

THE KNIGHTS OF THE GOLDEN CIRCLE

THE CAREER OF GEORGE BICKLEY

I

THROUGHOUT the decade from 1850 to 1860 American expansionist desires asserted themselves repeatedly, in the filibustering expeditions of Lopez and William Walker, in the formulation of the Ostend Manifesto, and in the messages of Presidents Pierce and Buchanan. Adventurers were faring forth from the United States in the spirit of Manifest Destiny. Patriotism, excitement, and land hunger were stock motives impelling filibusters, to which was added desire for sectional advantage. Such expeditions often originated in, or started from, the South, but sentiment favorable to territorial expansion was by no means confined to that section despite the complication of the slavery issue.¹ The present study will concern itself, however, with a purely Southern aspect of the desire for territorial aggrandizement.

Doubtless there were many Americans who, filled with self-confidence and imbued with the necessity of spreading beneficent American institutions to less fortunate lands, viewed with increasing satisfaction chaotic political conditions obtaining in Mexico as the decade closed. They saw in the region south of the Rio Grande a vast new field in which "expansion and progress" might become a reality.² Of this type of American was George W. L. Bickley, who sought to translate ideas into action by the founding, in 1859-60, of the secret and military organization known as the Knights of the Golden Circle, the instrument by which Mexico was to be Americanized and ultimately annexed, the slavery controversy settled in favor of the South, and his own fame and fortune won.

A cursory examination of the career of this remarkable individual illuminates much of the social scene of the two decades preceding the Civil War, an individualistic age characterized by real social and intel-

¹ Carl Russell Fish, *The Rise of the Common Man, 1830-1850* (New York, 1927), pp. 315-16.

² Ebullient Americanism in the form of the "Young America" movement was a feature of the early fifties. Exaltation of our republican and democratic ideas, intervention in Europe, and territorial expansion were the leading ideas. Merle E. Curti, "Young America", *Am. Hist. Rev.*, XXXII (Oct., 1926), 34-55.

lectual progress but unfortunately also by much charlatanism.³ George Bickley had behind him a career typical of the filibuster and adventurer of the fifties.⁴ Born in southwest Virginia in 1819, he ran away from home at an early age. After a youth and early manhood replete with adventure, the details of which seem impossible to unravel, he emerged around the year 1850 as a practicing physician in Jeffersonville, now Tazewell, Virginia. Interesting himself in historical research, he became one of the founders of the local historical society and in 1852 published his *History of the Settlement and Indian Wars of Tazewell County, Virginia*,⁵ a pioneer work in the field. Turning to fiction, the versatile doctor brought out shortly afterward a brief novel, *Adalaska*, a wild tale permeated with "Young America" ideas.⁶ Drifting to Cincinnati sometime in the year 1851, he accepted a professorship in the Eclectic Medical Institute of that city, where he remained intermittently till 1858. Although conscientious in the discharge of his professorial duties⁷ and placing his oratorical talents at the disposal of the institute on formal occasions, he found time to establish a literary magazine, the *West American Review*, of which he became editor. This periodical, however, proved to be but another of the short-lived literary projects of the period, expiring in the same year that saw its birth.⁸ Simultaneously

³ John Bach McMaster, *A History of the People of the United States* (8 vols., New York, 1883-1913), VII, VIII; Fish: Arthur Charles Cole, *The Irrepressible Conflict, 1850-1865* (New York, 1934).

⁴ His full name was George William Lamb Bickley. In the period 1859-61 he dropped the two middle names but used them before and after that time.

⁵ Cincinnati, 1852. Bickley's *History* has been reprinted several times. See William C. Pendleton, *History of Tazewell County and Southwest Virginia, 1748-1920* (Richmond, 1920).

⁶ Bickley, *Adalaska; or, The Strange and Mysterious Family of the Cave of Geneva* (Cincinnati, 1853).

⁷ He was listed by the *Daily Cincinnati Gazette*, Sept. 8, 1852, as "Professor of Materia Medica, Therapeutics, and Medical Botany". Although claiming to be a graduate in medicine of the University of London, class of 1842, and to have studied with the famous Dr. Elliotson, who is said to have signed his diploma, the evidence casts serious doubt on these claims. The *Eclectic Medical Journal*, XII (Mar., 1853), 140-41, asserted Bickley's claims. The authorities at the University of London fail, however, to find his name among the records of that university. George F. Goodchild to the author, Jan. 29, 1934. Dr. Elliotson resigned from the University of London in 1838. *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by Leslie Stephen (New York and London, 1889), XVII, 264-66. Perhaps Bickley had no medical degree. For ease of access to the medical profession in the West in a slightly earlier period see R. Carlyle Buley, "Pioneer Health and Medical Practices in the Old Northwest prior to 1840", *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XX (Mar., 1934), 497-520.

⁸ *The West American Review: A Critical Cyclopaedia of Literature, Science, and Art*, I (Apr.-Dec., 1853). Of particular interest to this study is the article "Jamaica", presumably written by Bickley. The writer thought England might soon lose this possession and said

he addressed his facile pen to the writing of several medical books⁹ and assisted in editing the *Eclectic Medical Journal*, to which he was a prolific contributor.¹⁰ This dynamic man, as if to pile Ossa on Pelion, furnished the press with voluminous copy, lectured to the Ohio Law School on medical jurisprudence, and addressed the public on various topics of general interest.

At the same time he was manifesting a keen interest in fraternal organizations, having established in 1853 the "Wayne Circle of the Brotherhood of the Union", an association "to foster a Constitutional Union, perpetuate American history, and dignify labor".¹¹ Moreover, he is said to have been a member of the Know-Nothing order, which fact, however, did not deter him from supporting Buchanan for President in 1856.¹² During that year he was listed as one of the editors of the *Ohio Pennant* of Portsmouth, in which town he was engaged in the improvement of property.¹³ Finding none of these ventures financially satisfactory, he quit medicine altogether in 1858, this time to devote his energies to the American Patent Company of Cincinnati, an organization for the promoting of inventions and the handling of patent cases. The quondam doctor was now a director of this company and

significantly: "These remarks are not made with the intention of goading on to action that immense body of men who now stand ready, at a given signal, to pour their thousands and tens of thousands on Cuba, like a field of Eastern locusts; for we regard any such movements as unwise and premature." He predicted that the future would give us Mexico, Central America, and the islands of the Caribbean (*ibid.*, pp. 14-24), an interesting adumbration of the Knights of the Golden Circle seven years later.

⁹ Bickley, *Principles of Scientific Botany* (Cincinnati, 1853); the same work was published under the title, *Physiological and Scientific Botany* (Cincinnati, 1853). He published *Positive Medical Agents* a year or so later, probably in New York. A list of "Standard Eclectic Works by Prof. G. W. L. Bickley" also included three works said to have been in press: *American Eclecticism*, *Syllabus of Physiology*, and *Syllabus of Medical Jurisprudence*. See *Eclectic Med. Jour.*, XVII (1858), opp. p. 241.

¹⁰ For Bickley's "History of the Eclectic Medical Institute of Cincinnati, and its Ethical Peculiarities" see *Eclectic Med. Jour.*, XVI (Jan., 1857), 9-15; *ibid.* (Feb., 1857), 57-64; *ibid.* (Mar., 1857), 105-12; *ibid.* (Apr., 1857), 153-56. See also Bickley, "Introductory Lecture, delivered before the Eclectic Medical Class, Nov. 6, 1852", *ibid.*, XII (Mar., 1853), 102-11.

¹¹ Columbus (Ohio) *Crisis*, Dec. 30, 1863. This patriotic society was founded by George Lippard of Philadelphia, who was the order's "Supreme Washington". *Dictionary of American Biography*, XI, ed. by Dumas Malone (New York, 1933), 285-86.

¹² *Atlanta Southern Confederacy* in the *Norfolk Southern Argus*, May 16, 1860.

¹³ File of the *Ohio Pennant* in the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio. Bickley was listed as one of the editors from February 15 to May 16, 1856. Later he sought backing to establish a great conservative daily newspaper with which to combat the influence of the New York *Tribune*. Bickley to John J. Crittenden, July 25, 1856, MS., Crittenden Papers, Library of Congress.

editor of its organ, a pretentious weekly journal known as the *Scientific Artisan*.¹⁴ This work occupied Bickley till the spring of 1859, after which he directed his entire attention to that most famous of all his manifold schemes, the Knights of the Golden Circle. In regard to his personal appearance, it may be of interest to allow a contemporary to describe him as he appeared late in 1860. "Gen. Bickley is", said the *Houston Telegraph*, "a tall, fine looking, middle aged gentleman, having an uncommonly fine expression of countenance, and a high intellectual forehead."¹⁵ Such, then, is a partial description of the background of the man who, styling himself "General"¹⁶ and signing his manifestoes "President General of the American Legion, K. G. C.", prepared to hasten the southward march of Manifest Destiny.¹⁷

¹⁴ For the purposes of the American Patent Company see Charles Cist, *Sketches and Statistics of Cincinnati in 1859* (Cincinnati, 1859), pp. 358-59; *Scientific Artisan*, Aug. 19, 1858. Bickley's name was last listed in *ibid.*, Apr. 23, 1859, as editor and director. See the curious article apparently written by Bickley, "The United States of America", in which the extinction of African slavery was predicted. "That the institution is one altogether unenviable, every reasonable man in America will at once admit." Bickley. *The Inventors' Almanac for 1859* (Cincinnati, 1859), pp. 3-7. The flaming proslavery speeches of the head of the Knights of the Golden Circle in the next year contrast sharply with these sentiments.

¹⁵ Harrison (Texas) *Flag*, Nov. 17, 1860.

¹⁶ The assertion was made that Bickley attended West Point but was forced to leave because of ill health; it was claimed that he had served in the Mexican War and later "witnessed" some of the severest fighting in the Crimean War. Atlanta *Southern Confederacy* in the Norfolk *Southern Argus*, May 16, 1860. Perhaps it was necessary to attempt to build up Bickley as a military man inasmuch as he was then at the head of a military organization, but the evidence discredits his claims to military experience. The authorities at West Point can find no record of his ever having been a cadet there. Lieutenant H. McC. Forde to the author, June 15, 1933. As to his service in the Mexican War, it has been impossible to find his name on the rolls of any organization serving the United States in that war. Major General James F. McKinley to the author, Mar. 31, 1934. It is entirely improbable that Bickley aided the Russians in the field in the Crimean War. The title "General" was self-assumed, but most newspapers accepted it without question.

¹⁷ For a friendly biographical account of his career to 1860 see the article, "Who is Gen. Bickley and what are his Objects?", reprinted from the Atlanta *Southern Confederacy* in the Norfolk *Southern Argus*, May 16, 1860; for a satirical review of Bickley's life by a Northern contemporary see the Cincinnati *Daily Commercial*, Apr. 6, 1860. A brief biography in Harvey Wickes Felter, *History of the Eclectic Medical Institute, 1845-1902* (Cincinnati, 1902), pp. 110-13, covers his entire life and includes, pp. 112-13, a reprint from the Abingdon *Virginian*, Oct. 4, 1867, which was written shortly after Bickley's death. Even briefer is Otto Juettner, *Daniel Drake and his Followers* (Cincinnati, 1909), pp. 362-63. A comparison of these accounts reveals many discrepancies of statement in the reconstruction of the activities of this adventurer. For an autobiographical sketch see a letter of Bickley dated Columbus, Ohio, Dec. 7, 1863, written while he was in prison and consequently not entirely trustworthy. The investigator can only conclude that assertions made by Bickley must be corroborated by other sources before they can be accepted as facts. An important collection of papers relating to Bickley is in the office of the Judge Advocate

II

Diplomatic relations between the United States and Mexico in the decade prior to 1860 were characterized by friction and mutual distrust. Boundary disputes, the activities of William Walker, the desire of the Buchanan administration to purchase Chihuahua, and Sam Houston's proposal in 1858 to establish a protectorate over Mexico¹⁸ produced uneasiness in the latter country. Anti-American leaders there leaned toward European assistance against the aggressive "Colossus of the North". The avid and persistent land hunger exhibited by the Buchanan government proved this feeling to have been well founded.¹⁹

Fierce internecine warfare had raged in Mexico since 1858 between the Conservative and the Liberal (Juarez) factions, reducing the country to anarchy and renewing hope north of the Rio Grande of territorial gain at the expense of a helpless neighbor. In his message to Congress of 1859 Buchanan vigorously supported the Juarez party and protested against "outrages" visited upon American citizens in Mexico City. He recommended the creation of a military force by the United States government to act in concert with Juarez and penetrate into the interior of Mexico, a suggestion which must have given encouragement to those entertaining filibustering schemes. The culmination of Buchanan's Mexican policy was the signing, late in 1859, of the McLane-Ocampo Treaty and Convention, the terms of which were so generous to the United States as virtually to establish a protectorate over Mexico.²⁰ The McLane treaty, obscured by the slavery question and presidential politics, was defeated in the Senate by the Republican members.²¹ In spite of the final disposition of this treaty there seemed to exist at the opening of the year 1860 a combination of circumstances that apparently made auspicious the launching of a grand filibustering enterprise which would ultimately bring that coveted land under the aegis of the United States.

To these favorable factors may be added a wide degree of enthu-

General, Washington, D. C. There was an interesting parallel in the careers of Bickley and William Walker, the most famous filibuster of the age. Both were physicians and journalists: both were involved in shipping schemes. *Dictionary of American Biography*, XIX, ed. by Dumas Malone (New York, 1936), 363-65.

¹⁸ This proposal was defeated in the United States Senate in 1858, but Houston continued to advocate it. Walter P. Webb, *The Texas Rangers* (New York, 1935), p. 205.

¹⁹ Dexter Perkins, *The Monroe Doctrine, 1826-1867* (Baltimore, 1933), pp. 318-37.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 337-42. J. Fred Rippy, *The United States and Mexico* (New York, 1926), pp. 212-29.

²¹ W. Stull Holt, *Treaties defeated by the Senate* (Baltimore, 1933), pp. 92-96.

siasm for the Americanization and annexation of Mexico, which was manifested by responsible Southern spokesmen in 1860. Insofar as the press gave voice to the sentiment of that section, it can be asserted that there was general interest and keen desire to consummate such a plan. The fiery Memphis *Daily Avalanche* believed that the "true genius" of American policy consisted of "occupation and annexation" and, peering into the future, saw not only Mexico but Cuba and all Central America as possessions of the United States within fifty years.²²

That "crookedest of all boundary lines, the Rio Grande" was offensive to an Arkansas observer, who insisted that the Sierre Madre range must become the boundary; otherwise the people of the United States would take all of Mexico.²³ A Southern urban journal stated the axiom, "Territorial extension is the prevailing idea of the present age", and felt confident that the process of Manifest Destiny would give all Spanish America to the United States. It would be lamentable indeed, according to this same source, if sectional disruption should displace expansion.²⁴ Although the Augusta *Chronicle and Sentinel* feared that the obstacles were overwhelming, it decided upon later consideration that it would be well if "Old Sam" Houston would invade and conquer Mexico at once, drive the Indians into the sea, and enslave the Negroes and half-breeds, anterior to assumption of control by the Anglo-Saxons. They were to civilize the country and prepare it for annexation to the United States. No European government was to be permitted there.²⁵ The South was reassured on the question of slavery and the territories, then uppermost in the sectional mind, by the reminder that Cuba and Mexico were fields "where sunbeams and slavery are kindred things".²⁶ The Norfolk *Day Book* took familiar imperialistic ground by urging the introduction into benighted Mexico of peace, civilization, prosperity, religious freedom, and "for all we know, the Star Spangled Banner".²⁷ The appellation, "our sick man", was applied to Mexico, and the belief was expressed that the time was approaching when the United States would have to take care of him.²⁸ A less lofty but more realistic note was sounded by the Montgomery *Daily Post*: "The commercial world is demanding that a country so essential to its interests shall no longer

²² Jan. 28, Feb. 2, 1860.

²³ Little Rock *Arkansas True Democrat*, Apr. 7, 1860.

²⁴ New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, June 20, Sept. 30, 1860.

²⁵ Feb. 24, Mar. 10, 1860.

²⁶ Augusta *Daily Constitutionalist*, Mar. 13, 1860.

²⁷ Mar. 9, 1860.

²⁸ Nashville *Patriot*, Mar. 21, 1860. Mexico was frequently asserted to be worse off than Turkey, that "sick man" of Europe.

be permitted to remain an interruption to its advancement, and a scene of disgraceful strife.”²⁹ Thus it may be concluded that Southern press opinion was in substantial accord with the idea that inasmuch as “that terrestrial paradise on earth” [Mexico] was geographically adjacent to the South, Southerners would people it and carry their institutions with them and that assuredly the time for action had arrived.³⁰ And in this connection it is significant that shrewd Governor Sam Houston of Texas had come to the same conclusion and was himself prepared to lead an attack on Mexico.³¹

To meet such an inviting situation the mystic order of the Knights of the Golden Circle was held in readiness by the indefatigable leader, General George Bickley, who set forth the order’s objectives, first in

²⁹ Apr. 4, 1860. This was an assertion of a commercial doctrine of international eminent domain.

³⁰ It would be possible to multiply almost indefinitely supporting press quotations to indicate Southern zeal in the matter. The *Memphis Morning Enquirer*, Apr. 24, 1860, favored annexation on the score of terrible internal conditions. *Brownlow’s Knoxville Whig*, Sept. 15, 1860, approved the Americanization idea. The *Nashville Daily Gazette*, Apr. 11, 1860, denounced the polyglot population of Mexico, adding significantly, “her resources seem inexhaustibly bountiful. What might she not become under a liberal protection given to her industry, her commerce, and her property?” The *Gainesville (Alabama) Independent*, Jan. 21, 1860, declared that there had been no good government in Mexico since the Aztecs and warned that “strong, energetic, and comparatively virtuous races always overshadow and measurably absorb weak and vicious ones”. The “greaser” must improve or perish like the Indian. The *Jacksonville (Alabama) Republican*, May 3, 1860, asserted that an Americanization program would have the warmest commendation of all Southerners. The *New Orleans Bee*, June 8, 1860, said: “We have for years entertained and expressed the opinion that the only chance for Mexico is the gradual depuration of its effete blood by the strong and vigorous current of the Anglo-Saxon race.” The *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, Jan. 11, 1860, was certain that at last we had convinced British diplomats of the futility of opposing the decree of fate that we should have the entire continent. The *New Orleans Daily Delta*, Mar. 16, 1860, expressed a similar view and urged anticipation of English intervention by a “bold and decisive policy”. The *New Orleans Courier*, May 13, 1860, welcomed excitement along the Rio Grande as a diversion from the hackneyed topics of the day. The *Atlanta Locomotive* in the *Columbus (Georgia) Daily Times*, Apr. 5, 1860, referred to the thousands of Southerners who were eager to take Mexico. The *Paulding (Mississippi) Eastern Clarion*, Feb. 29, 1860, suggested that the United States annex the northern provinces of Mexico as a solution of the border troubles. See also the *Vicksburg Sun* in the *Ripley (Mississippi) Advertiser*, Apr. 11, 1860. Evidently many Southern papers opposed to expansion were silent. Occasionally dissent was expressed. The *Richmond Whig*, Mar. 27, 1860, assailed intervention as unwise and as an effort of “a corrupt and imbecile administration” to gain prestige. The *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, May 1, 1860, was refreshing in the candid assertion that it was difficult to elevate the morals of our neighbors by stealing their country and also voiced the heresy that our political institutions might not be as attractive to others as to ourselves. The *Charleston Mercury* preferred to have Southern rights defined before seeking new territory. *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, Apr. 5, 1860.

³¹ Webb, pp. 203-205.

an authoritative pamphlet intended for members,³² and later in a series of stirring manifestoes and speeches addressed to the Southern people.³³ In an elaborate exposition the K. G. C. was declared to be a powerful military organization, around which would rally the forces that would disenthral the cotton states from the alleged oppression of the manufacturing and commercial interests of the North.³⁴ The agricultural South, furthermore, was held to be devoted to old forms, detesting the innovations and "isms" of which the North spawned such a large number. If the question were asked, how was the South to protect her civilization from contaminating ideas—unsympathetic critics would add all new ideas—and liberate herself from economic servitude, the answer was simple. The gallant Knights of the Golden Circle were prepared to colonize Mexico, peaceably and without the violation of any law; indeed, it was claimed that a class existed in Mexico which would welcome them, and Juarez was said to have sought and obtained a promise of their co-operation.³⁵ Although some critics had attacked Buchanan's Mexican policy as being too aggressive, Bickley found it regrettably timid. All he asked of the American government, however, was adherence to the Monroe Doctrine and a rigid execution of the neutrality laws.³⁶

Bickley's fertile imagination foresaw "energetic Anglo-Saxons" as members of the K. G. C., ensconced in Mexico, who would then proceed with the process of "Texasizing" that country, which in turn

³² *Rules, Regulations, and Principles of the K. G. C. issued by order of the Congress of the K. C. S., and the General President* (New York, 1859?). Several communications in this pamphlet were signed by Bickley. Bickley Papers, Office of the Judge Advocate General, Washington, D. C.

³³ See K. G. C. *Address*, first issued in a pamphlet, reprinted in the *Daily Louisville Democrat*, Sept. 2, 1860.

³⁴ Cf. Charles A. and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (2 vols., New York, 1927), II, 4-7. In another manifesto Bickley declared: "It is useless longer to attempt to disguise the truth, that there are now but two parties—a Northern and a Southern party; the one with manufacturing, the other with agricultural interests—and that their variance is so great that a reconciliation is almost an impossibility." *Richmond Daily Whig*, July 18, 1860.

³⁵ Bickley later asserted that prominent Mexican officials co-operated with his scheme—Ocampo, Miramon, and others. *Columbus (Ohio) Crisis*, Dec. 30, 1863. The editor of the Abingdon *Virginian* claimed that he had seen letters from Juarez and Miramon to Bickley "proffering co-operation, grants of land, and other great advantages". Felter, pp. 112-13. Yet Juarez's agent denied that he desired K. G. C. interference. *St. Louis Daily Morning Republican*, Apr. 14, 1860. Other denials were issued from Mexico. *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, June 2, 14, Aug. 20, 1860.

³⁶ Yet in an address to his soldiers Bickley said: "We are at all times determined not to be found in conflict with our country's laws, yet to avoid them requires politic action, and skillful management." *Rules, Regulations, and Principles of the K. G. C.*, pp. 19-24.

would lead to the final absorption by the United States of the entire region from the Rio Grande to Yucatan. In one of his proclamations the general paid his respects to the Spanish American, who had criminally neglected and mismanaged the bounteous resources with which Providence had endowed the luscious country. Instead the Spanish American had "mixed and intermarried with Negro and Indian, until pure blood is no longer found".³⁷

In earnest words the South was informed that the only hope of restoring the political and economic sectional balance lay in the adoption of this program, which would be followed by the ultimate addition of twenty-five slave states to the American Union—surely enough to satisfy the demands of the most ardent slave expansionist or devotee of Manifest Destiny. It was indeed an alluring prospect which Bickley held out before the eyes of Southerners, desperately concerned at the moment for the future of slavery in the territories and the maintenance of sectional equality.³⁸ If they would but support his project, fifty new slave state senators would one day appear in Washington and sixty or more new members of the House of Representatives. It was hinted darkly that this territory, if rejected by the United States, could as easily be annexed by a Southern Confederacy.³⁹

Probably with some degree of accuracy, General Bickley warned the South that the North coveted Mexico, Cuba, and Central America and would, if possible, make free states out of this territory; the Knights planned to forestall the Abolitionists by removing the future conflict between North and South to "the valleys and plains of Mexico". The

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4; *Daily Louisville Democrat*, Sept. 2, 1860.

³⁸ Bickley dilated upon inequality in another communication. "The North has a population of twenty millions, and an area of *two millions, one hundred and three thousand, six hundred and fifty eight square miles*, embracing the territories. The South has a population of twelve millions, and an area of only *eight hundred and fifty one thousand, four hundred and forty eight square miles*. For each of her population, the North has *seventy* acres of land—while the South for hers has only *forty five*." He protested that the South, which had borne the burden of the Mexican War, was excluded from land acquired as a result. Congressional remedy was hopeless because of the predominance of Free-Soil members. *Richmond Daily Whig*, July 18, 1860.

³⁹ *Daily Louisville Democrat*, Sept. 2, 1860. "Now, this truth must be apparent to every thinking man; with Mexico Americanized and *Southernized*, our area of territory would be nearly equal to that of the North, including the Southern Territories of Arizona [*sic*], New Mexico, and California. Our population would be equal to hers. Besides we should possess advantages of climate, soil, productions and geographical position of a very marked character." The North was depicted as busy sending out emissaries of abolition, while the South was said to be doing nothing to counteract this influence, always excepting the work being done by the Knights of the Golden Circle. *Richmond Daily Whig*, July 18, 1860.

successful operation of this policy would enable the South to give up the contest for all land north of the thirty-fourth parallel within the existing boundaries of the United States.

Aside from the much desired restoration of political equality, or better, the establishment of Southern predominance in the Union, the consummation of the K. G. C. scheme would bring untold material benefit not only to the South but to the hated Yankees as well. The much discussed Pacific railroad, traversing the southern route, would doubtless be translated into reality, and this, in turn, would enhance land values of the Rio Grande Valley and Arizona. A tremendous impetus would be given to shipbuilding, mining, and manufacturing in the South, which would furnish employment for all. Economic opportunities in Mexico would touch a responsive chord in the notorious Yankee avarice; Northern manufacturers and merchants, soon to be absorbed in profit making, were expected to support the movement. To the people of Texas was promised the elimination of border disturbances, which were agitating the politics of that state at the time. One boon which was offered, of such naïve character as must have touched the Southern sense of humor, was the assertion that the numerous proposed states presented "wonderful" openings for discontented—and perhaps discredited—politicians. Furthermore, the old trick of diverting attention from perplexing domestic problems by engaging in aggressive foreign policy was also advanced as an argument. It was asserted that the mere announcement that fifteen thousand Knights of the Golden Circle were en route to Vera Cruz would greatly obscure the bitter sectional antagonism. Indeed, in the mind of the writer there was every reason why the South should espouse such an advantageous program, "the only practical solution to the slave question ever offered to the American People".⁴⁰

If these inducements were not enough, the possibilities of the K. G. C. organization in the event of secession and civil war were not to be overlooked. The South had been suffering since the John Brown raid from a feeling of uneasiness, which became a terroristic psychosis in the summer of 1860, when it was commonly believed that

⁴⁰ Bickley could think of hundreds of reasons why Southerners should support the K. G. C. Among other reasons were that of advancement of religion untainted by Northern "isms" and the repeal of Northern "treasonable" laws. The Knights would kill Wall Street and New Orleans lobbies, which, he said, were constantly scheming to plunder the Mexicans. Evidently competition was not desired. *Daily Louisville Democrat*, Sept. 2, 1860. Bickley also appealed for aid in restoring peace and good government to Mexico. *Richmond Daily Whig*, July 18, 1860.

diabolical Abolitionist emissaries were at work fomenting servile insurrections.⁴¹ It was explained that the Knights of the Golden Circle might form a domestic police system extending throughout the slave states. Even more exciting was the hint that before the year 1860 had closed, Southern governors would have need of the order—an innuendo which assumed that trouble would follow the election of Lincoln. If this condition should develop, the District of Columbia, rather than Mexico, would become the goal of the K. G. C. But whatever the future held in store for America, the Knights of the Golden Circle were to be guided by that chauvinistic principle, “The South, right or wrong”.⁴²

The Southern press received the plans of the order with enthusiasm, and many newspapers became its exponents; some of these not only opened their news columns to accounts of the progress of the K. G. C. but editorially endorsed, interpreted, and clarified Bickley’s pronouncements.⁴³ These journalistic spokesmen for expansion emphasized the founder’s denial that the Knights were filibusters. It was carefully pointed out by the New Orleans *Courier* that Bickley’s men were preparing to operate in “the broad field of Civil War in Mexico”, their object being to place the Juarez government in power at Mexico City. This organ could compare the K. G. C. leaders with Lafayette, Kosciusko, and DeKalb and in a peroration exclaimed, “God speed the K. G. C.”⁴⁴ Another friend declared that the government of Mexico had invited the industrious and intelligent youth to come there to settle and that to facilitate such a plan the K. G. C. had been created. There could be little doubt, he believed, that this organization held the destiny of Mexico in the palm of the hand.⁴⁵ The Columbus (Georgia) *Weekly Sun* welcomed the advent of the new order and informed its readers that immediate annexation of Mexico was not the aim of the Knights, who would pave the way for expansion of Southern institutions and relieve the South from the “folds of the monster, Abolition”. It had already been demonstrated in Kansas that the South’s facilities in colonization could not compete with those of the North. The Knights

⁴¹ The Southern press was filled with lurid accounts, some of which were probably of political inspiration. For example, see the Houston *Weekly Telegraph*, July 31, Aug. 14, 1860.

⁴² *Daily Louisville Democrat*, Sept. 2, 1860.

⁴³ Usually those papers favoring expansion approved the K. G. C., at least in the early days of the organization. In the spring of 1860 it was accorded much publicity. The Memphis *Morning Enquirer*, Apr. 24, 1860, found the columns of its exchanges filled with material on the K. G. C. The Lexington *Kentucky Statesman*, Apr. 17, 1860, said that the order was attracting much attention.

⁴⁴ Mar. 6, 1860.

⁴⁵ Norfolk *Daybook*, Mar. 9, 1860.

feared that immediate annexation would result in the "Kansasizing" of Mexico; therefore they preferred to delay annexation till they had ended civil wars, re-established peace, and opened up a wide field for slavery. All this was to be achieved by the "superior" race which, it was declared, Mexico needed so badly. This Georgia journal also said that it was an important objective of the order to prevent that country from falling into the hands of Europeans and to enforce the Monroe Doctrine. All Southern men, irrespective of political party, should support them.⁴⁶ The Vicksburg *Sun* set forth the two objectives of the K. G. C. as (1) to cultivate a martial spirit in the South and (2) to give the South a military organization capable of defending her rights at home and abroad.⁴⁷

The K. G. C. was furnished with an elaborate military organization, ritual, and system of governance. Eligible for membership in this secret and military order were all Southerners of good character and "such worthy Northern men as live in the South and heartily concur with us in our determination to stand by the Constitutional rights of the South". Considerable ingenuity was demonstrated in the fabrication of the intricate K. G. C. organization. Provision was made for three distinct divisions, which in turn were grouped into classes, and finally the classes were subdivided into departments. The first division was entirely a military degree, "appealing strongly to the chivalry and martial pride of our people", consisting of two classes, the Foreign and the Home Guards. The Foreign Guard was composed of "such worthy and eligible men as wish to participate in the wild, glorious, and thrilling adventure of a campaign in Mexico, and who constitute the active army of the K. G. C." Those members of the first degree who, for one reason or another, were incapacitated for active military service and professional men unable to participate because of circumstances were classified as the Home Guard; this body had but two functions: to

⁴⁶ Apr. 9, 1860. Three out of four papers in Atlanta were said to have been supporters of the K. G. C. movement. *Montgomery Daily Mail*, Mar. 30, 1860. See the *New Orleans Courier*, Mar. 11, 17, 24, 1860. Widely quoted article, "No Filibusters", *Montgomery Daily Mail*, Mar. 12, 1860. Later this paper expressed doubt. *Ibid.*, May 21, 1860.

⁴⁷ *Ripley Advertiser*, Apr. 11, 1860. Yet some thought that there was too much martial spirit in the South already and that this needed a curb rather than a spur. *Memphis Morning Enquirer*, Apr. 24, 1860. Bickley declared in a speech at Montgomery that the "age of chivalry still exists with universal recognition among the children of 'the sunny South'". *Montgomery Daily Mail*, Mar. 14, 1860. The *Charleston Mercury* thought Bickley protested too much his Southern aims and that because of his modest allusions to the "almighty dollar" he might hail from the "land of wooden nutmegs". In the *Raleigh Semi-Weekly Standard*, Aug. 8, 1860.

defend the order from misrepresentations at home and to aid in the provisioning and transporting of the army. Further, Home Guard members were informed of the plans and movements of the order and enjoyed certain mysterious "advantages and privileges".⁴⁸

The second degree was the commercial and financial division and was likewise divided into two classes, the Foreign and the Home Corps, each of which had special duties to perform. Sutlers, commercial agents, paymasters, postmasters, clerks, physicians, ministers, teachers, editors, hunters, and negotiators were to make up the Foreign Corps; advice, supplies, recruits, and favorable propaganda were to be furnished by the Home Corps of this degree.⁴⁹

The third and highest degree, known as the American Legion, was the political or governing arm of the whole organization, which, like the two lower degrees, was divided into two groups known as the Foreign and the Home Councils. Membership in the Home Council was exceedingly secret, not being known even to members of the lowest degree, and although it was a body "of pure advisement, and takes no active steps", it did guard against violations of the law. Ten departments, representing the interests of agriculture, education, manufacture, finance, religion, police, war, navigation, law, and foreign relations, made up the Foreign Council. A high court of appeals, drawn from three classes of the council, formed the legislative body, which made laws governing the K. G. C., with special regard to numerous capitalist interests. Women were not eligible for admission to this degree but were allowed membership in the two subordinate degrees. Indeed the third degree was said to have been given to but few persons, and those chosen few were required on bended knee to take a solemn oath which invoked the guidance of the Divine Christian authorities.⁵⁰

The K. G. C. army and inducements which were held out to join it may best be described in the optimistic words of the founder and active head.

The army is composed of four divisions of four thousand men each. Each division has four regiments and each regiment ten companies. There is one Major General, four Brigadier Generals, sixteen Colonels, and sixteen Lieutenant Colonels. Thirty two Majors, and one hundred sixty Captains and their company officers, besides staff and department officers. The pay of the army and departments is one-eighth more than the salaries of the U. S. army. For those of the privates who settle in the country 640 acres of land; those who return to the United States, 320 acres of land or \$400 in money. Pen-

⁴⁸ *Daily Louisville Democrat*, Sept. 2, 1860.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

sions are provided for those who may be disabled. The rations and clothing are ample. The land for officers is proportioned according to rank.⁵¹

Volunteer auxiliaries, not regular members of the army, were also encouraged to accompany the Knights in their invasion of Mexico by similar promises of good pay and generous grants of land.⁵²

An elaborate ritual, solemn secrets, esoteric codes, signs and passwords known only to the initiated, were all provided, doubtless by the ingenuity of General Bickley, perhaps suggested by the Know-Nothing order, of which he was said to have been a member.⁵³ In view of the publicity received by the order and an attempted rapid expansion in membership, secrecy was difficult to maintain, and subsequent exposures are not surprising.⁵⁴ The ease with which individuals became K. G. C. organizers was made clear by an authoritative spokesman.

A gentleman desiring to be a K. G. C., and to organize a castle [a local lodge], will address a note to the President of the Legion K. G. C., (Gen. Geo. Bickley), at Knoxville, Tennessee, enclosing evidences of his standing and character, when the form of an obligation will be sent to him, which he will fill and acknowledge before a magistrate, or notary public, and return, and enclose with it the sum of five dollars, whereupon the following castle works and papers will be at once forwarded: 7 First Degree Books and 7 Keys. 7 Second Degree Books and 7 Keys. 2 Copies of Instructions. 1 Roll Book. 1 Set Receipts. 20 Copies K. G. C. Address. 1 Copy Rules and Regulations. And such other papers as are needed. Or application may be made to any Colonel of the order, and the money to be so forwarded to him. The works themselves will give all other information.⁵⁵

As in most American fraternal organizations, the financial aspect was by no means neglected, and those familiar with the earlier get-rich-quick schemes of the promoter may suspect that Bickley confidently expected to realize a handsome fortune from the K. G. C. Fees were of course required of the members, and according to an official report,

⁵¹ *Ibid.* A critic observed that "without shadow of authority, save that of his own will, Bickley created Colonels, Majors, and Captains in the most absolute and Napoleonic style". St. Louis *Daily Morning Republican*, Apr. 14, 1860. It will be noted that the land scheme was a feature of most filibustering projects of the time.

⁵² *Daily Louisville Democrat*, Sept. 2, 1860.

⁵³ *Degree Book*, pamphlet (pp. 8), Bickley Papers.

⁵⁴ *New York Tribune*, June 13, 1859, Mar. 31, 1860; *Staunton Spectator*, Jan. 31, 1860; the *Savannah Daily Morning News*, Jan. 30, 1860, quoted a New York correspondent of the *Charleston Mercury* regarding "professedly authentic exposures of certain newspapers". After the beginning of 1861 lurid and not entirely trustworthy exposés appeared. Anon., *An Authentic Exposition of the "K. G. C."* (Indianapolis, 1861); J. W. Pomfrey, *A True Disclosure and Exposition of the Knights of the Golden Circle* (Cincinnati, 1861), however, bears marked similarity to prospectuses issued by Bickley in 1860.

⁵⁵ *Daily Louisville Democrat*, Sept. 2, 1860.

after May 20, 1860, the fees were to be one dollar for the first degree, five dollars for the second, and ten dollars for the third. Weekly dues in all the degrees were to be fixed by the colonels of regiments in their own jurisdictions. Initiation without the payment of dues was expressly forbidden. Loans and gifts were earnestly solicited from those sympathetic with the purposes of the Knights, receivable in money or in other forms.⁵⁶ But an insight into the more grandiose financial plans of the order may be gained from an examination of "The American Colonization and Steamship Company of 1 [Vera Cruz]". This company was organized in 1858 as a financial nucleus to gather money for the K. G. C. and to develop a shipping line between Pensacola and Vera Cruz. The company was said to be capitalized at five million dollars, and it was claimed that 10 per cent interest was paid. Moreover, the company was said to control 600,000 acres of excellent land. On this land the company proposed to settle as many as would accept, occupy, and improve 640 acres of land.⁵⁷ Such then, in brief, were the main features of the theoretical organization of the K. G. C., not all of which, probably, ever actually functioned as laid down in the rule books by Bickley and his advisers.

It has been suggested that Bickley's lifelong and consuming ambition was to make himself emperor of the polygot population of Mexico and that the ultracomplex system of government was designed to contribute to that end. Certain it is that Bickley was on occasion privately critical of the workings of democracy in the United States. He informed members of the third degree on this point: "We aim at the establishment of a great Democratic monarchy—a Republican Empire, which shall vie in grandeur with the Old Roman Empire, and which shall regenerate and vivify society in Spanish America."⁵⁸

With the aspirations and structure of the K. G. C. in mind, it now becomes necessary to examine the actual progress of the order in the South and to determine just how many of the vaunted objectives approximated realization. General Bickley had evidently done preliminary organizing work before 1860, but it is difficult to determine exactly

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* Third-degree men were told: "Always remember that this is a selfish organization, which looks to the pecuniary interest of its friends alone." *Degree Book*, p. 7, Bickley Papers.

⁵⁷ *Rules, Regulations, and Principles of the K. G. C.*, p. 41. William Walker had been involved in shipping company schemes, by which he had incurred the enmity of Cornelius Vanderbilt. *Dictionary of American Biography*, XIX, 363-65.

⁵⁸ *Degree Book*, p. 6, Bickley Papers. See "Political Maxims", *Rules, Regulations, and Principles of the K. G. C.*, pp. 57-60; Felter, p. 112.

when the order began to function. A friendly source dated its founding July 4, 1854, in Lexington, Kentucky, by Bickley and a small group of followers sworn to loyalty.⁵⁹ If this were true, the organization probably existed largely in the mind of the founder during the mid-fifties, inasmuch as he was preoccupied in those years with other schemes.⁶⁰ In any event, active organizing work was begun by Bickley in 1859, followed by intensive efforts during the succeeding year. In connection with the promotion of his grand plan Bickley established in Baltimore a newspaper, the *American Cavalier*, a warlike Manifest Destiny journal. The militant commander in chief entertained a conviction that all civilization was the fruit of war, and the *American Cavalier* baldly proclaimed, "The fact is, we want a fight, but how to get it is the question."⁶¹

An eloquent orator and filled with the spirit of modern "chivalry", Bickley engaged for months during 1860 in a vigorous stump-speaking campaign in the Southern states, which he hoped would enlist widespread support for his project. It is indeed remarkable with what facility this plausible man ingratiated himself with Southern editors, who frequently accepted General Bickley at his own estimate.⁶² He also drew to his support as active organizers a considerable number of men throughout the South, who were, however, not politically prominent.⁶³

⁵⁹ Norfolk *Southern Argus*, May 16, 1860.

⁶⁰ Confusion exists as to the date of the founding of the K. G. C. The date July 4, 1854, was fixed in Bickley's writings in 1860. *Daily Louisville Democrat*, Sept. 2, 1860. Later Bickley declared it to be of Mexican origin and to date from 1845. Columbus (Ohio) *Crisis*, Dec. 30, 1863. It may be concluded that the actual functioning of the order began in 1859-60.

⁶¹ *American Cavalier*, May 28, 1859. C. P. Curtis was listed as editor and proprietor, but its close connection with the K. G. C. is apparent. This copy is in the Bickley Papers. Edward Bates became indignant when he learned of the establishment of this filibuster paper. *The Diary of Edward Bates*, ed. by Howard K. Beale (Washington, 1933), pp. 18-19. For Bickley's predilection for war see *Rules, Regulations, and Principles of the K. G. C.*, pp. 19-24.

⁶² Mobile *Daily Mercury*, Apr. 6, 1860. Copy in Bickley Papers. Harrison (Texas) *Flag*, Nov. 17, 1860.

⁶³ Some of the men associated with the K. G. C. were: Colonel N. J. Scott, of Auburn, Alabama, Philip D. Woodhouse, Colonel V. D. Groner, Norfolk, Virginia, Colonel John L. Walker, Charles City Court House, Virginia, A. J. McAlpin, Raleigh, North Carolina, Colonel James E. Cureton, Lancaster Court House, South Carolina, Colonel F. W. Dillard, Columbus, Georgia, Colonel H. C. Young, Memphis, Tennessee, Major Charles Bickley, Knoxville, Tennessee, Major William G. Yaeger, Baltimore, Maryland, Colonel Ben M. Harney, Louisville, Kentucky, Colonel James H. R. Taylor, Holly Springs, Mississippi, Major H. C. Castellanos, New Orleans, Louisiana, William H. Judah, Pensacola, Florida, General E. Greer, and Major Sam. J. Richardson, Marshall, Texas. Richmond *Daily Whig*, July 18, 1860.

General Sherman recalled that while he was living in Louisiana, he was visited sometime in 1860 by a man who was said to be a high officer in the K. G. C. Sherman was ignorant of the order until it was explained to him.⁶⁴ Certainly during the first months of his canvass Bickley and his program were well received in the lower South.⁶⁵

That ill fortune, however, which had marked Bickley's earlier career now interrupted the progress of the K. G. C. in the form of serious charges against him brought by a group of Knights in New Orleans, who claimed, in a card published in April, that he was an impostor, a liar, and a coward and that through his misrepresentations they had deceived between five and six hundred of their fellow citizens.⁶⁶ The New Orleans "troubles", followed by Bickley's abrupt departure from that city, discredited his leadership in no small degree;⁶⁷ but the resourceful general soon appeared to defy his enemies with a demand for a complete investigation by a convention of the entire organization, and a detailed reply to the New Orleans charges was made in a letter to the press from the pen of his aide and relative, Charles Bickley.⁶⁸ Accordingly a call was issued for a K. G. C. convention to assemble at Raleigh, North Carolina, May 7-11, a convention which not unexpectedly vindicated General Bickley and restored his authority in the order.⁶⁹ In spite, however, of the victory at Raleigh and renewed stumping tours, bombastic speeches, and manifestoes in the press, the order seemed to gain less publicity as the summer waned. Bickley returned to his native Virginia, where during the summer months, in company with a clergyman or two, he spoke on K. G. C. business and attempted to recruit members. It appears that he made little impression there, if one may judge by the press notices.⁷⁰ Meanwhile headquarters had been

⁶⁴ *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman* (2 vols., 2d ed., New York, 1904), I, 180.

⁶⁵ *Macon Daily Telegraph*, Mar. 23, 1860, reported that there was much enthusiasm at Bickley's meeting in Atlanta. When he was introduced to a large meeting at Montgomery, Bickley was greeted "with liberal manifestations of applause". *Montgomery Daily Mail*, Mar. 14, 1860.

⁶⁶ *Washington Constitution*, Apr. 10, 1860. A New Orleans correspondent wrote that "General Bickley left here after refusing all offers to fight, of which I am told he had plenty." *Montgomery Daily Mail*, Apr. 9, 1860.

⁶⁷ *Charleston Mercury*, Apr. 14, 1860. ⁶⁸ *Montgomery Daily Mail*, Apr. 12, 1860.

⁶⁹ *Raleigh Press* in the *Norfolk Southern Argus*, May 15, 1860.

⁷⁰ The *Richmond Daily Whig*, July 18, 1860, published a K. G. C. manifesto but declined to take the order seriously. Bickley promised the people of Lynchburg that the K. G. C. flag would fly over Mexico City on January 1, 1861. Lynchburg *Virginian* in the *Charleston Mercury*, June 7, 1860. The *Daily Baltimore Republican*, Aug. 15, 1860, quoted the *Farmville Journal* on Bickley's visit.

established at Knoxville, Tennessee, and the order's correspondence was directed to that place.⁷¹

Indeed the attention of the South was by then riveted upon the impending presidential election, and the growing concern for the future gave little opportunity to consider wild filibustering schemes. As always, Bickley, discerning the trend in national affairs, began to shift the emphasis in his appeals, although he had not yet abandoned Mexico as his main objective. A party of speakers represented this new point of view in a meeting at Cleveland, Tennessee, during which one of the spokesmen intimated that Southern governors would have need of the K.G.C. "soon". Bickley claimed, doubtless with exaggeration, that the "brains" of the South, all slave state governors save three, several members of the Buchanan cabinet, and a total of sixty-five thousand Southerners were members of the Knights.⁷² Although such assertions were promptly denied, they gave color then and later to Northern charges of Southern aggression and conspiracy.⁷³

The close of the summer saw General Bickley working his way toward the Southwest.⁷⁴ Perhaps conscious of criticism of his delay in initiating a real military movement across the Rio Grande, he frequently apologized for his apparent failure and assured his public that the invasion would take place at a later date. Among the reasons cited for delay were the discouraging fate of General William Walker in Honduras, the silence of the American government on British intervention in Mexico and Central America, the difficulties of transporting large numbers of men and materials across country, the failure of ammunition to arrive on schedule, and the approaching presidential election.⁷⁵ Indeed it appears that explanations were very much in order, as announcements had proclaimed the actual beginning of the invasion as early as January, often giving numbers en route, officers in charge,

⁷¹ Richmond *Daily Whig*, July 18, 1860.

⁷² Nashville *Republican Banner*, Sept. 15, 1860. Opinions differed as to the numbers enrolled in the K. G. C., and it seems impossible to make an accurate statement on this point. Later Bickley claimed 115,000 members. Harrison (Texas) *Flag*, Nov. 17, 1860.

⁷³ The K. G. C. "prepared and ripened its members for the task of treason". Horace Greeley, *The American Conflict* (2 vols., Hartford, 1867), I, 350; the New York *Tribune*, Mar. 31, 1860, advanced the conspiracy theory. See also Orville J. Victor, *The History, Civil, Political, and Military of the Southern Rebellion* (4 vols., New York, 1861-68?), I, 135-36. Parson Brownlow vigorously denied membership. Knoxville *Whig*, Sept. 15, 1860.

⁷⁴ Alexandria *Gazette*, Sept. 4, 1860.

⁷⁵ Letter of Bickley to the Galveston *News* in the New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, Oct. 26, 1860. Walker was executed on September 12, 1860, by Honduran authorities. *Dictionary of American Biography*, XIX, 363-65.

destinations, and other details.⁷⁶ At first these alleged movements were taken seriously, but as no well co-ordinated army appeared on the Rio Grande, increasing skepticism was voiced. A biting sarcastic denunciation of Bickley appeared in the St. Louis *Sunday Morning Republican*, July 29, 1860, written by a New Orleans correspondent, which denied the existence of a K. G. C. camp in Texas and expressed wonder that intelligent people could be deceived by "that arrant knave and unmitigated humbug, 'General' Bickley". Unquestionably many prospective adventurers did proceed to the Mexican border, but no farther, and before the end of the year turned back in disillusionment to their homes, sadder but wiser, it may be hoped.⁷⁷ The chief responsibility for the collapse of the movement rests with Bickley, and probably the Corpus Christi *Ranchero* was correct in saying that mismanagement on the part of the K. G. C. leaders was apparent.⁷⁸ In spite of his lack of tangible accomplishment the irrepressible leader was now ready for new ventures and from his headquarters at San Antonio, Texas, prepared to utilize the K. G. C. as a secessionist auxiliary. At the end of October General Bickley addressed the people of Austin as to the role of the K. G. C. in the crisis which was approaching. He advised the election of Bell, Douglas, or Breckinridge, and although he disavowed disunion objects, he declared that there were but two parties, Northern and Southern, and that if Lincoln were elected, the K. G. C. would become a rallying army for secessionists. Judge Paschal, a Bell elector, inquired whether the K. G. C. oath was above or subordinate to the Constitution and laws of the land and, further, whether members assumed to themselves the power to determine the constitutionality of laws of Congress or recognized the lawful tribunals of the country. General Bickley replied that "as citizens we judge of the Constitutionality of the laws and act accordingly". The Breckinridge electors present were said to have applauded this answer "vociferously".⁷⁹

Judge Paschal then asked about the activity of the order as a police

⁷⁶ The New York correspondent of the Charleston *Mercury* declared that 1,500 men had left New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore by land and sea and that 8,500 Knights were at New Orleans, "ready to go". Norfolk *Southern Argus*, Jan. 27, 1860; Alexandria *Gazette*, Sept. 4, 1860.

⁷⁷ The K. G. C. on the border may be followed in the New Orleans *Daily Crescent*, Apr. 25, May 8, 9, 12, 26, June 2, 14, July 2, Aug. 20, Oct. 16, 1860. The Cincinnati *Daily Commercial*, Oct. 1, 1860, reported two thousand K. G. C. on the banks of the Rio Grande under Major General G. W. Bickley and General Greer.

⁷⁸ San Antonio *Ledger and Texan*, Oct. 13, 1860.

⁷⁹ Austin *Southern Intelligencer* in the LaGrange (Texas) *True Issue*, Nov. 1, 1860.

force. He said that he understood that it was acting as spies on travelers "and *even marks* baggage". This Bickley acknowledged to be true, whereupon Paschal denounced the order's police activity as worse than Know-Nothingism, as "an order of Robespierre, which would plunge us into revolution". This critic, however, had no objection to the Mexican objectives of the K. G. C., because he himself desired to see "every foot of Mexico" under the American flag.⁸⁰ There can be no doubt that Bickley was in congenial company among the Texans, who approved his fighting talk, whether directed against Mexicans or Yankees.⁸¹ Whatever Bickley's role in the presidential election in Texas, the Breckinridge press was favorable to the Knights.⁸²

One other aspect of the K. G. C. activity in Texas may be of interest. Walter P. Webb has described Governor Sam Houston's threefold "Grand Plan", by which he would annex all of Mexico, settle the sectional controversy, and make himself President of the United States.⁸³ It will be noted that Bickley's plan embraced the first two of these points, and indeed many thought that Houston was the head of the K. G. C. Although this was apparently untrue, in the fall of 1860 a Virginia officer of the K. G. C. wrote to the Norfolk *Southern Argus* describing an interview which, he said, was attended by Governor Houston, General Bickley, and himself. Houston assured the group that if Spain "made a hostile demonstration at Vera Cruz", he and his Texans with "other volunteers" would cross the Rio Grande. This writer asserted that affairs on the border, in Mexico, and in the South were of such a critical nature that there should be no surprise if soldiers were soon "swarming on both sides of the Rio Grande, struggling for a country which furnishes the South an outlet for her institutions".⁸⁴ The election of Lincoln, however, ended the community of interest between Houston and the Knights if such ever existed. The K. G. C. continued secessionist and Confederate activity through the early months of 1861. A convention of Knights was held at San Antonio on February 22, 1861, at which their services were tendered to the state of

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Charleston *Mercury*, Nov. 1, 1860; Alfred M. Williams, *Sam Houston and the War of Independence in Texas* (Boston, 1893), pp. 333-34; R. H. Williams, *With the Border Ruffians*, ed. by E. W. Williams (New York, 1907), pp. 158-64.

⁸² The Charleston *Mercury*, Nov. 1, 1860, said that only a remnant of old Whigs opposed the Knights.

⁸³ Webb, p. 203. Webb does not mention Bickley.

⁸⁴ Macon *Georgia Journal and Messenger*, Nov. 7, 1860. The officer was probably Colonel Virginius D. Groner of Norfolk, who was traveling at that time with Bickley. Marshall *Texas Republican*, Nov. 17, 1860.

Texas. Persons who attended reported the order to be in a flourishing condition, and it was said that there were eight thousand members in the state.⁸⁵

After the outbreak of the Civil War, Northerners recalled the antebellum plots of the K. G. C. in Texas. In 1862 General Mansfield told Secretary Salmon P. Chase that he had been in Texas during the winter of 1860-61 and that the K. G. C. had been very active. Mansfield had learned from a K. G. C. officer there of a plot to seize Washington and to inaugurate Breckinridge. Floyd, Cobb, Breckinridge, and Jefferson Davis were members, he was told.⁸⁶

Space will not permit here a detailed consideration of the subsequent career of the amazing Bickley, but a few words may suffice to describe the concluding phases of his life. Leaving Texas, a state safe for the Confederacy, late in 1860 or early in 1861, he turned to secessionist propaganda and military organization in the border states of Tennessee and Kentucky. He evidently visited Montgomery, the Confederate capital, as the correspondent of the London *Times*, William H. Russell, who was in Montgomery in May, 1861, commented: "I hear a good deal about the association called the Knights of the Golden Circle, a Protestant Association for securing the Gulf provinces and states, including—which has been largely developed by recent events—them in the Southern Confederacy, and creating them into an independent government."⁸⁷ It will be recalled that this was one of the original proposals of the Knights as enunciated by Bickley.

More pressing matters, however, awaited him in Kentucky, a state hanging in the balance between the Union and the Confederacy, and the trail of the elusive ex-filibuster may next be followed in the vicinity of Clarksville, Tennessee, and Russellville, Kentucky, where there were concentrations of troops for Confederate service. At last, opportunity actually to fight was about to present itself to the warlike general, who thus far had fought all his battles in the press or in the forum. The organizing and recruiting work soon attracted the notice of Unionist members of the Kentucky legislature, into which were introduced

⁸⁵ Colorado (Texas) *Citizen* in the *LaGrange True Issue*, Mar. 14, 1861.

⁸⁶ *Diary of Salmon P. Chase, July 21, 1862, to October 12, 1862, Annual Report of the American Historical Association, 1902* (2 vols., Washington, 1903), II, 70. See also Greeley, II, 18-19; John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History* (10 vols., New York, 1890), IV, 181.

⁸⁷ William H. Russell, *My Diary North and South* (2 vols., London, 1863), I, 238. Members were officially notified on February 1, 1861, that after March 1, 1861, the general headquarters of the K. G. C. would be Montgomery. San Antonio *Herald* in the Dallas (Texas) *Herald*, Feb. 20, 1861.

resolutions calling for an investigation of the K. G. C. But such was unnecessary, as Bickley's ever-ready pen produced "An Open Letter to the Kentucky Legislature", phrased in characteristic style, which defied his critics by the publication of the first and second degrees of the K. G. C. He claimed eight thousand members distributed in every county of the state and boldly announced that his work would continue vigorously till the Confederate flag flew triumphantly over the capitol at Frankfort.⁸⁸ Naturally this aroused the Unionist *Louisville Journal* to combat the subversive movement. Editorially this paper compared Bickley to Catiline, assailed his "incendiary doctrines and hellish machinations",⁸⁹ and later characterized the K. G. C. as "the very heart, the brain, the breath, the soul of the Secession party in Kentucky".⁹⁰ In lighter vein the same paper lampooned "King Bickley, Monarch of the K. G. C.", and humorously observed in a witticism redolent of George D. Prentice, "Many a man who puts his foot in a golden circle may get his neck in a hempen one."⁹¹ Events were to prove that once again Bickley had enlisted in an unsuccessful cause; although many in Kentucky sympathized with the Confederacy and joined the armies of the South, Union sentiment ultimately prevailed in the state. Bickley concluded this chapter of his life on a carping and complaining note; in a letter to the *Clarksville Chronicle* he charged unfair treatment by the state of Tennessee, disbanded his men, and sent them to their homes.⁹²

Probably the K. G. C. organization spread across the Ohio River into Indiana and other states of the Old Northwest, where the order won an unsavory reputation during the course of the Civil War. But apparently Bickley was not concerned in this later and more famous development of the order which he founded, an antiwar organization which caused the Lincoln administration some anxious moments and was investigated by the Federal government in an effort to suppress its activities and imprison its members.⁹³

⁸⁸ *Louisville Daily Courier*, May 20, 1861.

⁸⁹ *Louisville Daily Journal*, June 4, 1861. ⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, July 20, 1861.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, June 8, Aug. 14, 1861. Prentice was editor of the *Louisville Journal*.

⁹² *Clarksville Chronicle*, Aug. 2, 1861. In spite of his treatment he pledged continued loyalty to the principles and cause of the South.

⁹³ A point which needs clarification is the relationship of Bickley's order to that existing in the North, 1862-64. James Ford Rhodes, *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850* (7 vols., New York, 1900-1906), V, 317-18, does not mention the Southern phase of the order. An investigation during the Civil War in Indiana disclosed the Southern and filibustering origins. *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, Aug. 5, 1862. Mayo Fesler, "Secret Political Societies in the North during the Civil War". *Indiana Magazine of History*, XIV (Sept., 1918), 183-286, a pioneer scholarly investigation, discussed, pp.

Never again did Bickley win the notoriety that was his during 1860-61, and after the Kentucky-Tennessee episode it is at times difficult to trace him. From his old haunts in southwest Virginia the erstwhile general wrote to Governor John Letcher, early in 1862, informing him that he was raising a battalion of light dragoons in Lee, Scott, Russell, and Wise counties and requesting assistance in the form of supplies from either the state of Virginia or the Confederate States.⁹⁴ No other record of this organization has been found, and it is probable that its fate was similar to that of other projects begun by Bickley. The next evidence reveals him resuming the medical role, which he had once renounced for more romantic diversions, as surgeon in General Bragg's army,⁹⁵ and on June 10, 1863, he signed a voucher for pay from January 28 to June 9, 1863, as surgeon, 29th North Carolina Regiment.⁹⁶

For reasons which are not apparent the Confederate surgeon applied for and received a pass through Union lines with the understanding that he would proceed directly to his erstwhile home in Cincinnati. Immediately suspicious of Bickley, General Rosecrans permitted him to come to headquarters near Tullahoma, Tennessee, for questioning. Confronted with the charge that he was "the famous General Bickley", he denied it stoutly, maintaining that he was the nephew of the general and that he could prove it in Cincinnati, a contention to which he persistently adhered throughout his imprisonment. Perhaps the plausibility of the man may be grasped in the fact that his tale of suffering so won the sympathy of the officers at headquarters that they lent him sixty dollars in addition to ten dollars which he had already borrowed when he first made contact with the Union men. Bickley was paroled and ordered to report to General Burnside in Cincinnati for identification, but General Rosecrans took the precaution of placing a detective on the train with the good doctor. Arriving at Louisville, Bickley es-

183-99, Bickley and the K. G. C. movement, based largely on the Bickley Papers. Fesler attempted to ascertain the time and manner of the introduction of the order into the border states north of the Ohio but arrived at no convincing conclusions. *Ibid.*, pp. 199-200. Eli Kinney, Bickley's brother-in-law, testified in 1863 that Bickley had established a K. G. C. castle at Portsmouth, Ohio, before the war. MS., Bickley Papers. Of course after his capture Bickley emphatically denied connection with the Northern K. G. C., or Order of American Knights, as they were later called. Columbus (Ohio) *Crisis*, Dec. 30, 1863.

⁹⁴ Bickley to John Letcher, Feb. 3, 1862. MS. in the office of the Adjutant General, Washington, D. C. Copy in possession of the author.

⁹⁵ Special Order No. 23, Adjutant and Inspector General's Office, Richmond, Jan. 28, 1863. MS., Bickley Papers.

⁹⁶ Major General James F. McKinley, Adjutant General, to the author, July 23, 1934.

caped to New Albany, Indiana, instead of proceeding to Cincinnati as ordered, and "commenced putting himself *en rapport* with the Knights of the Golden Circle". Under close surveillance, he was permitted a day or two of freedom, then was arrested, and his baggage searched. In his trunk were found incriminating documents which proved him to be "the great modern knight himself, and nobody else".⁹⁷

Further investigation proved to the satisfaction of Northern authorities that the prisoner was the original and notorious General Bickley.⁹⁸ He was characterized by the press as "Morgan's spy", and indeed it was a suspicious fact that his movements were apparently timed to coincide with General John H. Morgan's famous raid into Indiana and Ohio.⁹⁹ It may have been that Bickley intended to secure aid for Morgan from the Knights in the Northwest. If this was his plan, his arrest summarily terminated it, and on August 18, 1863, he was remanded to prison in the Ohio Penitentiary in Columbus, where, despite his complaints, he was kept in solitary confinement. He was later transferred to Fort Lafayette and finally to Fort Warren, from which place he was released in the fall of 1865.¹⁰⁰

While in prison, he bombarded officials of state and national governments with his pleas for trial, denial of guilt, and demands for release.¹⁰¹ But his efforts were in vain, because the Lincoln administration was convinced that he was a dangerous man, and not until some

⁹⁷ Cincinnati *Daily Commercial*, July 22, 1863. This account was captioned "The Great Mogul of the Knights of the Golden Circle in Captivity". This paper considered him to be the active head of the K. G. C. in the West. For Bickley's arrest and a description of the papers found in his trunk see the New Albany *Daily Ledger*, July 18, 1863. The seized papers are now in the Office of the Judge Advocate General, Washington, D. C.

⁹⁸ See the statement of Eli Kinney and Daniel K. Cady, "In re Case of G. W. L. Bickley". MS., Bickley Papers.

⁹⁹ Indianapolis *Daily Journal*, July 22, 1863; the Cincinnati *Daily Commercial*, July 22, 1863, asserted that Bickley would be tried as a spy and possibly put to death. An important review of the case by Larz Anderson revealed suspicion that Bickley's visit north at the time of his arrest was in connection with the Morgan raid and concluded that "his character . . . is that of a very accomplished, uncommonly plausible, and utterly untrustworthy individual". Larz Anderson to General N. C. McLean, Feb. 6, 1864. MS., Bickley Papers. For a brief account of Morgan's raid see Rhodes, V, 313-15.

¹⁰⁰ Record of G. W. L. Bickley's imprisonment. MS., Bickley Papers. For his protests against his treatment at the Ohio penitentiary see the Columbus (Ohio) *Crisis*, Dec. 30, 1863.

¹⁰¹ For Bickley's case see Statement B, written by him and later sent to Secretary Seward. MS., Bickley Papers. See also Bickley to C. A. Dana, Sept. 9, 1864; Bickley to Stanton, Jan. 16, 1865; Bickley to Major General John A. Dix, May 5, 1864. MSS., Bickley Papers.

months after Appomattox was he at last released, after signing an oath of amnesty on October 14, 1865.¹⁰² Deeply discredited everywhere and odious because of his association with the Knights of the Golden Circle,¹⁰³ after his imprisonment he was plunged into an oblivion from which he did not emerge during the brief remainder of life left to him. He is said to have lectured in England on the subject of the American Civil War, in which he had played so inglorious a part.¹⁰⁴ Even in Cincinnati he was so quickly forgotten that shortly after his death, on August 10, 1867, the Cincinnati *Daily Commercial* made only the laconic announcement: "G. W. T. [*sic*] Bickley died in Baltimore on Saturday. Bickley flourished in Cincinnati fourteen or fifteen years ago."¹⁰⁵ Thus passed from the earthly scene a man to whom, it was said, the title of adventurer belonged more properly than to any other American.¹⁰⁶

III

The Knights of the Golden Circle, considered as an abortive Southern filibustering movement, appear to be of significance to the historian of the United States for their contribution to further sectional misunderstanding. It must be emphasized that emotional feeling in the North and South rose to fever heat during 1860. In the summer of that year "fiendish abolitionist plots" were "discovered" and publicized, and no doubt Northerners who chanced to read Bickley's incendiary manifestoes were strengthened in their hostility to the South. Senator James R. Doolittle of Wisconsin discussed in the Senate what he termed "Southern fanaticism's" solution of the slavery question. That solution looked to the

acquisition of Cuba, Mexico, Central America, all tropical America . . . the reopening of the African slave trade direct with Africa, as well as with the old slave-producing States of the United States, for the double purpose of planting slavery throughout the whole of that region, until, extending across

¹⁰² Records in the office of the Adjutant General, Washington, D. C. Major General James F. McKinley to the author, July 23, 1934.

¹⁰³ See a curious contemporary cartoon which held the K. G. C. doctrines responsible for the assassination of Lincoln. James Truslow Adams, *The March of Democracy* (2 vols., New York, 1932-33), II, opp. p. 115. It is difficult to believe that Bickley was involved in that crime.

¹⁰⁴ Felter, p. 111.

¹⁰⁵ Cincinnati *Daily Commercial*, Aug. 16, 1867; Cincinnati *Daily Gazette*, Aug. 16, 1867.

¹⁰⁶ Abingdon *Virginian*, Oct. 4, 1867, reprinted in Felter, p. 112.

all Central America and tropical America, it shakes hands with the empire of Brazil, and at the same time bringing into this Union millions upon millions of the mixed races, for the purpose of counterbalancing the growing power, politically and otherwise, of the great Caucasian race in the North and the West. Call this solution by what name you please—the solution of Walker and his filibusters; the solution of the slave propagandists, or of the Knights of the Golden Circle.¹⁰⁷

Not all Northerners, however, shared Doolittle's apprehension. Halstead's Cincinnati *Daily Commercial* mercilessly satirized Bickley in a humorous review of his career. He would invade Mexico, said the *Commercial*, "carrying the Bible, the pocket-pistol, negro slavery and other blessings of civilization" in his train. Concerning his protestations of respectability the question was posed, "Is he not an F. F. V. and a gentleman?" Patrick Henry's words were paraphrased in Bickley's mouth: "Give me Mexico, or give me death!" After which the *Commercial* affirmed that the collection box was passed.¹⁰⁸ Another Republican organ in the same city looked with favor on a move which would bring Mexico under American control, disregarding the danger of slave expansion.¹⁰⁹

Possibly some of the Northern alarm was of a political nature, for the campaign of 1860 was in progress. Earlier the New York *Tribune* had expressed no qualms on the score of slave extension across the Rio Grande, because climate and topography would prevent it. Buchanan's Mexican policy would have been more comprehensible to the *Tribune* if northern Mexico afforded any hope of adding slave states to the Union. Slavery needed fertile soil, staple crops, and facilities for transportation. Northern Mexico had little soil suitable for the cultivation of cotton or sugar, nor were there navigable rivers or harbors for satisfactory transportation. So sanguine was this eminent Republican newspaper that it doubted if even the revival of the African slave trade could establish slave labor there.¹¹⁰ Moreover, the Lincoln administration would deal a *coup de grâce* to such filibusters as Bickley.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ *Congressional Globe*, 36 Cong., 1 sess., pt. II, p. 1632. Apparently the Southern members allowed the allusion to the K. G. C. to pass unanswered. The congressional spokesman for the K. G. C. in 1860 was Representative S. S. Cox of Cincinnati, an ardent exponent of Manifest Destiny. For his speech supporting the order see *ibid.*, pp. 1238-45.

¹⁰⁸ Cincinnati *Daily Commercial*, Apr. 6, July 30, 1860.

¹⁰⁹ Cincinnati *Daily Gazette*, Mar. 26, 1860.

¹¹⁰ New York *Tribune*, Nov. 22, 1859.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, Mar. 31, 1860, did not think much could be achieved by the K. G. C. before November, when a new order would begin in Washington which would "restrain the ardor of these gentlemen of medieval propensities".

Clearly a fundamental divergence existed as to geographical fact. Was Bickley correct in his belief that he could build a slave empire in Mexico, or was the *Tribune* right in assuming that natural laws would inexorably halt the expansion of slavery in that quarter? Contemporary leaders like Douglas and Crittenden agreed with the *Tribune* on this point. Congressman John H. Reagan of Texas was of the same opinion. He wrote in 1858:

I know you will shrink back at the idea that slavery may thus be well nigh circumscribed. But we must look at destiny as it is, not as we would have it. You would make slave States then, so would I, and we would make a slave State of Kansas, of New Mexico, of Utah, *but we cannot*, as we did not in California. I see the last State Gazette wants Sonora. For what, in God's name. To make another free State? For that is the inevitable.¹¹²

Charles W. Ramsdell, a modern scholar, has projected the discussion into the twentieth century by his contention that the geographical limits of slave extension had been reached by 1860 and that there was no further land within the confines of the United States, or contiguous to it, where slavery could be established.¹¹³

All of which bears on the problem of Lincoln's historic decision to reject the Crittenden Compromise in 1860-61. Lincoln and some of the Republicans were strongly of the belief that the question of slave extension must needs be definitively settled. They felt that if Crittenden's measures were adopted, filibustering for all the lands to the southward would be a constant problem, with the probability that more concessions would be demanded by the South as a condition of remaining in the Union. Later Lincoln wrote that the only "compromise" acceptable to him would be a prohibition of the acquisition of any more territory whatsoever. Would not the South soon demand Cuba, Mexico, and Central America?¹¹⁴ There is no evidence that Lincoln knew of the K. G. C., the last of the ante-bellum filibustering movements, but as he is known to have been a careful reader of newspapers, it is possible that he was cognizant of Bickley's Knights and that he had in mind such activity as theirs when he declined to accept the Crittenden Compromise.

¹¹² John H. Reagan to J. W. Latimore, Oct. 7, 1858. MS., Reagan Papers, Austin, Texas. Senator Louis T. Wigfall of Texas was another in that state who disapproved of the seizure of Mexico. Cincinnati *Daily Gazette*, Mar. 1, 1860.

¹¹³ Charles W. Ramsdell, "The Natural Limits of Slave Extension", *Miss. Valley Hist. Rev.*, XVI (Sept., 1929), 151-71.

¹¹⁴ Rhodes, III, 168-70, 264.

Avery Craven has observed, regarding the coming of the Civil War, that overwrought emotions led to sectional hatred, which in turn produced "mythical devils". The people of the North and the South had heard and read so much misrepresentation that they "knew little of each other as realities".¹¹⁵ Given the current state of mind on the eve of the war, it is probable that the blatant Bickley and his Knights of the Golden Circle became just such hated symbols of evil in the crisis of 1860-61.

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¹¹⁵ Avery Craven, "Coming of the War between the States: An Interpretation", *Journal of Southern History*, II (Aug., 1936), 303-22.