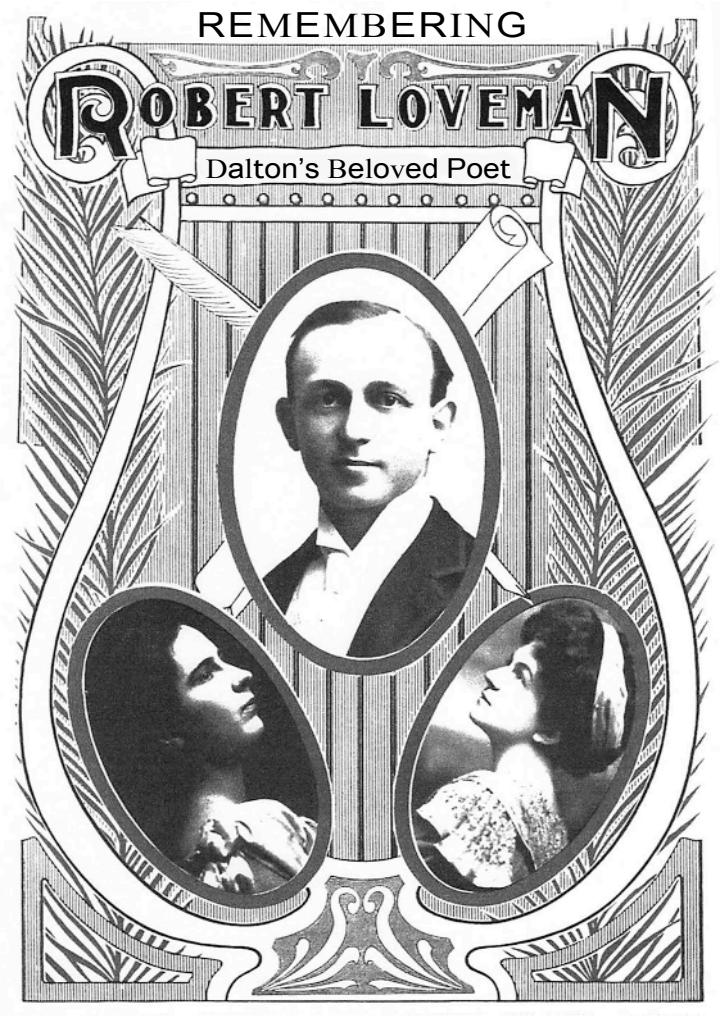
This Man of Few Words



CANDI DEAL

In 2009, the city of Dalton nearly erased from its street map the name of Robert Loveman, one of American's great lyric poets at the end of the 19th century. During a city project to simplify street names and numbering, Loveman Lane, which is really an extension of Castle Road, nearly adopted the latter street's name. Vigilant residents aware of the poet Loveman's ties to Dalton eventually dissuaded the city from making the change.

"I was pleasantly surprised," reported Denis Donegan, one of the Loveman Lane residents who attended a city council hearing. Donegan believes the street's historical significance and the passionate appeals by its current residents—each of whom attended at least one meeting—made the difference. "There were people who wanted to preserve Dalton history and there is no other place with Loveman's name on it," he notes. "If we change the name of that street, Loveman is gone from Dalton forever."

Robert Loveman was born in Ohio in 1864 to Jewish parents from Hungary. It's unclear when David, his father, adopted the surname Loveman in place of Lieberman, but it was prior to Robert's birth. After arriving in Cleveland, Ohio, David Loveman entered the clothing business. There he met his future wife, Esther Schwartz, daughter of a Hungarian scholar. Robert was the second of their seven children.

While Robert was a baby, the family moved to the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, just after the end of the Civil War. David Loveman believed that the area, in the midst of a massive postwar rebuilding effort, would provide rich opportunities for a clothing merchant.

In Dalton, Loveman opened a dry goods store on Hamilton Street. To accommodate his growing family, he purchased a roomy house set in a grove of oak trees on a knoll overlooking Thornton Avenue. The beautiful town green was located just across the street.

As a boy, Robert may have absorbed some of the dreamy romanticism of the Old South that later influenced his poetry, but a more significant influence was the German culture present at home. His parents, who "worshipped at the shrines of the great German romanticists, Goethe, Heine, and Schiller,"[1] cultivated the rich heritage from the old country. Further, Mrs. Loveman loved the fine old music of German composers and guided Robert's appreciation of song, which later revealed itself in the lilting music of his poetry. He later paid tribute to this particular influence in his poem "Song:"

When I, an infant, peaceful lay
Upon my mother's breast,
She softly sung me, night and day,
Sweet lullabies of faith and rest.

At age seven, Robert began school in a two-room schoolhouse presided over by a stern master. Spelling competitions and recitations often ended in humiliation for the young students. For unknown reasons, the master detested "Casabianca," a popular poem most famous for its opening line, "The boy stood on the burning deck." His pupils, knowing his aversion to the piece, conspired to annoy him during recitations by, in turn, repeating the detested line. Although the boys could hardly repress giggles, the glowering headmaster spoke not a word until it was Robert's turn.

"The next boy who recites that poem," he roared, "will get the worst licking I ever gave!"[2]

Robert took position by the enraged teacher and anxiously looked at the faces of his peers. What would he do? Haltingly, he took a deep breath and began, "The boy stood on the burning deck."

The headmaster proved true to his word.

At age twelve in 1876, Robert enrolled in the Dalton Boys Academy atop Fort Hill, a building that still stands today as part of the Dalton School System. He was a good student and especially loved poetry. He soon began to scribble his own verse in the blank spaces of his schoolbooks.

Poet Robert Loveman (1864–1923) was one of America's "great lyric poets" of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Look how it sparkles, see it greet

Two years later, the senior Loveman insisted that Robert quit school to work in the family store. Robert continued to read, however, and was drawn to the works of Poe, Whitman, and Wordsworth. He also kept up his writing. Before long, his bookkeeping entries in the store ledger were filled with notes and sketches. Whenever Robert was missing from his bookkeeping cage, his father, in exasperation, would run down Hamilton Street shouting in halting English, "Vere is der poet?"[3]

Robert found clerking painfully boring, but he did establish a lasting friendship. Will Harben, six years his senior, owned another store in town. He too loved literature and spent his days plotting the novels he would one day write. Together, the two walked the hills about Dalton, discussing the works of the literary greats.

At age 24, Robert enrolled in the law department of the University of Alabama, following in the footsteps of his younger bother, Morris. He lived there with his sister, Linka, and her husband. At best, Robert was a halfhearted student, preferring to spend his time daydreaming, writing poetry and reading beneath the towering campus pines. The *Atlanta Constitution* published three of his poems between September and December of 1888, so his literary career was taking flight.

The first volume of Loveman's poetry was published in 1889. Simply titled *Poems*, the collection contained just 42 pages. The *Birmingham Age-Herald* briefly described this as "a collection of original poems, written for distribution among his friends."[4] The reviewer boldly predicted that the budding poet would impact the literary world. Likewise effusive in its praise, the *Atlanta Constitution* lauded Loveman's poetry as "full of pure, pleasant thoughts told in musical rhyme."[5] The newspaper compared his short and clear verse to the works of greats like Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats.

Loveman's second volume of poetry, also titled *Poems*, was published in 1893. Dedicated to his mother, it begins with this rhyme:

Many the weary miles between
But distance yields to love like thine
Blest miracle! Though all unseen,
Closely thy cheek is pressed to mine.

This book also received high praise from southern newspapers, and at least one reviewer in New York reservedly called it "a commendable first venture."[6]

The prestigious J.B. Lippincott & Co. of Philadelphia published the next volume of Loveman's poetry. Reviews from across the country were overwhelmingly positive. Noted for brevity, purity and airiness, the poems were referred to as "art briefs" and Loveman as "this man of few words."[7] Emboldened by the book's success, Lippincott printed a second edition of verse within a year, and poetry scholars continued to sing praises of the lyric poet from Dalton. Of Loveman's work, the *Poetry Review* described it as a "distinctly native utterance by a singer who loves his homely land and puts into his songs the unaffected message of his heart."[8]

In late 1897, Loveman visited his childhood friend, Will Harben, in New York City. In his letters home, he mentions attending the theater. Later, one of these plays,"Cyrano de Bergerac," appeared in a poem he wrote called "Cyrano Speaks." While in New York, he bemoaned his lack of funds but cheerfully wrote his mother about the things he could do at no cost: "My bicycle saves me carfare…I rode up Fifth Avenue to Central Park the other day and spent an hour or so in the National Museum of Art. Yesterday Will Harben and myself went through the East Side. It will all appear—I guess —in my poems later."[9]

In the spring of 1898, Loveman accompanied Harben and his wife on a long vacation tour of Europe. While crossing the Atlantic to London, Loveman continued to write, and three of these poems were published in magazines. By the time the threesome reached Germany in late August, he had grown weary of travel as evidenced in a letter to the family: "I am wearing Swiss shoes, a Paris hat, my hose are from Germany, my hair was trimmed in France, and even all this is part vanity…I want to build up my shattered estate, and I may come back to Dalton, if I don't see a good outlook in New York."[10]

The group returned to New York City in September. From there, Loveman hastened home to the hills of North Georgia. But his stay in Dalton was short-lived because once again he grew restless. So he took his mother and youngest sister Annie

"Robin's Nest" in the early 1920s with Loveman and mother Esther sitting on the front porch. Carpet magnate Robert Shaw bought the property and offered it to the local historical society in the 1990s if funds were raised to renovate it within two years; however, damage proved too extensive and the home was razed in December 1996.

COURTESY OF THE WHITFIELD-MURRAY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

to New York, where they took up residence. Undoubtedly aided by his mother's attention and encouragement, Loveman flourished during this interval. From late 1898 to 1901, he worked at his craft during what became the most productive creative period in his life.

Loveman's breakthrough came in the spring of 1901. As he lay in bed one night in his attic room overlooking Central Park and reflecting on the sound of falling raindrops, he wrote his most recognized poem, "Rain Song":

It isn't raining rain to me,
It's raining daffodils;
In every dimpled drop I see
Wild flowers on the hills.

The clouds of gray engulf the day,
And overwhelm the town;
It isn't raining rain to me,
It's raining roses down.

It isn't raining rain to me,
But fields of clover bloom,
Where every buccaneering bee
May find a bed and room.

A health unto the happy
A fig for he who frets!-
It isn't raining rain to me,
It's raining violets.

The following morning he mailed the poem to *Harper's*. The April issue had already gone to press, but, as the editor wrote in a reply letter, he "stopped the presses to get your little poem in the issue."[11]

"Rain Song" was Loveman's pièce de résistance. He was bombarded with hundreds of requests for autographed copies. The poem was reprinted multiple times at home and abroad. In addition to insertions in a dozen anthologies, the poem was later set to music by Josephine Lambkin Kay. But it wasn't until the early 1920s that the poem soared to its loftiest height, when Al Jolson sang a version called "April Showers" in a Broadway musical. Jolson next performed the song in the country's first talking motion picture, *The Jazz Singer*. The bootlegged rendering of Loveman's work didn't net him a cent in royalties, though, and journalist Franklin P. Adams made some noise about the blatant plagiarism, rebuking the songwriters in the popular column he wrote for the *New York World*. Loveman brought a lawsuit against the alleged plagiarists, but would die before the matter was resolved.

Splitting his time between New York and Dalton, Loveman continued to write acclaimed poetry. But Lippincott rejected "The Gates of Silence With Interludes of Song," possibly due to a shift in Loveman's style. Middle-aged and obsessed by the previous prose. Yet the book received high praise when published by Knickerbocker Press.

Despite his far-reaching critical acclaim, Loveman reaped little monetary reward for his work. His poems sold for $5 or $10 apiece. In the autumn of 1903, he took a job at the *Birmingham News* that paid $25 per week, which was good money at the time. He lived rent-free in a room with his brother's family in Birmingham. His nieces adored him, and he charmed the adults in his circle with entertaining tales of travels and adventures with famous writers.

But as had been his pattern, Loveman left the newspaper after only a week because he missed

Robert Loveman

home. He returned to Robin's Nest, his house in Dalton, and once again settled into the life of a poet. A nature lover, he gardened, bird watched and raised chickens. He took rent-free office space at the newspaper but spent little time there.

Loveman continued to write, but not with the same elegance he once had. "Songs from a Georgia Garden" and "More Echoes From the Gates of Silence with Interludes of Song," published by Lippincott in 1904 as one volume, barely made a ripple in the poetry world. If anything, these books sullied his reputation as a master poet. One critic said this about "More Echoes": "Verses seem less sincere and charmful, more like an afterthought." Another noted, "[His] poems are light in theme and treatment."[12]

Five years passed before Lippincott released Robert's next volumes of poetry. *The Blissful South* and *Hippocrene*, reflecting his now-gloomy outlook on life, were found lacking by all accounts.

After a successful appearance at Dalton High School in September 1908 in which he recited poetry while other performers sang and played musical instruments, Loveman formed a traveling show organized around dramatic readings. An invitation to lecture in West Point, Georgia, was followed by several other appearances. Soon he founded the Robert Loveman Concert Company, which included a harpist and a

One little drop of sunshine sweet

for six weeks. Loveman received $50 per week plus travel expenses. Reviews were favorable, describing Loveman as charming and delightful. "[He] threw his heart and soul into the interpretation of his own poems," the *Atlanta Journal* noted, "weaving them into a whimsical little sketch of his own boyhood in Dalton."[13]

The concert company toured for five seasons, but eventually life on tour—catching trains at odd hours, living in hotel rooms, and poor eating habits—affected Loveman's health, so he once again retreated to Robin's Nest. There, he completed another book, *On the Way to Willowdale—Being Other Songs from a Georgia Garden with Sonnet Interludes*. Lippincott rejected this modest effort, but Dalton printer and friend A.J. Showalter published it.

With the marriage of his younger sister in 1913, Loveman became the sole caretaker of his failing mother. He continued reading, gardening and visiting neighbors. Neighborhood children were drawn to him, accompanying him on nature walks around town. Nicknamed the Children's Poet, Loveman continued his writing.

Stirred by America's entry into the Great European War in 1917, Loveman next wrote thirty-one poems published as *Sonnets of the Strife with Songs* by Cornhill of Boston. With the release of the volume, critics claimed that he finally understood that realism had replaced his romanticism. In part, his tone could be attributed to the deaths of his mother, sister, and Will Harben over a five-year period.

Loveman had one final accolade coming. In 1922, the Georgia General Assembly declared his poem "Georgia," set to music by Lollie Belle Wyie, the official state song. It would remain so until 1979, when it was succeeded by Ray Charles' "Georgia on My Mind."

By February 1923, Loveman's health was so fragile that doctors recommended a visit to a sanitarium in Hot Springs, Arkansas. The hot baths failed to restore him to wellness, and his condition steadily worsened. Morris hastened to the clinic and was by his brother's side when he died on July 9, 1923.

Hundreds attended Loveman's funeral at Dalton's West Hill Cemetery. Condolence messages and tributes poured in from across the country and abroad for "the sweet singer of Georgia." Loveman was "a poet worthy the name" wrote the *Tribune* of Minneapolis. In a brief notice, the *Atlanta Journal* reported the passing of Dalton's beloved poet: "News of the death of Mr. Robert Loveman, Dalton's gifted poet, ...has deeply grieved this city, where he was universally loved, not only as one of the South's sweetest singers, but as a lovable gentleman."

Later, the Loveman family donated Robin's Nest to the Dalton Woman's Club for use as the public Robert Loveman Library.[14] When the library outgrew its space in the 1940s, the home served as a private residence and was later divided into apartments. Carpet magnate Robert Shaw bought the property in 1994 and donated it to the local historical society with the stipulation that funds to restore it be raised within two years. The damages proved too extensive, and Shaw demolished the home on December 10, 1996.

Today, Dalton's North Georgia Regional Library holds a few editions of Loveman's poetry, some of which include notations written by family members and friends. Other than that and the street name preserved by alert residents of the city, little remains in the way of a Loveman legacy, considering the heights to which he had ascended a century ago. Yet in today's tumultuous times, readers who happen upon Loveman's work can feel their souls stirred by its beauty and truth and perhaps a longing for a simpler time.

Endnotes

1. Friedman, Helen Adele. *Robert Loveman: Belated Romanticist*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1921, 10.
2. Friedman, 13.
3. Hoole, William Stanley. *It's Raining Violets: The Life and Poetry of Robert Loveman*. Tuscaloosa: Portals Press, 1981, 13.
4. Hoole, 17.
5. Hoole, 18.
6. Hoole, 28.
7. Hoole, 32.
8. Hoole, 33.
9. Friedman, 42.
10. Friedman, 58.
11. Hoole, 43.
12. Hoole, 58.
13. Alkahest Lyceum Company. "Reviews and Images." Robert Loveman Concert Co., 1909.
14. Westcott, Mrs. G. L. "Brief Early History of Dalton Public Library." Library Histories, Fall, 1997. 14.

Candi Deal is a freelance writer in Dalton.

Last line of Robert Loveman's quatrain, "A Diamond"

Held in eternal bondage there.