

# Photo of the Month

## John Bell and Mollie Van Winkle Steele



Mollie and Captain Jack Steele in his uniform, about 1860. Courtesy of Marilyn Hicks. (Neg. #N003245)

His name was John Bell Steele but everyone called him Jack. After the Civil War he became known as Captain Jack because during the war he rode with Colonel Brook's regiment of cavalry, participating in the Battle of Wilson's Creek, Vicksburg, and other dangerous encounters.

Captain Jack was not only an officer but a gentleman as well. He sent many letters of poetry to his sweetheart. Her name was Mary Van Winkle, known to all as Mollie. Her father was Peter Van Winkle, a New Yorker who settled on the White River in 1850 and operated a large lumber mill.

Jack Steele grew up in Bedford County, Tennessee, and had worked as a wood turner before Van Winkle hired him to operate a lathe at his mill. We don't know if Jack knew Mollie before he was hired by her father, but working there certainly presented many opportunities for them to visit. The Civil War interrupted the young couple's courtship as Mollie's family and their slaves took refuge in Texas. Jack Steele enlisted in the Confederate Army. During the four years he served, he was wounded twice and spent time in a prisoner-of-war camp. Jack wrote to Mollie often and was able to visit her at least once when his regiment was camped close to the Red River on the Arkansas-Texas border.

When the war ended, Mollie and her family returned to their home on the White River in the War Eagle area. Her father still owned 17,000 acres of standing virgin timber, but the lumber mill and house had been destroyed and the Van Winkles, like most other area citizens, had to start over. Captain Jack and Mollie married after the war and made their home near present-day Springdale. Jack started a mercantile business and the building that once housed his store can be seen today on the grounds of the Shiloh Museum of Ozark History.

Around 1874 the Steeles moved their store to War Eagle. Soon afterwards Van Winkle completed a three-story hotel in Fayetteville, and Jack and Mollie moved in, with Jack serving as proprietor. At that time the hottest topic in town was the coming of the railroad. While Van Winkle concentrated on profiting from this new development in the established city of Fayetteville, Jack and Mollie decided to move north to help build a brand new town along the Frisco line. That town was Rogers.

The Steeles picked a pretty spot near a sparkling spring, adjacent to the new railroad route. There they built a house patterned after the old Van Winkle family home in War Eagle. Today Captain Jack and Mollie Steele's house still stands on one of the oldest streets in Rogers. Although surrounded with

modern-day commercial structures, the Steele family home itself still remains steeped in history. The house is the manifestation of an important chapter in the story of a family which played a major role in the development of 19th-century Northwest Arkansas.