

THE COBBLERS

On the evening of October 24, 1415, King Henry V of England found himself facing a dire military situation with the fate of England hanging in the balance. His worn, dysentery plagued army totaling about 6,000 faced a vastly superior French force of 25,000 to 40,000 on their own soil near the small village of Azincourt – pronounced Agincourt by the English. King Henry's forces had suffered a long march with short rations. Dysentery was so bad that most of the bowmen removed their trousers before the battle since they could neither control their bowels nor leave the battle field to relieve themselves. Chronicles of that time record the obvious anxiety of various English nobles who yearned for some of the English men back at home. In reports of the time, King Henry expressed great confidence in his tiny force of men and eagerness for the battle. Almost 200 years later, Shakespeare elaborated on the conversations of that evening with the following well known and oft quoted excerpt from "Henry V." King Henry is responding to a question from his cousin Westmoreland:

"No, faith, my coz, wish not a man from England.
God's peace! I would not lose so great an honour
As one man more methinks would share from me
For the best hope I have. O, do not wish one more!
Rather proclaim it, Westmoreland, through my host,
That he which hath no stomach to this fight,
Let him depart; his passport shall be made,
And crowns for convoy put into his purse;
We would not die in that man's company
That fears his fellowship to die with us.
This day is call'd the feast of Crispian.
He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,
Will stand a tip-toe when this day is nam'd,
And rouse him at the name of Crispian.

He that shall live this day, and see old age,
Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours,
And say 'To-morrow is Saint Crispian.'
Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars,
And say 'These wounds I had on Crispian's day.'
Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot,
But he'll remember, with advantages,
What feats he did that day. Then shall our names,
Familiar in his mouth as household words-
Harry the King, Bedford and Exeter,
Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester-
Be in their flowing cups freshly rememb'ed.
This story shall the good man teach his son;
And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remembered-
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition;
And gentlemen in England now-a-bed
Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
that fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day."

I cannot hear this speech without feeling the urge to grab a weapon and bash a few French heads. Of course, I have that feeling at other times as well but largely overcome it.

We now know that the Battle of Agincourt was one of history's most decisive victories with the French losing over 10,000 killed including half of French nobility

with 2,000 additional taken prisoner. English losses are estimated at a mere 200 killed. As in earlier battles, the victory was a combination of great field generalship by King Henry, impressive use of the long-bowmen as artillery, and the stupidity of the French. The long term results of this battle as part of the 100 Years War are a likely subject for a much broader paper. Suffice to say, that this was a true turning point in English and European history.

Yet, for hundreds of years, from before 1415 till well beyond Shakespeare's time, it was assumed that the battle would be remembered because of the St. Crispin's Day Holiday and not the other way around. Hear King Henry's words again:

“And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remembered”

Today, it is a rare individual anywhere in the world who knows anything about St. Crispin and why he had such an important feast day. So, who the heck is St. Crispin and why has his day been forgotten?

Actually, the documents from the sixth century that supported sainthood for St. Crispin included his brother Crispinian. Since factual verification of the evidence to support sainthood for the brothers is difficult, we must stick with what may be as much legend as fact. Crispin and Crispinian were reported to be Roman citizens of the third century who converted to Christianity. Under the co-rulers of Rome, Diocletian and Maximianus Herculius, the brothers went into exile in Gaul to escape broad persecution of Christians. They took up the trade of shoe making and lived a life modeled after the Apostle Paul by preaching during the day and working at night. Their shoes were available at little or no cost to those without funds as part of their Christian ministry. Since they were generous to the poor, the brothers were popular with the disadvantaged but became known to the Roman authorities. During a visit to Gaul, Maximianus had the brothers arrested

and ultimately tortured in an unsuccessful effort to force them to renounce their faith.

Now the Roman's were no novices at torture. None of this sleep deprivation or loud music stuff for them. A prosecutor named Rictius Varus had them put on the rack, cut thongs from their flesh, drove awls under their fingernails, and immersed them in molten lead and boiling oil. Then, having failed to get them to renounce their faith, he placed millstones around their necks and dropped them into the River Aisne. When Crispin and Crispinian emerged alive on the other side of the river, Rictius Varus is reported to have thrown himself into the fire prepared for them. Perhaps modern prosecutors should pay heed. At this point, Maximianus grew bored with the fun and had the two brothers beheaded on or about October 25, 286. Their bodies were buried at Soissons where a large church now stands in their honor. While I am not qualified to judge who should be a saint, it seems obvious that Crispin and Crispinian certainly meet most criteria even if the story is half fanciful.

Since Crispin and Crispinian were cobblers, they were recognized as the patron saints of all shoe makers with October 25th as their feast day. By the time of the Battle of Agincourt on October 25, 1415, the cobbler trade was a very important cottage industry in England and all European countries. Shoe makers were prominent in every village and were as prevalent in the cities as pubs. Shoes did not last long in the muddy environment of England and cobblers were both busy and important. The cobblers had adopted St. Crispin's Day as a holiday and often had picnics or parties at their shops. This custom had grown to become a widespread general holiday with street fairs and good times all around England. This practice continued in various forms right up to the industrial revolution when shoes started to be mass produced. Thus, on October 24, 1415, Westmoreland was yearning for some of the men just a hundred miles away who were about to enjoy a holiday the next day in England celebrating the cobblers' feast day.

Today, we are hard pressed to even find a shoe repair shop – much less a full fledged shoe maker. Even the title of “cobbler” is lost to many if not most citizens. A brief sampling of college students indicates that they are not familiar with the term “cobbler” except as a dessert made of berries. The history of St. Crispin’s day is largely lost and now remembered more because of Shakespeare’s well crafted language than for any other reason. It is interesting to reflect how the players of that time or any time mark important turning points in history by purely local events. In fact, one may conjure images of the shoe makers of today - thousands of workers in China producing millions of pairs of Nike’s - who could care less about Crispin and Crispinian or the Battle of Agincourt. As we become conscious of world history and not just Euro-centric history, what holidays will be remembered and then forgotten as the world goes from new crisis to new beginnings?

For now, let us pay homage to those two martyrs, to the brave warriors who fought on that fateful day, and to William Shakespeare who gave us the memory:

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition;
And gentlemen in England now-a-bed
Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here,
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