

The Colonel and his Lady

One of the big draws to the Corinth Civil War Interpretive Center is the battle flag of the 6th Missouri Infantry. The distinctive Van Dorn Pattern flag, with its bullet holes and bloodstains, is a tangible reminder of the battle that occurred right here in Corinth. A small square of fabric sewed into the center of the banner tells of the fight and how the color bearer, Ensign William Huff, was shot nine times while carrying the flag. There is another story connected to the flag, a love story.

Andrew Eugene Erwin was born in Kentucky in October of 1833, the grandson of the illustrious statesman, Henry Clay. Known as Eugene, he was raised by his grandfather while his father was busy squandering the family fortune in New Orleans. Though Eugene desired an appointment to West Point, Clay already had one grandson at the academy and there was no room for a second. Eugene's career led him to the Pacific Mail Steamship Company and a posting in far away Monterey, California.

While in Monterey Eugene was introduced to the beautiful Josephine Deborah Russell, the daughter of Colonel William Russell, California's Secretary of State. A romance blossomed and soon the couple was deeply in love. They moved to Independence, Missouri, married and started a family of their own.

When the war broke out Eugene entered the Missouri Militia and fought at the battles of Wilson's Creek and Elk Horn Tavern. In April of 1862 he crossed the Mississippi with General Van Dorn's Army of the West and arrived to participate in the Siege of Corinth. By August of '62 he was promoted to Colonel of the 6th Missouri and he became an inspirational and beloved leader.

On October 3, at the Battle of Corinth, he led his men in a ferocious attack during the afternoon not far from the landmark "White House." His first attack was beaten back but he rallied the men and came on again. A bullet ripped through his right foot and he was carried from the field in pain. In a matter of moments Lt. Colonel Hudspeth was wounded followed by Major A.B. Vaughn and Captain F.M. McKinney. The 6th Missouri was without a single field officer and when the smoke cleared it was found that of the 300 men who entered the fight, 214 became casualties, a staggering 71% of the men engaged.

Erwin and his 6th Missouri were sent to Vicksburg where Eugene, weakened by his wound, fell ill, probably from tuberculosis. When Josephine heard of her husband's illness she set out on an incredible journey. In the company of her eldest daughter, 10 year old Lula, she received a pass through the Union lines to Memphis where she secured a wagon and set out over bad roads for the 250 mile trek to Vicksburg. A perilous trip under any conditions, the way was fraught with dangers for an unaccompanied woman and a little girl; enemy patrols, lawless Southern guerrillas, treacherous roads and little help along the way. What she did was foolhardy but she must have had a guardian angel; in early April she and Eugene were reunited in Grand Gulf.

Despite his sickness Eugene was compelled to lead his regiment into battle as Grant's forces crossed the Mississippi below Vicksburg and began to move north. His command did well in the fighting around Grand Gulf but they were pushed back and Erwin suffered a second wound to his foot. The wound and his frail health forced him to give up command of the regiment and he retired to Vicksburg to be cared for by his wife and daughter. Soon he was joined by his men and the rest of the army as Grant's men surrounded and lay siege to the city.

When the 6th Missouri had entered the city they were carrying a new battle flag, a blue banner with a red border and a white cross along the flagpole. All of the Missouri regiments had been given the new flags and Col. Erwin gave the shot torn red flag to his wife for safekeeping. He asked her to protect it and to someday sew a bit of cloth to the center to describe the fight at Corinth. As Eugene slowly regained his health, Josephine was often seen on the front lines strolling along the defensive earthworks.

On June 25, Grant ordered an attack against the city and in the course of the engagement Eugene rose from his sickbed and led his men into the heaviest of the fighting. He was instantly killed by two bullets in his chest. Nine days later the city surrendered and the newly widowed Josephine, pregnant with her fourth child, was faced with returning to her home in Missouri. With no means or prospects of returning home she turned to a friend who arranged a meeting with General Grant. To protect the precious battle flag from capture she sewed it to the inside of her dress and was wearing it when she met with the Union commander. When he heard the story Grant gave her a pass through Union lines and transportation on a steamboat bound for St. Louis. As she was leaving his headquarters Grant extended his hand but the grief stricken widow could not take it, but thanked him for his kindness and left.

After the war the widow Erwin eventually moved to Kentucky and settled with her Clay family relatives and took up horse breeding. She fell in love with John Clay, her late husband's uncle, and they eventually married but she did not forget Eugene. To honor his memory she attended every reunion of the 6th Missouri and always brought the precious red battle flag with her. She sewed the cloth to its center as Eugene had asked her.

Before she died in 1920 she told her family that the only regret she had in life was that she did not accept Grant's hand when it was offered in friendship at Vicksburg.