Southern Man

A Boulder group is fighting for Southern secession. Some say it's also fighting for white supremacy

by Joel Warner

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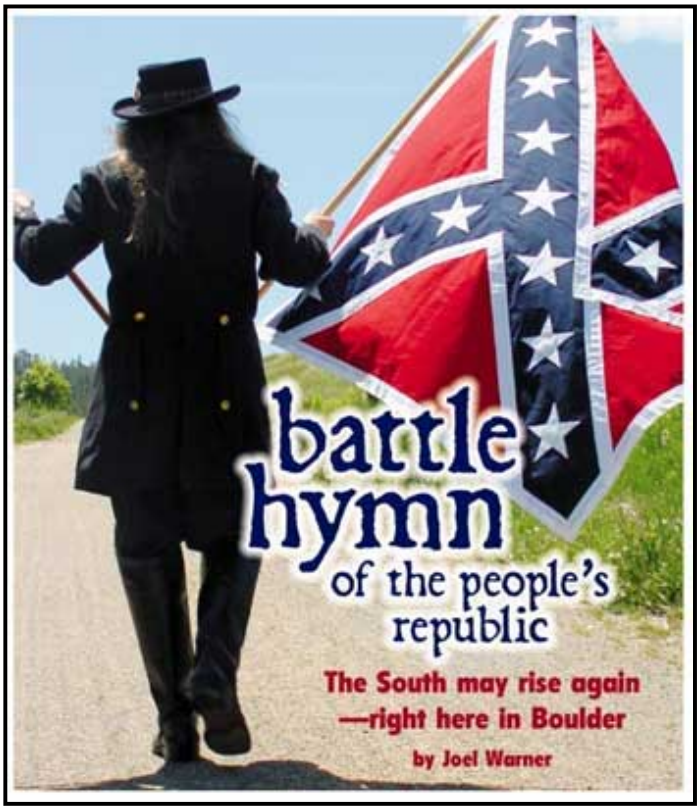
On April 17, 2004, MacDonald King Aston stood on the edge of the harbor in Charleston, S.C., and looked across the water at Fort Sumter. One hundred and forty-three years earlier, almost to the day, Confederate batteries in Charleston launched an artillery barrage at the Union force stationed in the fort-the opening salvo in what would become known as the American Civil War.



While Aston was a long way away from his home just south of Boulder, Colo., he stood out from the usual tourists that come to the birthplace of the War Between the States. Aston was wearing a full "Richmond Gray" Confederate officer's uniform, accurate right down to the brass buttons. Aston had just walked five miles in 90-degree heat in his uniform, marching with thousands of others in honor of eight Confederate sailors whose bodies had been recovered from the remains of the CSS Hunley submarine in Charleston Harbor, and who were now finally laid to rest. By most accounts this was the last funeral of a war that claimed at least 618,000 Americans, North and South.

As Aston gazed at Sumter he was struck by the fact his ancestor Roger Atkinson Pryor, a fiery secessionist, had been given the chance to fire the first shot at the fort. It was an offer Pryor turned down.

For Aston, such musings are more than just wistful remembrances.

For him, the Civil War has never ended.

"My main feeling was sorrow that the America we had established on this continent had vanished and been replaced by an empire. The American republic hasn't existed since 1865," says Aston. "The big problem is that the South, as we know it, is an occupied country."

Aston's obsession with the Civil War runs much deeper than his fondness for his Confederate Grays. By his accounts he is a soldier of the Confederacy, one who is armed not with weapons, but with the belief that the South should rise again and take its place among the world's sovereign nations.

Aston and his convictions are not easy to define. Some call him an eccentric, preoccupied by events that wrapped up 140 years ago and involved a region of the country far removed from Aston's home base of Colorado. Some call him an activist, fighting against imperialism and the corporatization of America. Some call him a free-thinking scholar, exposing mistruths and honoring his American Indian heritage. Some call him the leader of a hate group.

Aston's heard all these labels-and many more. He sees it as all part of his burden as he marches along to the beat of a very different drummer. His forebear was given the chance to begin the Civil War; now Aston wants the chance to finish it.

Confederates in the closet

You don't need a specific street address to find Aston's house in Louisville. As Aston will tell you, just steer your car into his tidy neighborhood of modern homes and look for the "flag of freedom"-the stars and bars of the Confederate battle flag out front.

If it's a nice day Aston will sit you down in a lawn chair in his backyard and offer you a cool glass of Southern sweat tea-none of that bastardized Northern stuff in which the sugar's added after the water's boiled. Aston's long brown hair will likely be covered by a wide-brimmed hat with a rattlesnake band, an exact replica of that worn by Ronnie Van Zandt, the late Lynyrd Skynyrd singer. At some point Aston will probably say something like, "I don't really like Yankees," in which case if you're a Yankee, you'll likely instinctively glance at the sidearm holstered to his belt.

You might hazard a guess Aston's from the South-but you'd be wrong. He's from Southern California.

Aston calls himself a "prune picker," in reference to the fact his family moved from Oklahoma to the California salad basket for work after World War II. Growing up Aston says he read about 20 books a week. He went on to get his bachelor's degree in classics from the University of California at Irvine and then his master's in the same subject from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Md.-all the while a single father.

After shuffling back and forth between Colorado and California working for tech companies, Aston moved to the Boulder area in 2001 with his third wife, Nancy. He now runs his own business, outsourcing technical writing for corporations. The flexible job schedule provides him ample time for his artistic pursuits-developing his music career and traveling across the country, photographing stone angels he finds in cemeteries.

Several years ago Aston's world became a lot more complicated, however, when he began exploring his genealogy. As he had learned as a child, he was a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, an American Indian nation whose homeland occupied what is now Mississippi and some sections of Alabama. Aston is related to Moshulatubbe, the Choctaw chief who fraternized with Thomas Jefferson and fought as a general under Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans in the War of 1812.

What Aston hadn't known was that his ancestors were active members of the Confederate States of America. One of his forebears, McKee King, allied the Choctaw with the Confederacy, while another, Sampson Folsom, raised the First Choctaw Brigade, CSA.

Since the other side of Aston's lineage hailed from old Virginia bluebloods-including fire-eater Pryor-Aston now estimates he's related to literally hundreds of Confederates.

"My family was astonishingly Southern, almost as if they had a phobia of the North," says Aston. "I must have several hundred Confederates in my closet."

For Aston, this was more than interesting trivia. It was a wake-up call.

"I ended up with a lapful of Confederates," he says, "and I had to consider what this meant."

Un-reconstruction

Colorado might not have been the best place for Aston to explore the intricacies of his Civil War heritage. Like the rest of the West in the 1860s, Colorado was largely removed from the hostilities back east, aside from the rare marauding band of Confederate wannabes and a few Indian massacres in the name of the Union. But with a little digging not too far from his house, Aston discovered a hornet's nest of Civil War battles-battles over the war's depiction in the history books.

In works like The South was Right, by James Ronald Kennedy, Aston discovered a very different Civil War from the one he'd learned about in school, a war in which Abraham Lincoln reportedly imprisoned thousands of journalists, as well as the entire Maryland legislature, and used Fort Sumter as a pawn to embroil the South in hostilities. This was a war in which Grant allegedly kept his slaves after the Emancipation Proclamation because, as he reportedly said, "Good help is hard to find."

This was also a war, says Aston, that was never a civil war.

"There was no Civil War. A civil war is a war between two factions in a country. The Civil War, as we'll call it, was a war between two countries," says Aston.

The South had every right to secede, says Aston. According to him, the United States was never meant to be a nation as we see it today; it was meant to be a constitutional republic, the Constitution in effect a compact between the states.

To support this idea, Aston points to the Tenth Amendment of the Bill of Rights: "Öthe powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution nor prohibited by it to the States are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people." Since secession is not forbidden in the Constitution, then it must be a right reserved to the states.

Another major misconception about the war, says Aston, is that it was about slavery. Aston believes the war was fought because Southern leaders were frustrated by the industrial North's abuse of state rights and the imposition of unfair taxes. The common Southerners became involved when the North invaded their home, he says.

Some scholars agree that the Civil War is not as black and white as the textbooks would like us to believe, but also note Aston's interpretations are likewise naive. As Civil War scholar James McPherson writes in the Pulitzer Prize-winning Battle Cry of Freedom, "For many southerners, the war was not about slavery. But without slavery there would have been no Black Republicans to threaten the South's way of life, no special southern civilization to defend against Yankee invasion."

To illustrate this point, McPherson refers to Virginia's secession vote in 1861. In the 35 Virginia counties where slaves accounted for only 2.5 percent of the population, voters opposed secession by a margin of three to one. The rest of Virginia, where slaves accounted for 36 percent of the population, voters supported secession by 10 to one.

According to some historians, Aston's Choctaw ancestors also weren't fighting for lofty political ideals.

"The could have cared less about states' rights. They were just angry at the U.S. government," says Gwen Walker, site manager of the Confederate Memorial Museum of Oklahoma. According to Walker, the Choctaw nation were insulted when the Union withdrew U.

S. troops protecting the Choctaw for the war, thereby violating their treaty with the Choctaw. So when the Confederacy asked the Choctaw nation to join them, they were only too happy to oblige.

But to Aston, these arguments were just more examples of how the winners always get to write the history books. In 2001 Aston decided the best way to defend his new view of the past was to join the Colorado chapter of the Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV), a 100-plus-year-old organization devoted to preserving the memory of the men who fought in gray.

Aston became the Commander of SCV Camp 1492 in Loveland, the oldest SCV camp in the state. But soon Aston tired of laying flags on Confederate graves, rallying in support of the Confederate banner and participating in living history events. He calls these people "Grannies," those who just "meet, greet, eat and leave." Sure, Aston has his hardcore $500 Confederate uniform, but he does not just want to play soldier. He sees himself as part of what he calls the "Fire-eater" camp: He doesn't just want to honor or re-enact the Civil War; he wants to live it.

An American without a country

Move over Gettysburg, Antietam, Chickamauga and Fredericksburg, there's a new Civil War battlefield: The United States Post Office.

"This will sound a bit eccentric," says Aston, "but zip codes are highly offensive. It is a reminder that we are under an empire, not under the sovereign state of Colorado."

In response Aston has come up with a new way to address letters: "Boulder, CO, Yankee Occupation Code 80302."

Aston has brought the Civil War down to a personal level. As long as the federal government continues to oppress the South's free will, he doesn't want to be a part of it.

"There are at least two forms of secession. One is political, the other is personal. The clothing I wear, the beliefs I hold, they all relate to the fact that I have personally seceded from the United States of America," he says. "I may live under the imperial empire, but I am not an imperial subject."

Aston's zip code nullification is just the beginning of his battle campaign. He calls George Bush and his advisors a bunch of "Caligulas" who are greedily expanding the American empire through the Iraq war and other foreign policies. He's helping to spread word of the Confederacy overseas by contributing articles to the website for Confederate States Allied Europe. He's quick to compare Lincoln to figures like Hitler, Mao and other people who killed thousands of people for money and power.

Even the written word isn't safe from Aston's fire-eating tendencies. Accusing New Englander Daniel Webster of bastardizing the English language, Aston uses "Southern orthography," peppering his prose with British spellings like organisation, colour, arent and so on. And of course, he spells the United States with a lowercase u.

Some might lump Aston with right-wing militias, but that's the furthest thing from the truth, says this born-again Southerner. Aston says secession is the antithesis of violent revolution. And he says he is a true-blooded American-an American without a country.

"I believe in the original America. I believe in the original America with all my heart and soul," he says. "But I am against the American empire. I will do everything in my power to oppose it."

Aston found that he was not alone; his beliefs fit perfectly into those of the League of the South (LOS).

The LOS was formed in Tuscaloosa, Ala., in June 1994 to push for the independence and self-government of the Southern people. The group's stated agenda is "To advance the cultural, social, economic, and political well-being and independence of the Southern people by all honourable means." Today the organization boasts at least 9,000 members, with 96 chapters in 20 states. Some call the LOS a neo-Confederate group; others, like Aston, find this term derogatory.

In 2002, Aston founded the Colorado chapter of LOS. The group attracted the interest of people like Mark Slater. Slater, like Aston, is not an original Southerner; he was born in Colorado, the descendant of a conductor on the Underground Railroad. But like Aston, Slater feels right at home with the sensibilities of the South.

He grew up a mainstream conservative, but the movement left him cold. All around him, in Colorado and beyond, Slater says he saw a society devoid of culture, human bonds, loyalty and connection to the land. He had no idea how to change this, until Aston showed him the power of the Southern movement.

"The South was society more on a human scale. People grew up with one another. People cared about their land. They cared about their homes," says Slater. "How did we get multinational corporations that don't give a whit about what is going on around them or the people? You can trace that to the war between the states."

Aston, Slater and other members of LOS say they aren't naive-they know secession isn't going to happen tomorrow. But they see foreshadows of the coming division. After all, what are the anti-PATRIOT Act resolutions passed by Boulder and hundreds of other communities if not acts of nullification?

"The history of all empires is eventually to fall apart," says Aston.

The groundwork is already laid out. The LOS is soon to release The Grey Book: Blueprint for the Southern Independence, outlining how a new free South will handle issues like the economic slump, social security, armed services, tax burdens, public education, and, of course, firearm ownership. (It will be protected from "anti-gun zealots.")

It's only a matter of time, says Aston, until the South can return to the original idea of America, that of a constitutional republic-and enjoy a Gross National Product that would place it in the top five richest nations in the world.

Civil war over the Civil War

You might think a Colorado LOS meeting is akin to a war council. It's actually more like a backyard barbecue.

The handful of Colorado LOS members convene in Aston's backyard, arriving in cars sporting bumper stickers like "American by birth, Southern by the grace of God," and "Proud to be a rebel lady." Slater, wearing a Mossimo baseball hat and smoking a cigar, sits in a lawn chair and rails against urban sprawl and tells stories about his cat. Sitting nearby Terry Wabnitz, sporting a bushy mustache and a wide-brimmed hat accentuated by a feathery plume, complements his wife, Carla Pyle, who was born in Nebraska but now wholeheartedly supports the South: "I dearly love my copperhead. There's no one else like her!" Aston, caring for the catfish on the grill, jokingly bemoans the fact his wife, Nancy, a Pennsylvanian, hasn't yet completely renounced her Yankee ties.

This rag-tag group are already veterans of a civil war-a civil war within the Southern movement in Colorado.

According to Aston, by the summer of 2003 the Colorado SCV was in shambles. Divisions in the organization, he says, led to racism, bigotry, threats of violence and power grabbing.

"They attacked me because I was Indian. I was attacked for my long hair. They attacked me because I was a vegetarian," says Aston, who was still an SCV camp commander at the time.

Soon things became even more ugly, as Mac and his compatriots were compared to the "Lincoln Administration" and criticized for their non-Southern birthplaces. Eventually Aston and the two other camp commanders, calling themselves "the Band of Brothers," resigned from the SCV. Aston now believes he and the Colorado LOS are the true state champions of the Southern cause.

"The League of the South looks to the future, while the Sons of Confederate Veterans looks to the past," he says.

Aston's tales of racism, discord and corruption within the Colorado SCV might not be that far-fetched; some people say a similar threat is facing SCV all over the country, a radicalization of the 31,000-member, $5-million organization.

"There is a takeover of the SCV from the head down," says North Carolina SCV member Walter Hilderman. "This is all a huge bag of worms that the SCV has got us involved in."

Hilderman formed the organization Save the Sons of Confederate Veterans in response to what he saw as an attempted extremist takeover of the SCV, involving neo-Nazi ties and backroom consolidation of power. SCV honchos counter that Hilderman and his bunch are really the extremists.

What's at stake, says Hilderman, is the future of the entire Southern movement.

"If the image of the SCV goes down the drain, so does the image of the Confederate soldier," he says.

It appears that Aston and his small band of compatriots are right in the middle of a convulsion of the entire Southern movement, a civil war over the Civil War, where both sides are slinging accusations of racism and extremism at the other. So which side does the Colorado LOS represent-that of the moderates, or that of the extremists?

Heritage or hate?

Once the catfish and potato salad are disposed of at the Colorado LOS meeting, Aston announces it's time for business. As the granite angels in Aston's photographs along the walls look on, the Colorado LOS convenes in his living room for a formal meeting. Most of the ensuing discussion focuses on race and religion; the issue is especially pertinent because Aston is concerned about a fringe element of the LOS that is arguing the free South should be a Christian Theocracy.

"It is imperative for us in the West to come down solidly on the side of tolerance and freedom for all people," says Aston. "We don't

want to be aligned with anything that smacks of racism at allÖ The problem is appearances."

Aston is right to be concerned about appearances. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), an Alabama-based group that monitors civil rights and the radical right classifies the LOS as a hate group and allegedly the FBI has done the same.

"It's almost entirely a racial issue for us," says Heidi Beirich, a senior writer for SPLC's magazine The Intelligence Report. "The League of the South, when it was first formed in 1994, was a highly conservative secessionist organization. It was essentially theocratic. Between 1994 and the late '90s, it took a harder and harder line on racial issues. If we didn't list them as a hate group, we would be making a mockery of the importance of fighting these organizations."

But Aston and other LOS members contend that the SPLC and its president Morris Dees can't be trusted.

"Morris Dees is the person who has this front group that claims to be in favor of civil rights," says Aston. "What he really is is a shake-down artist making millions and millions of dollars by tearing down Southern heritage."

Aston and others point to a Harper's Magazine story that reported the SPLC took in more than $44 million in fundraising in 1999 but spent only $13 million on civil-rights programs.

But some might say you don't need to listen to the SPLC to determine that the LOS is a white supremacy group; the ideals of the LOS speak for themselves. The LOS supports the idea of an Anglo-Celtic Southern heritage, or in other words that a free South must uphold the legacy of the largely English and Scots-Irish settlers who colonized the region.

In an LOS position paper on race, President J. Michael Hill explains this idea in detail. Hill writes, "Each time the League leadership addresses itself to the issue of race, the policy we advance must be free of hatred and malice." But Hill then notes, "This does not mean, however, that we must subscribe to the flawed Jacobin notion of egalitarianism, nor does it mean that white Southerners should give control over the civilisation and its institutions to another race, whether it be native blacks or Hispanic immigrantsÖ Today's white Christian Southerners are the blood descendents of the men and women who settled this country and gave us the blessings of freedom and prosperity."

There are other aspects of LOS ideology that might be cause for pause. The organization advocates for the right of free association, meaning that people should be able to associate with others of the same culture without bureaucratic interference. For example, Aston says he opposes Brown v. The Board of Education, but not because he supports segregation; it's because the federal government illegally imposed desegregation on the states, as opposed to letting the states work it out for themselves.

But simply labeling the LOS a bunch of white supremacists ignores one problem: MacDonald King Aston. If the LOS was simply a white supremacist group advocating the subjugation of minorities, then why would a well-educated descendent of American Indians be running a local chapter of the organization?

"I didn't grow up and go to school to become a white supremacist moron," says Aston. "If I belong to a hate group, I better start hating myself. Should I burn a cross on my own lawn?"

Battle cry

Aston doesn't see any incongruity in running a free South movement in the West. "Who else could possibly better understand the

plight of the South than the peculiarly individualistic, free-thinking Westerner?" he writes on the Colorado League of the South website.

But Aston does know the risk of publicizing his organization in an alternative newspaper in ultra-liberal Boulder. Almost everything about Aston and the LOS flies in the face of political correctness. He argues the Civil War had nothing to do with slavery, disregarding the fact that the event changed the lives of hundreds of thousands of oppressed Americans and all of their descendants. He says the battle flag of the Army of Northern Virginia is one of the most beautiful works of art he's ever seen, but when he proudly flies the banner in front of his house he seems to ignore the fact that his neighbors might associate it with white supremacy, hate and violence. He believes the South should respect the white Christian heritage of its founders, but says little about the defense of Choctaw culture, a society that occupied the Southland for thousands of years before the first Europeans and is today in much greater threat of extinction.

But this is all part of a long, messy battle Aston is ready to face. Sitting in his back yard, savoring a glass of Southern sweet tea, he says he's not going to make apologies for his beliefs.

"Disclaiming too much is just arrogant," he says with a smile.

And maybe that's the real attraction of the Southern movement for Aston and others like him: a nullification of all the pretension, a secession from political correctness. Aston discovered his family tree was brimming with Rebs, but instead of feeling guilty about it, he embraced a historical theory that made this upbringing not just understandable but commendable. He found himself stranded in the sterile world of suburbia, so he escaped into a world of epic battles and Homeric myths, where even mailing a letter can be the modern-day equivalent of the rebel yell.

Aston's grand adventure won't be ending anytime soon. To spread the word and shatter misconceptions about the Southern movement, the Colorado LOS will be organizing community service projects and hosting symposiums on the Civil War. Aston's also working on a book, to be called The Book of the Lie. Covering topics as diverse as antebellum history and the Theory of Relativity, Aston says the guide will help young people "get over their brainwashing."

If all goes as planned, says Aston, in 50 years the revolution will run its course.

"We are looking at our great-grandchildren, hoping that they can grow up in a free South or a reclaimed America," he says.

Along the way, there might even be a big move for Aston—he's been dabbling in real estate in the cotton belt. Someday the Confederate flag might come down for good in this Louisville suburb.

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