

Colonel John W. Thomason

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“Colonel John W. Thomason, Jr.” This is Paul Culp, Special Collections Librarian at Sam Houston State University.

John Thomason—or simply Thomason, for future frequent reference—was the biggest celebrity ever to have been born in Huntsville. Sam Houston, who came here well into his life, was already one of the most famous men in the United States and known by important people all over the world. Dana Andrews, a movie star of the first magnitude, spent his formative years here and graduated from SHNI, but was neither born nor buried here. Logan Wilson, possessed of 22 honorary doctorates as well as an earned one from Harvard, was our most academically distinguished local product, but was not well-known in the sense that Thomason was during much of his life. Dan Rather, a super-celebrity, is closely identified with Huntsville through his loyalty to SHSU, his alma mater, but otherwise has no local connections.

Thomason, however, was born here, spent his formative years here, returned frequently throughout his life to visit his parents and younger siblings. Margaret Thomason Cole, his younger sister, is now the only living family member of this generation. She was so much younger that, as a baby, she was able to provide a wonderfully vivid figure of speech to her oldest brother; while a reporter for the *Houston Chronicle* in 1917, he was impressed by an airplane ride over Houston, and in a letter home, he compared the appearance of the then-new campus of Rice Institute to Margaret's blocks scattered across the lawn. Rice Institute, as it was called then, just as our college was then Sam Houston Normal Institute, had been planted in bare fields—I think they might even have been rice fields, which is an irony that even the very serious William Marsh Rice would have appreciated. It had none of the interlaced branches of live oak trees then.

—But back to the matter of Thomason's celebrity status. I know of no other native-born Huntsvilleite who has been featured in articles in the *New York Times* and other major national papers on numerous occasions—especially if you were considering only praiseworthy activities. A military man who was asked to review the first biography of Thomason, published in 1961 by Colonel Roger Willock, began his review with the statement, quote: “The most talented Texan in the first half of the 20th century was John W. Thomason, Jr.” The editor of the journal emphasized his prerogative and changed the sentence to read, “One of the most” etc. The reviewer maintained that his 1961 appraisal was eminently correct, and that 20 years later he would merely change the line to read, quote, “The most talented Texan in the first three-quarters of the 20th century.”

You may now be wondering at the basis for the fame that I have proclaimed but not yet substantiated, other than one book reviewer's opinion. Outlining Thomason's adventure- and distinction-filled life is not a task that I do routinely. That may sound surprising, as I have been Special Collections Librarian and curator of the Thomason Room, where most Special Collections are housed, for more than 20 years. However, though I've often been asked to describe the collections, which include more than 19,000 books, numerous manuscript collections, and museum-type items that are housed in the impressive 6,000-square foot room named for him, I have seldom been asked to provide a biographical sketch of the man himself. Admittedly I have a few remarks always at hand to give visitors to the room a bit of introduction to the person who created the books and multitude of drawings which were donated by his widow, Leda Bass Thomason, a collection of more than 1800 drawings and a wooden chest filled with his manuscripts of his books. These all surround visitors once they push through the elaborate walnut doors on the fourth floor of Newton Gresham Library. In fact I talk about him so often that I sometimes feel I knew him personally, though he had been dead almost 30 years when I arrived in Huntsville in 1973.

It is somewhat ironic that the major memorial to Thomason in Huntsville had been provided by the, quote, “Institute,” on the outskirts of his beloved hometown. SHNI was one of only a number of institutions of higher learning whose

premises he tolerated for a maximum of one year, and I think it would be safe to say that he regarded it as the surviving relic of Huntsville's tradition as an educational center, and little else. Nevertheless, in addition to the beautiful room that is the treasure house of SHSU's fine library, an entire building on the quadrangle bears his name. The Thomason building houses the Sam Houston Press and the Department of Agriculture. Thanks to a specific bequest of Thomason's sister, Sue Thomason Noordberg, money was available to frame some of his drawings for display in the building that bears his name. Two large drawings done in China welcome one at the entrance. I should say "welcome," in audible quotation marks, because these works are exceedingly complex—despite the sparseness of style that characterizes Thomason's work—and the overall effect is somewhat menacing, owing to the abundance of exotic military personnel and ordinance. In fact, I took a bit of flak from a faculty member in the building who was offended by "the rampant militarism," though most appreciate the visual excitement of drawings from various countries and types of landscape.

Although it had not occurred to me until I began thinking about this talk, the combination of functions in the Thomason building is almost as fitting as is the name of the Dan Rather building, a structure that contains the programs of journalism, radio, television, and film. Thomason was one of the most published authors of the first half of the 20th century; therefore, having a university press in his building is very appropriate. More pointedly, the profuse amount of illustration in his books and books he illustrated for others meant that he did a great deal of book design. As to Agriculture, the Thomasons had been a prominent agrarian family, both before and after their arrival in Texas, though his grandfather was a medical doctor educated at the University of Pennsylvania, graduated 1837. His plantation west of Huntsville comprised 15 square miles, roughly 10,000 acres, and was worked by more than 100 families. A love of the land was undoubtedly a major part of Thomason's ethos. Had World War I not led him into his military career, the life of a Southern squire with cultured avocations might have made the best fit with his love of horses and outdoor pursuits.

With that allusion to his background, I would like to present a brief overview of Thomason's early life. He was born in the family home, which still stands on Avenue J between 12th and 13th Street, on February 28, 1893. Built two years earlier by his newly-wed parents, it was not as grand a place as the high Victorian house that one currently sees surrounded by verandas and old magnolia trees, just north of the First Baptist Church. Large additions would be necessary to comfortably house the family that would ultimately consist of nine children, four boys and five girls. That house, by the way, is now owned by Thomason's nephew, Dr. T. C. Cole, Jr., as is the next-door doctor's office that Thomason's father built in 1898. Both structures have been beautifully restored and listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

His father, Dr. John William Thomason, was a graduate of the University of Virginia and the leading physician in Walker County. His mother, Sue Goree, was the daughter of Major T. J. Goree of General Longstreet's staff. Goree appeared as a character in the novel *Killer Angels*, on which the film *Gettysburg* was based, and his vivid Civil War letters have been twice published and quoted in several reference publications. Goree was a good friend of Sam Houston, despite disagreeing with his politics. He had boarded with the Houston family while studying at Baylor, then in Independence, and had even been baptized on the same day that Houston was. One of his letters describes the efforts that pranksters had made to disrupt that long-anticipated—at least by Margaret Lea Houston—that long-anticipated event. In later life, 1870-1890, he was the superintendent of the penitentiary; that is, singular until the Rusk penitentiary was built under his administration. The in-town unit of TDCJ on Huntsville's southern limits was named for him. I am dwelling on Major Goree at some length because this admired maternal grandfather was a very strong influence on Thomason's interests, both physical, in hunting and fishing together, and intellectual—Civil War history. It is significant that it was his grandfather Goree that he called "Dad."

Thomason remembered his childhood as "blissful." He loved animals, so he did not mind being responsible, as the oldest boy, for much of their care. Behind the house were barns and stables which housed horses, cows, even hogs. His gray pony Nellie inspired what is probably his first published drawing: a drawing of Nellie to accompany a letter to the *Houston Post* when he was only 12 years old. He rode her to accompany the cows out to pasture, just west of town, early every morning, and back at four o'clock in the afternoon. Obviously some routines were not so onerous as he would regard those of school-teaching, but even his herding duties were often side-tracked by observation of birds and other wildlife.

Thomason's graduation from Huntsville High School at the age of 16 began the seven-year period which would seem much less abnormal today than it seemed then to his serious and disciplined father. Even now, though, when it would be commonplace to state that he was, quote, "having trouble finding himself," the years of formal education and first attempts at earning a living seemed patchy at best. His father, a devout Methodist, sent him to Southwestern University in Georgetown, where he lasted only a year despite ample popularity with his classmates. He narrowly escaped expulsion after writing a satire of a math professor he disliked in the student annual. Probably the most significant event of that year was becoming friends with J. Frank Dobie, long the grand old man of Texas literature. Even though Dobie was a 22-year old senior, Dobie wrote a beautiful tribute to Thomason in an obituary after his death.

The next year, Dr. Thomason wanted him close to home, so he spent a year as a student at SHNI in Huntsville, received his teacher's certification, and actually took a teaching job, which that piece of paper made possible. At only 18, he became principal of a small school near Lindale in Smith County. Despite the interference in such activities as hunting, fishing, reading, and drawing that teaching imposed, numerous accounts indicate that he was an effective teacher. After closing an already-short school year early, he resigned and came back to Huntsville for a pleasant summer before heading for the University of Texas for another try at higher education. That year provided more drawing experience—he was art editor for the yearbook—and later in life would provide the setting for some interesting writing, but he did not return for a second year. Instead he dusted off his teacher's certificate and got another job as principal of a small school, this time at Penn City in Harris County. This position was more agreeable because it was close to Houston, located on a picturesque stretch of Buffalo Bayou that he described quite romantically, and he lived in the same boarding house as Reverend John Stevens, who became the principal model for Thomason's most vivid creation, Praxiteles Swan of *Lone Star Preacher*. Even with enjoyable hunting and fishing and the environs of Penn City, it probably wasn't as romantic as he described it in his writing, because the ship channel was being dredged out on September 17, 1914, and there would have been work going on while he was in Penn City, a clear indication of what a romantic he was. So, even with enjoyable hunting and fishing and the environs of Penn City, one year was all he could take.

By exercising all his charm and linguistic skills on his mother, he was able to persuade her to persuade his father to allow him to go to New York to study art at the Art Students League. Though Dr. Thomason, a highly cultivated man, appreciated art and admired his son's talent, he was not at all enthusiastic about a possible career in that field. The year in New York that followed was by far his happiest experience on either side of the classroom, despite initial negative feelings toward the gigantic Yankee city. In a city known for its fast movement, Thomason bewildered his family by changing his address an amazing number of times in short order. He could always come up with a logical reason for moving. On the plus side, there was a steady upward movement in his class performance ranking. After this exciting year, he grudgingly took another teaching job, this time at a blue-blood school in Houston. He took his meals in the nearby home of a family relation, Judge Norman G. Kittrell —Normangee, Texas, is named for him—and the Kittrell family, relatives on his mother's side, have some very interesting people; Dr. Kittrell's diaries, contemporary with Sam Houston, are fascinating.

But he could still not bring himself to settle into a teaching career. Fortunately, a family friend was able to come to his rescue this time. Huntsville native Marcellus E. Foster, known near and far as "Mefo," was the editor and owner of the *Houston Chronicle* and was able to find a reporter's job for Thomason. Nine months of work on the *Chronicle* was a great boost to his writing career. The United States entered World War I on April 6, 1917. In that same year, that same day, Thomason crossed the street to the Rice Hotel to enlist in the Marines. The years of indecision were over, for Thomason had found his niche.

During one of the long lazy summers he passed in Huntsville during this period of finding himself, he made the acquaintance of a friend of his sister Sue, a pretty girl who just happened to live in the penitentiary warden's house behind his family's home. This was Leda Bass from Terrell, and their relationship would deepen, even as her father took the family back to their hometown. With his work for the *Chronicle*, poorly paid as it was, he began to entertain the idea of marriage. After he joined the Marines, he felt confident enough to discuss it with his father, in a long letter in 1917. They married far from Huntsville, in Washington before he was sent to France. Leda had come east with friends, ostensibly only for a trip, but the rapidity with which her parents managed to arrive on the scene for the wedding suggests advance planning. Their first residence was Fredericksburg, Virginia, a brief part of their lives I've been trying to find more about, as people in the city's historical commission had been reading Martha Ann Turner's biography of

Thomason and come across the mention of taking pictures of playing in the heavy snowfall there in Fredericksburg. I was asked if the Thomason Room had any of these, which precipitated a search through nearly a thousand snapshots. The result was not as successful as I had hoped, but most of the photos are now neatly arranged in protective boxes by subject—librarians are old hands at refining access techniques to materials as research use reveals their need.

Camaguey, Cuba, was their first foreign residence together. The Marines had intervened in that country as treaties after the Spanish American War made possible, to restore order to a chaotic land. It was the first of several homes abroad in the face of political problems that seem always to involve Marines. Those of you who are trying to follow a historical continuum will note that I have just ignored World War I, a tragic event for the world that in a way was the making of John Thomason. For the moment I will say only that he was a true hero, much decorated, and covered not only with medals but with experiences that would shape his writing.

He began writing those autobiographical accounts of trench warfare, apparently almost at once, because by 1920, he was submitting stories—all refused—to numerous magazines. The letters of refusal assured him that the quality was good, but that the literate public did not want to read anything about the war. There was the same sort of revulsion against that appallingly wasteful and senseless war that would be seen again in the era of the Vietnam War. Books there are aplenty now, but it was years before there was a market for them. It was his drawings that caught the attention of his friend Lawrence Stallings, whose *What Price Glory?* was one of the most successful and enduring theatrical works to come out of the war. When Scribner's Publishing Company saw the drawings, they were immediately interested, but asked if the young Marine who produced them could provide some stories to go with them. As it turned out, Thomason already had, and his future publishers were delighted to find out that the Marine could write even better than he could draw. Thus the art training was certainly not wasted: without it, he might never have gotten his big opportunity, because there were many young veterans with vivid accounts of the conflicts seeking publishers. The fact that he was handsome and an undeniable military hero certainly did not make his first grasp for fame more difficult. After the publication of *Fix Bayonets* in 1926, there would be a steady stream of books, commissioned illustrations, articles, etc.

Thomason's life was so different from the others in his hometown that he must have seemed some sort of god when he made his forays to visit his family: The comfortable circumstances, whether in Washington or Peking; the stream of new books, much touted in the prestigious journals and the newspapers, and all the sophistication that was the result of the constant interplay of his three careers on a global backdrop seemed to make him a cross between Hemingway and Superman. Actually, Hemingway thought of himself as Superman, but it is curious that, despite his renowned ego, he included more selections of Thomason in his widely read anthology *Men at War: The Best War Stories of All Time*, than any other of the nearly one hundred authors: Thomason had four selections, Hemingway himself and Tolstoy had three, and all others had only one or two.