prussia was ready to spring at another's throat. For a thousand years all the products of peace would be fed to mills of war and every private citizen would carry a soldier on his back.

On the other hand, if the Allies shall achieve a great victory, then I devoutly believe that war will come no more upon the earth. We are fighting the very soul of war. We are battling to send militarism to the scrap-heap of civilization, and to make the conscience of mankind the supreme arbiter of the rights of nations. We are pouring out blood and treasure to build up a civilization in which a woman's finger will weigh more than a mailed fist, and the voice of a little child will be heard farther than a cannon's roar. Is it not all well worth fighting for? God knows I hate war, and have no lust for battle. My heart bleeds with compassion for the mothers and fathers and wives of the men who are moving to the front. I shall deeply mourn the unreturning braves. But, my friends,

"To every man upon this earth<sup>6</sup>  
Death cometh soon or late."

And I know of no finer way to meet the grim, pale messenger than to traverse a dangerous sea and in an unknown land register a stern challenge to the blood-red prestige of a band of

hereditary autocrats who have made unto themselves and all their people an iron image and called it God.

But how can we win? By fighting with every resource at our command--talon, tusk and claw. We must put all our moral power, all our money power, all our man power into the fight. Every blow must carry the weight of the entire Nation. This is precisely what we are doing. To this end we are training our soldiers in the right way. I have recently been through the training camps. I went through for the purpose of seeing what was being done to and with our boys. They are making mighty men of them. I noticed what they had to eat. I ate with them. I observed their sleeping quarters. I took a nap in one of the bunks. I noticed the precautions taken to protect the health and morals of the boys, and I can say to you mothers and fathers advisedly that the boys in the camps are better fed, better clothed, are leading more healthful and more decent lives than the men of the same age at home.

We are raising our army in the right way. The Selective Draft law is a legislative embodiment of the principle of equal justice to all and special privilege to none. It is the essence of Americanism and the sublimation of the square deal<sup>7</sup>. The man who understands the law and does not endorse it is not a good citizen. He is worse than a slacker--he is a shirker. He wants the other fellow to carry his part of the load. He believes in equal rights, but despises equal duties. When we come to raise money by taxation we all say that there must be absolute equality. The situation requires it and the conscience of the people approves it. To call a citizen to war is the highest tax a government can levy. It is the tax of blood and death. Should there be uniformity in taxing property, and discrimination in taxing life? Should there be equality in peace and favoritism in war? If there is to be preference, to whom should it be shown--you or me? If there is to be prejudice, against whom should it be directed--your boy or mine? No, my friends, the innate American love of fair play forces every man to admit that equal benefits and equal burdens go hand in hand; and the man who holds that the Selective Draft law is founded on the wrong principle does not believe in the Declaration of Independence and is an alien to the genius of this Republic....

The volunteer system is always unwise and unjust. It places a tax on patriotism and a premium on cowardice. When the war drums throb and the bugles blow, the brightest and the bravest rush to the front, while baser breeds skulk at home and become the fathers of the race. The cruel injustice of such a system is only surpassed by its colossal stupidity.

In raising our first National Army the military necessity of the hour forced the War Department to place the emphasis on the drafting principle in the law. In the present call the emphasis is placed on the selective principle. Men are called in the order that will entail the least hardship on families and communities. To this end all registrants are divided into classes. In a general way the single men will be called first, married men without children second, and married men with children third. Unskilled labor is called before skilled labor, and the idle before the industrious. Indeed, in the forefront of the first class will be placed married men who have not habitually supported their families. The man who has been boarding with his wife is going to try Uncle Sam's grub for a while. The fellow whose chief occupation has been holding down a goods box is going to take up his goods box and walk for the United States "from the dawn's early light till the twilight's last gleaming." The fellow who has been hanging around the corner drug store with a cigarette at an angle of forty-five degrees in the south-west corner of his mouth is going to hold a rifle on his shoulder at an angle of seventy degrees in the sun where it is ninety-six in the shade. The

poolroom aristocracy and the coca-cola gentry are going to be rounded up. After this call I will be able to issue a proclamation over the Great Seal of the State that between the ages of twenty-one and forty-five there is not a loafer left in North Carolina. The net is spread and the camel-and-needle act<sup>8</sup> is dead easy compared with any attempt of a loafer to get away from a fair chance to die for his country.

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## Notes

1. In the Biblical story of King David, his son Absalom raised an army and tried to depose his father. Absalom was defeated by David and killed in battle. Although Absalom had committed treason and had tried to murder his father, David still mourned his son.
2. This is a reference to Theodore Roosevelt, who said the U.S. should “speak softly and carry a big stick” in foreign affairs — negotiate peaceably but back up those negotiations with a strong military force. Roosevelt argued for the U.S. to enter World War I long before it did.
3. World War I began when a Serb murdered Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria. Austria declared war against Serbia. Various European nations had signed treaties with other nations pledging to support them in wars, and most of Europe was quickly drawn into the conflict.
4. Germany invaded Belgium in the summer of 1914, and its armies quickly swept through the small nation and into France. But German troops feared counter-attacks by Belgian and French guerrilla fighters, and so they burned several Belgian villages and massacred hundreds of civilians. Their actions brought worldwide condemnation.
5. Germany had pledged to not fire on passenger ships or on merchant ships of neutral countries such as the United States. But Germany believed that the U.S. was providing goods and weapons to the Allied powers and was not acting as a neutral power. Moreover, Allied navy ships were using passenger ships as a shield to conduct military operations. Germany thus began using submarines to attack American ships. Americans, though, believed that Germany was unfairly targeting passenger ships and killing innocent civilians. This was one of the main issues that drew the U.S. into the war.
6. From the Poem “Horatius” by the British poet Thomas Babington Macaulay.
7. The Square Deal was the name given by President Theodore Roosevelt (1901–09) to his domestic program. To support the interests of the middle class, he tried to break up monopolies and regulate big business. But he also opposed the demands of organized labor when unions disrupted the flow of business. He wanted fairness for workers and for business and sought to find a balance between the two.
8. This refers to Jesus’ saying that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

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### **Figure 1 (page 2)**

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