

By Thomas S. Mead

# With Force of Arms

*The Carolina-Clemson pigskin rivalry in 1902 brought out swords, clubs, brass knuckles and pistols. (A football also was involved.)*

*"Whether in victory or in defeat we stand fast to the principles of manhood and honor. Long may the Garnet and Black wave over fields of victory manfully won."*

—The Garnet and Black (1902)

*"May the Purple and Orange ever go forward . . . and wave over the Southern gridiron, the undisputed champion."*

—The Oconeean (1904)

The Carolina/Clemson football rivalry has a long and storied past. The first game was a South Carolina victory (12-6), played in 1896. Clemson, however, holds a commanding lead in the overall series. The 1902 contest stands out among the others in this colorful competition. Carolina upset Clemson. It was not the game that was so significant, but the events that occurred afterward. It is written that reference to 1902 still stirs partisan tempers.

October 29 was a clear, crisp autumn day as visitors traveled from near and far to attend the State Fair in Columbia. The rails of the Southern, Coast Line and Columbia, Newberry and Laurens, and Seaboard railroad companies were active as patrons from all points of the compass poured in to the capital city. There was good order, with little drunkenness or rowdyism. According to *The State* newspaper, police kept a low profile because they had "confidence in the good judgment and sobriety of the people of South Carolina." *The State* estimated 18,000 visitors attended what it called "the greatest carnival of pleasure" in Columbia's history.

At midnight, "the fine band of the Clemson college cadet corps . . . gave notice of the arrival of the reg-

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*Antagonists, arbitrators . . . or both? South Carolina assistant coach Christie Benet (above) and Clemson corps commandant Lt. E.A. Sirmyer.*

iment in gray from the great college in the foothills of old Pendleton district," *The State* reported. Leading the regiment was the young Army Lt. E.A. Sirmyer, who recently had been appointed commandant of the corps. *The State* described Sirmyer as an officer of splendid appearance who was sure to make friends throughout the great state of South Carolina.

Coach John Heisman led his undefeated Clemson team onto the Fair Grounds the morning of the 30th. The Tigers were fast and had "the necessary amount of 'stickibility,'" *The State* observed. The Carolina boys, led by C.R. Williams and assistant coach Christie Benet, were in good condition and ready to put up a stubborn fight. "All kinds of bets were made on the score, but none on Carolina's winning," the newspaper added. It predicted

the crowd would be the largest ever to observe a football game in South Carolina, with estimates ranging from 3,000 to 5,000 fiery fans whooping it up at the Fair Grounds.

As the contest began, Carolina college boys sitting on the sideline sang, "We'll twist the tiger's tail."

And twisted it was. "Its tail was twisted and twisted good by the sturdy 'pigskin pushers' of Carolina," reported *The State*. Using the famed Yale "tackle back" formation, Carolina won, 12-6. Coach Heisman, magnanimous in defeat, praised the efforts of Carolina: "Carolina simply outplayed us. She has a right to feel proud of her magnificent team." Clemson was recognized for its grace in losing and the sportsmanship of both her players and students. "It was a fine exhibition of sportsmanlike ball played in scientific style," *The State* proclaimed.

Coach Williams was hoisted to the shoulders of his players and carried off the field. A band led the raucous victors downtown. R. Beverly Herbert, a



game official, described a player who stopped every 100 yards and turned a complete flip in the air. "After a hard football game," he declared, "that was an outstanding example of how a man can get worked up."

Then the aftermath of the game began to turn ugly.

Each team had a window display at Soloman's tobacco store in downtown Columbia. The Clemson football players had created a lithograph of a tiger with a plug of tobacco in its mouth. On the plug was painted "S.C.C." (South Carolina College). After the game, the Carolina team entered the store and "kidnapped" the lithograph.

Later that afternoon, Carolina students marched down Main Street with a "transparency," a banner drawn by Prof. F. Horton Colcock that pictured a gallant gamecock gloating over a timid tiger. Clemson students took offense and tried to seize the offending object. A "scrimmage" resulted in which brass knuckles, knives and swords were employed. Blood was spilled and the transparency was damaged. The Carolina students, however, managed to retain possession of it. The cadets warned of more trouble if the transparency was brought to the Elks' Parade the following night.

The Carolina students arrived at the parade with the transparency. Lt. Sirmyer immediately called upon the authorities to remove the offending object. He stated that if it was not removed, he could not be held responsible for the conduct of his men.

Parade officials could discern no good reason to remove the transparency from the festivities. After all, following Clemson victories in previous years, the cadets had paraded through the streets of Columbia wearing garnet-and-black cloth wrapped around their shoes. The chief of police asked Christie Benet, who was in charge of the Carolina students, if he would give up the transparency. Benet replied that under the circumstances, he would not. One of the cadets turned to Sirmyer and said, "We will get it." Sirmyer allegedly replied, "I know you will."

After the parade, the lieutenant rode his horse down Main Street and retired for the evening. The cadets, however, gathered their bayonets and swords, formed ranks and marched in full battle array (some 300-400 strong) to the Sumter Street entrance of the Carolina campus. They stopped at the brick wall and

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Several dozen Carolina students responded by taking positions behind the wall. Armed with pistols and clubs, they were determined to resist the attack. A Carolina senior reportedly approached J. Rion McKissick, an underclassman.

"Mr. McKissick, are you armed?"

"I have a pistol, sir."

"How many rounds of ammunition?"

"Eight, sir."

"Mr. McKissick, make every shot count."

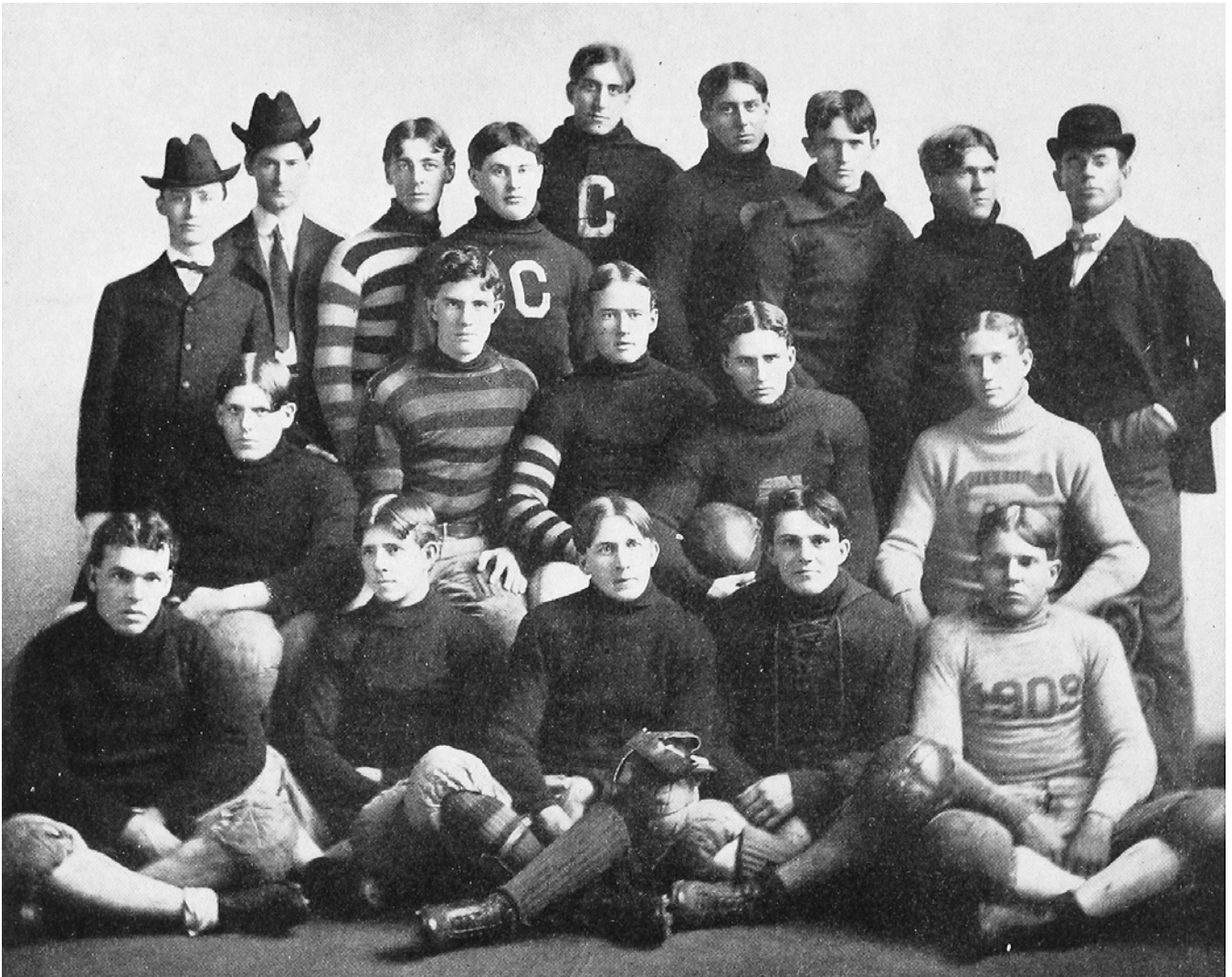
(McKissick later became president of the University of South Carolina and is buried on the historic Horseshoe near the spot where this incident took place.)

"Not wishing to see a bloody battle between young men of the same State and blood," according to the South Carolina faculty minutes of November 4, Christie Benet scrambled to the top of the wall and attempted to reason with the cadets. Benet, who later became a successful attorney in Columbia, "never spoke more earnestly in a courtroom than under the Columbia stars that night," recalled Harper S. Gault in his book *Big Thursday in South Carolina*.

However, his efforts proved ineffective. Stalling for time, he then challenged to a fistfight any individual the cadets might select from among their ranks. Benet, widely known for his pugilistic skills, had no takers. Finally, "actuated by high minded and humane motives," according to the faculty minutes, he suggested that committees be formed to deal with the impasse. To his surprise and to the apparent relief of everyone involved, this was agreed to.

Since the transparency held emblems of both teams, a joint committee representing each school decided to burn the offending article. The student bodies from both schools accepted the decision (albeit with more reluctance on the part of the Carolina students). After igniting the transparency, each side gave the opponent three cheers.

Not content to let sleeping dogs lie, N.G. Gonzales, editor of *The State*, seemed convinced the incident was far more serious than originally reported. And if it wasn't, he was inclined to make it so. Gonzales wrote that the Carolina students were well within their rights to celebrate the victory by whatever means available, as long as it "was not unfair or in-



*The Clemson Tigers (above) and South Carolina Gamecocks (right), circa 1902. Their heated rivalry, beginning in 1896, has fueled off-the-field animosity for generations. Events following the 1902 episode resulted in a six-year suspension of the series.*



sulting to their defeated adversaries.” The cadets, he said, should have accepted the loss with good humor because “that would have been the manly course.”

Gonzales claimed this was not the first time the Clemson student body was negligent in its lack of discipline and respect for the citizens of the state. It was just the latest in a long line of incidents, he suggested, and something needed to be done about it.

The editor then turned his attack on Sirmyer. He scolded the lieutenant for negligence and complicity in the unpleasant affair. He accused him of abetting

“the foray of his corps against the student body of another State institution.” Gonzales wrote that Sirmyer knew of the impending raid and intentionally made himself unavailable as the attack was carried out. He demanded that Sirmyer be dismissed as commandant of Clemson College.

Gonzales concluded the editorial by arguing that colleges of the state are not enemies of one another, and that rivalry in sports should not provoke antagonistic feelings of one institution against another. “Harmony between those who are alike the beneficia-

ries of the State should be demanded. And, above all, the discipline of institutions which have discipline as their cornerstone should be insisted upon.”

Clemson College president P.H. Mell (pictured here) was reluctant to get involved in the controversy. He felt it unwise to enter into a disagreement with a newspaper, especially one of the *The State's* stature. However, since “such serious charges have been made against the students and commandant of Clemson college . . . I am unwilling to remain silent while my boys are under fire.”

In a letter to *The State*, Mell wrote that the trouble actually began with the raid on the tobacco store. Then the Carolina transparency caused the altercation on Thursday afternoon. Furthermore, events on Friday night added insult to injury. Wrote Mell:

The Clemson cadets were drawn up ready to salute the governor and pay homage to the beautiful queen, when there appeared before them this unseemly and out of place transparency. It was too much for them to endure so they appealed to their commandant to get officials of the parade to come to their relief and prevail on the Carolina college boys to listen to reason.

Since no action was taken, Mell claimed that Sirmyer directed his command “to shoulder the dishonor and behave like soldiers.” During the confrontation on Sumter Street, Mell said it was the cadets who proposed the reconciliation, not Benet. And once it was arbitrated, it was the Clemson students who initiated the cheering.

In conclusion, Mell stated of Sirmyer:

He is a high-toned, honorable gentleman and performs his duty with exceptional skill and efficiency . . . I can say that he is one of the best commandants I

have ever seen, and any attempt to remove him would be injurious to the best interests of this college.

After lengthy consideration, Carolina’s faculty committee on athletics decided to discontinue the contest. For the next six years, no games were played between the two schools. Clemson Prof. Walter M. Riggs wrote Carolina Prof. F. Horton Colcock stating he thought a big fuss had been made over nothing. He acknowledged there had been the *threat* of serious trouble, but since none occurred, there was no reason for anyone to be upset. Riggs blamed the outcome on Gonzales. “I think it a pity the matter could not have been kept out of Gonzales’ clutches.”

In 1908, the Carolina and Clemson football teams once again were present at the State Fair Grounds. However, they were not there to play each other. Davidson College had challenged the two schools to contests to be played on consecutive days. Davidson won both games. Afterward, the Carolina student body invited the Clemson men to gather at the campus chapel, which was decorated in the colors of both colleges. The strained relationship between the institutions was repaired as both sides made benevolent speeches. “The students cemented the peace pact by joining in a parade to serenade the girls at the College

for Women,” Daniel Walker Hollis wrote in his 1956 book *University of South Carolina: College to University, Vol. II*.

Negotiations ensued. In 1909, the football series between the two great colleges resumed. ❖

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