

## THEY THAT TAKE THE SWORD: A TRUE STORY

by Milton Meltzer

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WHO HAS ever heard of Seth Laughlin?

I hadn't until one day I saw that name in print in a book. I like to play with names, to see where they come from and what they mean. *Laugh-lin*—say it that way and it sounds funny. I read on to see if his story was laughable.

Not quite.

Seth lived in the South, in Virginia. It was in the time before the Civil War, when most black people in the South were slaves. Seth's family was not well-off. They owned no slaves. As Seth grew up, he began to think that slavery was wrong. How can one person feel it is all right for him to own another person? To deny him his freedom to live his own life?

But he found no other white people in his village who thought the way he did. Seth married, and over the years had seven children. Together they made a living on their small farm. Early on, Seth stopped going to church. The preacher said nothing about the evil of slavery. Sometimes he even praised it. Christians, he said, were doing God's will when they took black people under their wing and protected them, giving them work to do and a place to live, and food to eat, and clothing to wear. (And paying them nothing, and buying and selling them like cattle, and not letting them learn to read, and whipping them when they liked, and a thousand other sins against human decency, Seth thought.)

It made Seth sick to sit there and listen to the preacher. One day he heard there were some people in the town nearby who thought the way he did. They were called Quakers, and they held weekly meetings. He saddled his horse and rode over on a Sunday morning. He liked what they said in their meeting. It made him feel stronger to know others thought as he did.

But he found the Quakers were not only against slavery, they were against war, too. They lived by what Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God." And Jesus had told Peter, "All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword."

What did that mean? That violence does no good in the long run? That to meet violence with violence is only to create a cycle of violence that never ends?

Now some Quakers did not believe it was enough to detest slavery and war. To be against using violence does not mean you give in quietly to injustice. You oppose it with all the moral strength you have. And take the consequences. Even when it means defying the right of government to order you to carry out its law when that law goes against your conscience.

Soon after Seth joined the Quakers, Abraham Lincoln was elected president of the United States. With his victory, the South knew the federal government would not allow slavery to be spread into the new territories of the West. Southern states broke away from the Union and began the Civil War by firing on the federal garrison at Fort Sumter.

On both sides, the South and the North, men volunteered to fight or were drafted into the armies. What should I do now, Seth wondered. Some of the Quakers he knew fled North to avoid the draft. Others hid in forests or caves. But Seth stayed at home with his family. The war went on, year after year, with tens of thousands of men killed on both sides, and the land ruined wherever the fighting raged. Now the South began to draft both young boys and older men, to fill the empty ranks.

One day—it was 1863—an Army officer came to get Seth. He refused to go.

“It is against my conscience to shed blood,” he said, “no matter what the cause.”

“Then pay the fee of five hundred dollars,” the officer said, “and we will get someone to take your place.”

“No,” said Seth. “I am glad not to take up arms to protect slavery. And I will not pay to have another man do it in my place.”

So the officer arrested Seth, handcuffed him, and took him to an army camp near Petersburg.

“We will break this man’s spirit,” said the colonel, “and he will be glad to do as we ask.”

A sergeant took Seth away and ordered him to stand, without any support, for thirty-six hours. A soldier stood nearby, and every time sleepiness overcame Seth and he began to sag to his knees, the soldier pierced him with a bayonet to make him stand straight again.

“Are you ready to obey orders now?” the sergeant asked. Seth shook his head.

“Then buck him down,” said the sergeant.

The soldiers threw him to the ground, tied his wrists together, slipping them over his knees, and then ran a stick through the space between his knees and over his arms. They kept him in this painful position for three hours a day, day after day.

A week later: “Are you ready to join up now?”

“No,” said Seth.

“Then tie him up,” said the sergeant.

They suspended Seth by the thumbs from the branch of a tree so that his toes barely touched the ground. He was left in that position for an hour and a half, each day, for a week. The pain was agonizing.

Thinking Seth was conquered, the sergeant cut him down and handed him a rifle. Seth dropped it on the ground. Then they gagged him by forcing a thick piece of wood into his mouth and tying it tight. The strain on his teeth and jaws was unbearable. Still he did not give in. More threats, more devices to torture him. Still no surrender. In desperate anger, the colonel ordered him court-martialed.

A military court sat to hear the evidence against Seth. Then it convicted him of refusal to obey orders, and commanded him to be shot.

The troops were paraded onto the execution ground, to learn a lesson. Twelve privates were detailed to carry out the death sentence. Six guns were loaded with bullets, six with blank cartridges, and they were handed to the twelve chosen men.

Seth, as calm as any of the men surrounding him, asked for time to pray. Of course they could not deny him this. The colonel assumed that naturally Seth would pray for himself.

But Seth was ready to meet his Lord. And so he prayed not for himself, but for them: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

As the soldiers heard his firm voice and the meaning of his words sank in, each of the twelve men lowered his gun. Accustomed as they were to taking human life, and knowing the penalty for disobeying military orders, they resolutely declared they could not shoot such a man. But the chosen twelve were not the only ones whose hearts were touched. The officers of the military court themselves revoked the sentence. Seth was sent instead to prison.

There he fell sick from the heavy punishment he had undergone. And after a long illness, he passed quietly away.