

Roscoe Whitman was the featured speaker at the New York Chapter Stukely Westcott Descendants Dinner on January 13, 1945 in New York City. His topic was the unfortunate story of Dr. Amos Westcott and his descendants.

## Tragedies and Hoax of Some Westcotts

by Roscoe L. Whitman

*Because of the somewhat startling title of my paper this evening. perhaps I should preface it with an explanation.*

*"Tragedies and Hoax of Some Westcotts" is a title that may cause some to think I have been prying into closets to find family skeletons. However, you can sit back comfortably without stirring uneasily in your chairs.*

*The facts come from the files in 1869 of the Geological Hall at Albany and from numerous newspaper clippings I have preserved during the last ten years. It is a tragic story of one Westcott family in central New York.*



*Roscoe Whitman*

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“Tragedies and Hoax of Some Westcotts.”

Prepared to read at the Westcott Dinner  
at New York, Jan. 13, 1945.

Steady and remorseless was the feud of fate against Dr. Amos Westcott, the Civil War mayor of Syracuse, N.Y., and his family. His parents, Gordon and Waity Knight Westcott, came from Foster township, Rhode Island, in 1809 and settled on a small farm in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains at what was and is still called Newport. Here Dr. Westcott, the eleventh of sixteen children, was born six years later, Apr. 20, 1815. The family moved to Truxton, N. Y., in 1819 and young Amos passed his boyhood here. He wanted to be an engineer and studied at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. The frustration

which was to pursue his descendants caused him to change his mind and take up dental surgery.

Early the ill luck of his family manifested itself. While he was riding one day his mare threw him. He determined never to ride horseback again. In the future he would confine his journeyings to horse and buggy. He bought a wagon. The first day he went out in it the rig tipped over and six of his ribs were fractured.

The Ill-fate of the family did not obscure their talents. Dr. Westcott became one of the most successful dentists in the state. He founded the New York State Dental Society and was its first president. He was editor of the "Surgeons' Monthly." As already stated, he was mayor of Syracuse during the Civil War.

It was Dr. Amos Westcott who conceived the hoax of the Cardiff giant, one of the oddest impositions ever perpetrated. With a horse-trading friend of Homer, N.Y., they are said to have stirred up an argument as to whether giants ever really existed. In support of his contention that they did, Dr. Westcott pointed to the Biblical statement that "there were giants in those days." Two years are said to have been spent in the preparation of the giant figure carved from stone, constructed in such a way that doubt might be raised whether it was a fossilized human being or a prehistoric sculpture. It was rubbed with sand until the features were partly obliterated, pieced with what looked like wormholes, bathed in sulphuric acid, and given a course of treatment that gave it the appearance of great age. The figure was ten feet, four inches tall, weighed 2,990 pounds and had shoulders more than three feet from point to point; it was then planted on a farm at Cardiff, a small farming community in Ononadaga County, N. Y. It was dug up by a third party and its "discovery" created much interest. It was exhibited in the Geological Hall at Albany in December, 1869, and attracted widespread attention.

Dr. Westcott and his accomplice derived much amusement from the exhibitions of the Cardiff Giant until, finally, the hoax was revealed.

Dr. Westcott had introduced the use of anesthetics into dentistry, whereby operations could be performed without pain to the patient. He was called upon many times to lecture on this subject to bodies of dental surgeons.

One night, July 6, 1873, following such a lecture, at a time when he was at the height of his career, and the peak of his success, he went home, and with the very narcotic he had perfected to alleviate pain, he killed himself, with no apparent greater cause than a slight cold of which he had been complaining.

His estate and the family ill-luck were inherited by two sons, Edward Noyes Westcott and Frank Westcott. Frank wanted to be an artist or a musician. Like his father, however, he could not make the grade in the field that most appealed to him. He became a clergyman. For many years he was rector of the Episcopal Church at Skaneateles, N.Y. His talents were recognized, and he was called to Milwaukee, where he became coadjutor to Bishop Walter Webb. His ability was such that another diocese had unofficially determined to make him its bishop.

A delegation of laymen and clergy went to Milwaukee to call on him. They were ushered into his room and found him hanging by the neck to his bedpost. Had he delayed his suicide a short time, high honors would have come to him.

His brother, Edward Noyes Westcott, took up banking. In a quarter of a century he built up an excellent firm and business, and then a series of adversities wiped out the business and broke his health. Before this he had been a victim of a curious accident. He was captain of a Syracuse militia company and the members were staging a drill at the old Weiting Opera house. Westcott had just put his men through an intricate formation and was backing toward the audience, facing his men. He miscalculated the distance and toppled over backward into the orchestra, landing on the back of his head, nearly breaking his neck.

It was while recuperating at a camp in the Adirondacks from the breakdown occasioned by the failure of his business, that Westcott

began to write "David Harum." It is said that much of his inspiration for the book was derived from the horse-trading friend of his father; the friend who had differed with his father about the existence of giants. Death in 1898 stilled his hand before he had finished the book. It was completed by Forbes Heermans, under a prearranged plan. Six months after the death of the author the book was published, and leaped into an immediate sale of 10,000 copies per day, exceeding the sale of "Uncle Tom's Cabin," which had been the World record-holder up to then.

The ill-luck of the Westcotts followed even Heermans. He was to have received a share of the profits for having finished and edited the book, but Westcott had neglected to file any statement of this agreement, and Heermans never received a cent out of the half million the book earned.

The money went to the author's son, Philip, and his daughter, Violet, Mrs. Victor Morawetz. The blight of the Westcotts had taken away a third child, Harold, who had fallen out of a cherry tree in his youth and was killed.

Mrs. Morawetz was the wife of a millionaire New York corporation lawyer. She seemed to have evaded the curse. But in the winter of 1918, her health became impaired and it was all arranged that she should go to her estate in California. She was to pass through Syracuse on her way and had telegraphed friends there to meet her.

A group of these were at the station with flowers and gifts. They looked for Mrs. Morawetz, but could not see her. Then a coffin was brought out. In it was the body of Violet Westcott Morawetz, the woman who had bade them "Come to meet me!" She had died suddenly, and her family, not knowing of her plans, had failed to notify her friends. The funeral car was attached to the very train on which she had planned to pass through. Thus fate delivered another blow to the Westcotts.

There was left now only Philip. He inherited Mrs. Morawetz's private estate, which was quite large. With what his father had left him, he was a wealthy man. His clergyman uncle had written two books. One was

"Hepsey Burke," advertised as "David Harum's Sister." The other was an Episcopal text-book. The books earned considerable royalties. Philip inherited these, too, and became a millionaire. Fortune smiled on him. It seemed as if destiny had decided to recompense him for the tragedies visited upon the other members of his family.

He left the East and went to San Francisco, where he lived at ease. For many years he dwelt at the University Club, apparently happy in his association with the life of art and letters in San Francisco. His father had written in his famous a book this line: "Death is a calamity only for the living."

Perhaps the words had been penned to fortify his own mind against the fate that seemed to have singled out the clan. Maybe his son Philip, reading the line, decided to run no risks of an unforeseen blow.

But in 1926, employees of the University Club went to his rooms and found there the body of the last of the Amos Westcott family, dead, a suicide. The reputed million-dollar estate had dwindled to \$50,000. And this \$50,000 he had willed to Mrs. Helen Rutherford of San Francisco.

But Westcott had neglected to date his will. The courts of California declared it invalidated because of the missing date and refused to probate it. The \$50,000 is now on deposit in a West coast bank with no one to claim it.

Perhaps, even if there were close-enough relatives, nobody would come forth to claim the money. The curse of this branch of the Westcotts has proven itself too powerful to be trifled with for any sum.

Thus is the story of the "Tragedies and Hoax of Some Westcotts."