

Memories of the Civil War

I, Vernon Ellsworth Field, was born on July 27, 1916 before the United States had entered World War I. My middle name was given to me in the memory of Col. Elmer E. Ellsworth, who had taken down a Confederate flag and was shot for having done this, by the building's owner. I grew up in the home of my parents', each of their fathers had served in the armed forces of the Union. My father's father was a soldier in the army and my mother's father served in the navy aboard the gunboat Paw Paw. The gunboat I believe was on the Mississippi River.

Today, one hundred nineteen years after the end of the Civil War, it may be difficult for people to understand how very much I was aware of this conflict. At the time of my birth only fifty-one years had passed since the end of the war between the North and the South. It may be easier to understand why the War Between the States made such an impression upon me, with two grandfathers who were veterans, because less time had elapsed between the end of that war, than has now passed since the end of World War I. Even World War II ended over thirty-nine years ago.

My grandfather, Severtus McIntosh, died when my mother was a little girl but my grandfather Charles Henry Field lived to be about ninety-three years of age. My grandfather and my father told me a few stories of my grandfather's experiences while in the service. I still remember a few things which I

will pass on to you. I have very little knowledge about his combat encounters and most that I do know are of unit participations which I found in a book, The Hardtack Regiment, by Mark H. Dunkelman and Michael J. Winey. I read this book during the winter of 1983-84 and I was surprised to find a picture of my grandfather, his brother-in-law, Joseph Cullen and a one time neighbor Melvin (Mev) Foster. I was very grateful that someone had collected this war data of the 154th Reg. Needless to say I enjoyed the book very much.

During my childhood I learned or at least was familiar with a number of songs associated with this war. Some of these were: Marching Through Georgia; John Brown's Body; Tramp, Tramp, Tramp; The Battle Hymn of the Republic; We'll Rally Round the Flag; Dixie and Tenting on the Old Camp Ground. Marching Through Georgia had much significance to me because my grandfather Field had made that march under the command of General Sherman.

On this march the union army subsisted on food which they could find along the line of march. My grandfather told of coming to a farm where there was a flock of turkeys. Near the flock was an elderly man splitting wood. It appeared that he may have hoped that his presence might make the foraging soldiers less likely to take his turkeys. My grandfather said that he did not have the heart to take a turkey from in front of the old man without paying for it. He also said that he probably was the only one who paid for any of the birds which were taken.

From their need for food the troops became proficient scavengers. The civilians tried to hide food from them but the

soldiers soon learned many of their methods. A recent wagon track into the woods was enough to arouse their interest for often beneath a brush pile they might find barrels of hams or other food buried. When they suspected that something might have been buried in the soil, which was of a sandy nature, they would probe with their rifle ram rods. If they hit a solid object they would start digging, often finding hidden food. One time they came upon a sorgum press or where one had been and under the pressed stalks they found barrels of sorgum juice or syrup. They filled their canteens with this sweet liquid.

There occurred a foraging incident involving "Mev" Foster. This may or may not have happened during Sherman's march. It seems that there were razor-back hogs in the area and some soldiers were pursuing one with fixed bayonetes. The method hoping to ^{be} used was for one soldier to stab the pig from one side, another soldier to stab the pig from the opposite side and then a third soldier would stab the pig down through the neck or shoulders, thus pretty well ending the pig's career. On this occasion there were very strict orders against firing a gun, for the command wished to keep their presence a secret from the enemy. Foster saw the soldiers chasing the pig and he shot it. He was promptly taken into custody by security personal. At this time his unit was intermingling with another unit and Foster took advantage of this condition to give a false name and to give this other unit as his own. Soon after his arrest a teamster got hurt and his guards went to the teamster's aid.

Foster disappeared into the large group of soldiers who were nearby. "Mev" was not reapprehended. He laughed about the incident but my grandfather felt that "Mev" would likely have been severely punished, perhaps even shot.

There is another little item about Mev Foster. He was a young overgrown sleepy boy with an older man as a tent-mate. This man had come from Germany to America and spoke rather broken English. In his effort to get Mev up and to help get breakfast, he would say, "Mev get up. Bake hotcakes. You no bake none, you no had none."

Diarhea has affected many soldiers down through the centuries. There was at least one soldier who became tired of continually having to lower his trousers when nature called. He, therefore, cut the seat out of his trousers to avoid this constant and unpleasant chore.

There were many fences constructed of wooded rails. My grandfather found other uses for them which their builders probably had never expected. He said that he had seen nights when he was thankful to have two rails to lay upon, which would keep him off the ground and out of the mud. Another use which he found for a rail fence was to support his musket when he was firing at the enemy. One time when he was using a rail fence for this purpose, his hand, which was on the rail, felt the thud of a bullet striking the rail on the other side. It is very possible that this rail may have saved his life.

On Sherman's march from Atlanta to Savannah, Georgia, the troops destroyed many of the railroads. They would tear up the

rails and the ties. The ties were piled and the rails were piled upon the ties; the ties were set on fire; when the middle of the rails became red hot, the soldiers would pick them up and bend them around a telegraph pole or a tree. If they were in a hurry they left the rails in the fire to warp and twist. This, while not as damaging as bending them around a pole or tree, still made them difficult to re-use.

There was a soldier, named Asa Wing, in the 154th Infantry Reg., with my grandfather. It seems that he discovered a way to find some explosive devices which the confederates had buried with the hope of causing casualties to the union army personnel. They referred to these as torpedos. I am reasonably sure that devices of this type are now referred to as land or anti-personnel mines. When the enemy had placed these torpedos, they had driven stakes into the ground to make a measuring point from which they could locate the torpedos. This would make the task of clearing the area for their own use more simple, should they desire. It was this relation of the stake to the torpedo which Asa Wing discovered. He dug up a torpedo held it in his hand and then calmly tossed it into the river.

From Marvin Wing, the grandson of Asa, I was reminded of something which I had long forgotten. During the war Asa was wounded. From Marvin's pointing to the area just back of his right ear, I assume that was where the bullet struck. Asa kept the bullet and wore it. I believe that he had attached it to his pocket watch as a fob. Marvin said that he had given it to one of his nephews.

The first time that I heard about Gettysburg's Devil's Cave was from grandfather, when he remarked, that at the time of the battle there were some devils in it. These devils were confederate soldiers who took shelter there.

There was a time during the battle of Gettysburg that my grandfather and his comrades were nearly surrounded and capture seemed very likely. He said that he had his gun loaded and that he would at least fire one more shot before being taken prisoner. He fired his weapon and he was fortunate enough to see an opening in the enemy lines through which he could and did escape.

Sometime during my grandfather's military service he had some kind of eye infection. I believe though I am not certain that he was at Elmira at the time. Some where, at the hospital, infirmary or barracks, there was medicine in open vessels which soldiers could use to self-treat their individual problems. Someone there had a small monkey which had observed the men putting these various medicines in their eyes. One day the monkey got loose and went to these many dishes of medicine, putting some of each in his eyes. I don't remember how the monkey made out.

One of my grandfather's cousins whose last name was Fay also served in the union army. He may or may not have served in the 154th regiment. He was wounded and one of the things done to treat the wound was to pull a silk handkerchief through the wound to clean and to keep it open.

Than to be a private and wallow in the dirt

As I lay my ten dollars down

The Yankees they will run.

The following lines are those sung by the enlisted recruits:

I'd rather be a private and as a private pass

than to be a captain and kiss the colonel's ass

As I lay my ten dollars down

The Yankees they will run.

The preceding pages were written from memory, about the Civil War. The stories were told to me when I was a young boy by my father C. C. Field and my grandfather, Charles Henry Field. Marvin Wing refreshed my memory about the bullet that hit his grandfather, Asa Wing. The purpose of my writing this was to keep me from forgetting these stories which I hope to share with Mark Dunkelman the co-author of the book "The Hardtack Regiment". This book tells the story of the 154th Infantry Regiment of New York volunteers which ^{were} recruited from Cattaraugus and Chautauqua Counties during the Civil War.

Vernon E. Field

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