

# Court days

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY L. MAREN WOOD

George Higby Throop (writing as Capt. Gregory Seaworthy), *Bertie; or, Life in the Old Field. A Humorous Novel* (Philadelphia: A. Hart, Late Carey and Hart, 1851), pp. 156–159.

## As you read...

### GEORGE HIGBY THROOP

George Higby Throop was a school teacher and tutor from Wilsboro, New York. In 1849, Throop came to North Carolina to teach the children of Cullen Capehart, a plantation owner in Bertie County. In the hot summer months, Throop accompanied the Capehart family to Nags Head. His time in North Carolina became the material for two novels, *Nag's Head; or, Two Months Among "the Bankers": A Story of Sea-Shore life and Manners* and *Bertie; or, Life in the Old Field: A Humorous Novel*.

Although Throop's novels were not popular during his lifetime, they were the first novels to fictionalize antebellum North Carolina society. Throop's novels are a window into the cultural attitudes and beliefs of elite Southern society in North Carolina during the 1850s.

You can learn more about the life and writings of George Higby Throop from this biography (see <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/throop/bio.html>) from Documenting the American South.

### COURT DAYS

In this excerpt, Throop described the atmosphere of court days. Unlike today, when legal courts operate year-round, judicial courts in the antebellum period were held on specific days. If a person had a matter to address before the court, he or she would travel to town on those specific days. As you read, you will see that court days were not just days for business. People from across the county took the opportunity to gather and socialize.

Throop's description of these court days was fiction, but it was based on the events he witnessed and the people he met while in North Carolina. Before you read this excerpt, you may wish to read the summary (see <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/throopbertie/summary.html>) of this novel provided by Documenting the American South.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How does Throop describe the dress and manners of the people he saw at court days?
2. What were some of the different things people could buy at court days?
3. What types of food could people sample?

4. What did people talk about?
5. What different attractions or performers were there for people's entertainment?
6. Do you think Throop enjoyed his time at court days? Why or why not?
7. In his novel, Throop made many historic and literary references. Why do you think he chose to include these references in his writing?
8. We know that Throop based his novels on his own experiences. What parts of this excerpt do you think were true to life? What parts do you think he may have exaggerated for the purposes of the novel?

We were among the earliest to arrive. The hotel was thronged with waiters who were in readiness to receive the guests. I found mine host and his lady, both of whom at once recognized me, bustling asthmatically about in the work of preparation. Mr. Dawson was filling the sugar-drawers with lump-sugar, while Mrs. Dawson was as nearly ubiquitous and out of breath as it was possible for her to be. She assured me that she was "just ready to drap<sup>1</sup>." She had been, she said, as busy as a bee for the last three days in making preparations. A glimpse of the pantry where meats, pies, puddings, cakes — what not? — were piled like shot<sup>2</sup> in an ordnance-yard<sup>3</sup>, fully confirmed the statement.

"Had I ever been at Court in the country?" she asked.

"No."

"Well, then, I should see sights!" she exclaimed; and she waddled away with a sigh of exhaustion.

Anon<sup>4</sup> came the people in carts, in carriages, on horseback, on foot. I saw the professor<sup>5</sup> in an agony of laughter as he watched the advent of two men in a cart which was drawn by a single steer<sup>6</sup>. Such horses; thin as the Cumæan Sybil<sup>7</sup>, who could only be recognized by her voice; consumptive, asthmatic, shadowy, dilapidated, uncombed, unwashed, unfed; despair in their long, sharp faces. The carts were in similar variety. The yard, however, was fast filling up with horses and carriages that would do credit to any part of the country. Among the arrivals was that of "a show," as it was called; the same being a deformed dwarf, whose picture roughly sketched on canvas was quite enough to disgust me. It proved, however, to be one of the lions of the day. In one corner of the public room was a book-peddler, demure, spectacled, sanctified-looking. In another corner a saddler<sup>8</sup> exposed his goods, and in another a shoemaker was similarly employed. Not far from the door of the court-house was a covered cart laden with oysters. There was a fire near it, and a rude deal-table, to which, ever and anon, thin, long haired, ague-blenched men, with limitless shirt collars, gathered tumultuously for the ambrosial stew. Fips<sup>9</sup>, ninepences<sup>10</sup> and quarters were thrown recklessly, almost furiously down, with the desperate air of people who are resolved to have what is technically called "a bender."<sup>11</sup> The professor seemed perfectly at home. Whenever and wherever I met him, he was exhibiting a piece of hardened cement.

Not far from the oyster cart was a sort of tent, if such it could be called, it being simply a sheet fastened at each corner to a pole, and thus serving to shelter from the rays of the sun an ample stock of cakes and candy and nuts. In another part of the yard a man was selling a horse at auction. The doors of the court-house as well as the walls were covered with notices, written in every imaginable style of penmanship, and in the most hardy defiance of all the rules of orthography and punctuation.

And then the dress! Coats that were venerable when swallow-tails<sup>12</sup> were young; hats that might represent the progress of hat-architecture since the flood<sup>13</sup>; caps of fur, cloth, leather, silk, and materials nondescript; nankeen<sup>14</sup> in its glaring, undisguised, unmitigated, remorseless yellowness, made up in Turkish<sup>15</sup> capaciousness; bonnets from the height and size and antiquity of Noah's Ark, with something of the picturesque modernness of a Chinese junk<sup>16</sup> or a Dutch frigate<sup>17</sup> of the old school. Perhaps the Egyptian war-chariot is a better standard of comparison. Then there were umbrellas which I will not undertake to say were of Chinese or Botany Bay<sup>18</sup> manufacture, but which would do no violence to the remotest of umbrella probabilities — due regard being had to their chronology<sup>19</sup>.

The people were out in force. There were greetings hearty and without number. There were grave consultations on all sorts of topics: the weather, the compromise<sup>20</sup>, the committee of thirteen<sup>21</sup>, the Contoy prisoners<sup>22</sup>, the last message, California, Utah, the dissolution of the Union, while "News much older than their ale went round,"<sup>23</sup> as unblushingly as if it were the last telegraphic dispatch<sup>24</sup>. Apple-brandy was as water for abundance, and barrels were as fountains of beer. Hard-handed toil regaled himself on gingerbread and stewed oysters. Old Times<sup>25</sup> stalked unconsciously along, jostling the newest and gaudiest robes of fashion and novelty.

It was warm that day. The landlady meekly and in resignation rolled her eyes heavenward, while mine host, "as subject to heat as butter,"<sup>26</sup> seemed ready to evaporate. The dogs sank wearily and pantingly down, stretching themselves to their full length with an evident conviction that all flesh is grass in hot weather.

At dinner-time a crowd was gathered at the door of the dining-room. When at length it was unfastened, there was a general rush, on the tide of which mine host was borne along, to the irremediable detriment of a new and somewhat tight pair of Sunday breeches. The table was loaded. There was beef by the half-ox<sup>27</sup>, whole hecatombs of fowls, vegetables innumerable. After dinner came the speeches from some of the political candidates, and at the instigation of Dr. Jeffreys, Professor Matters was called upon for a speech upon his new system of hydrology. The substance thereof may, perchance, yet be given to the world.

At three o'clock in the afternoon the crowd began to disperse, and we were among the first to depart. The professor informed us that he had been very successful, having closed a bargain for no less than five cisterns.

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## Notes

1. To drop. Throop is making a joke about the woman's dialect.
2. Shot was round metal balls fired from a gun or cannon (such as a cannon ball). Unlike a bullet, which contains gunpowder, shot and powder were loaded separately into a gun or cannon. When the powder ignited, the shot fired out of the gun.

3. An ordnance-yard is a place for storing military supplies, such as ammunition.
4. *Anon* means now, at once, or instantly. You may run into this word in Shakespeare's plays; Throop was probably trying to imitate Shakespeare by using it.
5. "Professor" Funnyford Matters is one of the main characters in the novel. He is employed by southern plantation owners to build drinking water cisterns (containers for storing water.) Throop presents Matters as a caricature, or exaggerated stereotype, of a Yankee who is irritable and cranky and dislikes the South.
6. Steers are male beef-cattle that have been castrated.
7. Cumaean Sibyl was a prophetess and an important figure in stories about ancient Rome. According to legend, Cumean Sybil presided over a temple to the god Apollo, located in the Greek colony of Cumae, near Naples, Italy. To the Greeks and Romans, Apollo was the god of prophesy. Because of her special powers, Cumean Sibyl provided the Kings of Rome with books of prophesies which they consulted in times of crisis.
8. A saddler was a person who made and sold horse saddles.
9. A fip was a nick-name for a Spanish coin worth about five or six pennies.
10. Ninepence was a British coin worth nine pennies.
11. A bender was a riotous party, especially a party that involved excessive consumption of alcohol.
12. A swallow-tail jacket was a coat for men with tails. From the 1790s through the 1830s, it was worn as an every-day jacket by men. By the 1850s, though, it was a style of jacket that was only worn in the evenings. These people were wearing clothing that was unfashionable and out of date, which showed how backwards they were.
13. "The flood" is a reference to the biblical story of Noah and the Ark. According to this story, to punish humans for their wickedness, God made it rain for forty days and forty nights and wiped out all life on earth except for Noah, his family, and the animals that Noah kept on his ark.
14. Nankeen was pale, yellow, cloth.
15. The fez was a hat worn in 19th-century Turkey (and is still sometimes worn today). It is a circular red hat, sometimes made of wool or felt.  
  
Throop was trying to convey to the reader that the people at the court day were wearing large, unfashionable hats.
16. A *junk* was a type of sailing vessel which was used by the Chinese for ocean travel as early as 200 BCE.
17. A Dutch frigate was ship with oars, sails, which was light and easy to maneuver.
18. Botany Bay is a vacation resort on the coast of New South Wales in Australia. The umbrellas Throop saw were not fancy or fine, and therefore would not be seen in this Australian resort, nor in China.
19. These umbrellas were very old.
20. The Compromise of 1850.

21. The Committee of Thirteen was a U.S. Senate committee established to find a compromise between the North and South in the conflict over slavery.
22. In 1851, a group of Americans led by Narciso López, a wealthy man from Venezuela, attempted to invade and take over Cuba in the name of the United States. These men acted without the authority of the U.S. government. López wanted to free Cuba from Spanish rule so that it could join the United States as a slave state, in the same way that American settlers in Texas had won their independence from Mexico and joined the Union.

On his way to Cuba, López and his men stopped at Cotony Island. Forty men quit the expedition and remained on the island, waiting for López and his men to return for them after they had taken over Cuba.

The expedition failed and most of the hundreds of men who were on the expedition were captured by the Spanish and many were executed. The Spanish also learned of the forty men on Cotony Island and sent ships to capture the Americans there. These men became known as the Cotony Prisoners. Eventually, they were released and allowed to return to the United States.

23. This is a quotation from the poem “The Deserted Village” by the Irish poet Oliver Goldsmith.
24. A telegraphic dispatch was a message sent by telegram.
25. Old Time is another name for Father Time, a character which represents the passage of time. Father Time is usually depicted with a beard and wearing long flowing robes.
26. From the play, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, written by William Shakespeare.
27. “Beef by the half-ox” means that, rather than having pieces of the animal prepared (such as steak or roast beef), the entire half of the animal had been cooked and was ready to be eaten.

## About the author

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