



Stones River National Battlefield

3501 Old Nashville Highway
Murfreesboro, TN 37129
Phone: (615) 893-9501, Fax: (615) 893-9508

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Donor Name: Alan Wetzel
Address: 8401 S. Kolb Road #555
City: Tucson State: AZ Zipcode: 85756
Phone: 520861-1550 Fax: _____

Significant Person's Name: Peggy Wetzel
Unit: 84th Ill. Infantry
Richard H. McClintock

List Contents of Donation Below:

Letters (Digital Copies)

**A Cannoneer's Story: The Third Gun, 5th Wisconsin Battery
by Private Charles C. Cunningham, Monroe, Wisconsin**

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Many of the boys have asked me to write something about my experience at the battle of Stone River, Tenn. I will therefore leave the position of the army and battlelines, etc. to history, and confine myself principally to those with me on the third gun thinking "Why should kind words ne'er be said of our messmates-till they are dead."

The 5th Wisconsin battery, commanded by Capt. O.F. Pinney and attached to Col. P. Sindey Post's Brigade, Brig. Gen. Jeff. C. David's Division, and Maj. Gen. McCook's right wing of the army, at the above named battle, left Nashville the latter part of December 1862, and reconnoitered and skirmished as it advanced.

On Christmas Day, the battery and brigade was sent out on a reconnaissance and foraging expedition. I was detailed as one among the number to remain in camp and cook rations for the men in our detachment when they returned, which consisted of a camp kettle full of beans and a kettle of coffee. Our mess had some robins also that the boys had caught in the canebrake near our camp the night before. While watching the dinner cooking and writing a letter home, a slave belonging to the plantation where we were encamped came to me and asked me, "Would young massa jes' as life go and hab some dinner wid him and his old Chloe in his cabin." I thanked him and said I would. I could not tarry long at the slave's quarters, bur returned to duty after enjoying a good meal. I thought of the last Christmas at home in 1860.

On the following morning, Dec. 26, we broke camp and marched towards Nolensville through a very heavy rain storm. The wheels of the artillery were one mass of mud. The battery was engaged in the skirmish at Nolensville and did effective work; then proceeded toward Murfreesboro or Stone River. The army looked grand when marching in line of battle to take up their respective positions with the silken folds of the flags and banners of blue unfurled from regiment after regiment, while strains of music from the bands filled the air with melody and aroused my whole soul to a sentiment I cannot describe.

On the night of the 30th, the command bivouacked in a cedar thicket near the enemy's lines. No fire were allowed, so we ate our hardtack and raw bacon with the accustomed coffee. All the cannoneers were ordered to sleep at their posts, with accouterments on; the horses remained harnessed and hitched up all night. Dave Welty and I were sitting on our caisson until late in the evening. He was talking to me about his home and mother and sisters, and of the songs they used to sing. I asked him to hum one to me and in a low, sweet tone he hummed 'Belle Brandon.' We then lay down by our gun to get a little rest.

Early next morning the 31st, we left the cedar thicket and moved until we were rushed into action, taking a position in a cornfield. We commenced firing briskly shot and shell, until the enemy were advancing too close, then used canister. Clark Baker was No. 1 and his post was at the cannon's mouth. He stood there cool, brave, and grand. He was in the nobility of his manhood. His coolness inspired me, the youngest boy on our gun; and on that battlefield, with the glistening bayonets of

advancing rebel battalions. I learned that my friendship for my messmate Clark Baker was born amid shot and shell and rebel bullets.

“And while the battle was raging most fiercely,
And death seemed to press ‘round us all,
He stood so brave and undaunted,
I trembled for fear he would fall;
And I thought when the contest is over,
Should we live to lie down by our gun,
I would press the brave hand then in action,
And tell him what the morning had done;
What I learned in that terrible battle,
On that field, ‘mid the shells and balls;
How I thought I would not leave him,
If he should be one who should fall.

Opposite Clark stood Dave Welty, fearless and strong, in the prime of his young days, with the expression on his fair face that each charge he inserted would do its duty. Billy Ball was serving vent, with every movement and every feature bent on strict duty to his country and flag. As I passed with the shot, shell, or canister opposite to him to meet John Worick, our eyes would sometimes meet, and told his thoughts more than words, “Which of these boys will fall?” Charley Barnes with his warm heart and nature and unflinching firmness said to me, “We cannot all survive these rebel bullets.” I think Will Preston handled the lanyard. It was done with dexterity. He was an active boy, true blue, loyal, and brave. Milt South was gunner and put in many well directed shots, the canister being very effective. Brad W. Stout was the Sergeant of the gun. He was a fine looking and fearless soldier; his bearing either in the saddle or on foot was everything that could be desired. His nature was warm and friendship sincere; he would do anything in his power for his comrades. He knew he had a splendid detachment of men that he could depend upon; and everybody liked Brad.

The volleys of musketry and booming of artillery, screeching and bursting shells with the movement of troops and the thundering of both armies, made us all know that the battle raged fiercely and that the approaching columns of rebels were pressing us when we saw our infantry support falling back. Many of the horses of the battery were wounded, some dying, some killed; the riders were busy extricating such from the limbers and caissons. Amid this ordeal, the battery remained, firing canister at the advancing rebel ranks. Dave was wounded, but helped load the last charge, when we were ordered to fall back. While the last gun was being limbered up, I helped Dave mount the lead team, the rider (Charley Taft) giving up his place to him. The blood was flowing freely from his wound, and left crimson stains upon my overcoat. I only had time to say, knowing he would be placed in an ambulance as soon as possible, “Good bye, Dave. I cannot begin to tell you how sorry I feel and how I will miss you; you must hurry up and get well and come back to us.” He replied, “So will I miss you Charley and all the boys, but I’ll not forget you no matter where I go.”

Brave Capt. Pinney and many others of the command were seriously wounded. Clark found Mort Campbell of another gun wounded badly. He wanted to lie down. Clark said, “No! The rebels are right after us!” He halted one of the caissons and put him on it and held him there while passing through

the woods, sending one of the boys ahead to hold an ambulance, as he saw everything was moving back rapidly. After placing him in the ambulance, the caisson went on.

When that grand and noble rider "Curly" Woprick came along with a Parrott gun (the horses were all killed except his wheel team), he was urging his horses on until he reached the opening where there was a hill; the horses drew it half way up and were completely tuckered out. The glorious old 59th Illinois boys were near and falling back with the other staunch grand regiments of our brigade. Clark asked some of the boys of the 59th if they would help him run the gun a few rods up the hill so Curly could get it off. They answered, "Yes, that the damn rebels shouldn't have the gun anyway." Some of the boys took hold with a will and helped run the gun to the top of the hill. If any of these boys are now living, it would be pleasant to know the fact and hear from them.

Capt. Pinney was being taken off the field by brave young Lieut. George Q. Gardner and private Joe Hoffman when said to them seeing the enemy pressing onward: "My God ! Leave me here, George, and save the battery." At his request, they reluctantly laid him down on the battlefield with his sword by him, and in a short time he was captured, a wounded prisoner with many others.

When I left the field, I had two cases of canister in the gunner's bag. Charley Barnes had taken them out of the limber chest and laid them on the ground. Thinking we would take another position immediately, I carried them through the woods but abandoned one case by dropping it in a hollow stump, as they were very heavy. When the rebel cavalry charged, the right wing of the army was routed by the concentration of rebel forces to crush it. History shows the cause of the disaster to that wing of the army that advanced so proudly a day or two before.

Seeing I would be taken prisoner, and that the battery was captured, I threw away the gunner's bag so that it would not fall into rebel hands, as it would make them a fine haversack. I saw smoke rising from the wagon train of supplies, which had been fired by the Texas Rangers. It proved to be our division train of rations. I feared the ammunition train would be fired also and expected every moment to hear the explosion. I tried to reach the center where Gen. Thomas was engaged, but was overtaken and captured by a Ranger who rode up on a gallop with revolver in hand. Nearest me was an infantryman who had fired his last cartridge and whom the Ranger shot down as he advanced. Turning to me with the revolver cocked, he demanded my firearms. We looked at each other. I told him that I had none, that I was a cannoneer. He then said, "I'll not take your young life, but take off your overcoat and hand it up here," and with it went the mittens that warm and noble-hearted Charley Barnes had loaned me early in the morning, and which had been sent to him by a young lady friend at home.

The Ranger threw my coat upon the pommel of his saddle along with others and a silk flag torn from its staff. I wanted to tear it from his saddle before he galloped off. The prisoners were being marched toward the rebel lines. I found Corporal Aaron Eley and O.D. Snow among the number. I was in no hurry to march up for in the distance I saw our cavalry forming, and hoped they would charge quickly. Soon gen. Davis and staff appeared on the scene. A Texan nearest me fired twice at the General whom I heard say "Kill the damn rebel!" By this time our cavalry were charging and driving the Rangers and soon we were recaptured. I cannot express how glad I felt and started to find our gun. The riders had left the cannoneers in all directions, trying to save the guns. They were all brave boys.

I found part of the battery, commanded by Lieut. George Q. Gardner, whose courage and bravery were always conspicuous, and enhanced by being our youngest officer. We were placed in position and the worked the guns with diminished numbers. The evening roll call was a very sad one,

and as the names were being called and someone would answer "Killed" "Wounded" "Captured" and "Unknown." It made a feeling of sorrow pass over the soul. I know it was with a tremulous voice that I answered for Dave. We lay down that night by our posts, ready for action at a moment's notice. I thought of the night before and of my messmate Dave as I lay beside Clark, by the gun, whose cheeks were streaked with the powder and smoke of the morning's battle; and his hand that had handled the sponge and rammer so bravely and fearlessly, and that had helped the wounded man and saved his life; that had helped to get the gun off the field, and at his post at the cannon's mouth as soon as our gun was in position again-that hand was resting; it had nobly done its duty.

New Year's day we changed position and in the afternoon crossed Stone River to reinforce the left wing. The water came rushing down madly over the ford, and almost came up to the ammunition chests. We were placed behind hastily constructed works. The sharpshooters kept up a continual firing at us. Our rations were short, as our commissary supplies had been burned by the rebels the day before. Brad had a partly cured pickled ham given him by an infantry soldier, he having foraged two from a house on the picket line. Some of us ate it raw, while others roasted slices on a stick over the coals. During a lull in the contest, Clark went to a house on the picket line in the face of the sharpshooters to get some of the meat for us. None of us would risk our lives, even if we were hungry; but the bold attempt was unrewarded for the barrel had been emptied of its contents by other pickets.

Every soldier present will remember the terrible grandeur of the battle with the center; the roar and the booming of artillery, the thrilling volley after volley of musketry, and the incessant crash from both armies. It was a dreadful and indescribable tempest. Only a soldier knows what it was.

When the enemy evacuated Murfreesboro, we recrossed the river and camped by the Nashville pike. I found a chunk of salt pork in the road in the mud which did good service. I obtained permission from Lieut. Charley Humphrey to go and see Capt. Pinney with other of the boys. We found him in a planter's mansion, which the rebels used as a hospital. I went upstairs with my heart filled with sorrow. When I entered the room, he reached out his hand to take mine and in his pain he said: I am glad you came to see me. Charley, you must think something of your captain. Am glad you escaped unharmed. You must take care of yourself, my boy, I won't be with you."

When we went into camp in the timber near the Shelbyville pike, the strongest and bravest hearts more forcibly felt the bond that bound us together as companions in arms. Dave's blanket was not unfolded as it had been a few nights before when we lay down together by the old third gun. But Clark, and Brad, and Charley, and Bill, and the others members of the detachment were there. I felt proud of each one. I thought more of the boys on the other guns and those who commanded us. Of the riders on the third gun, the beauty of each one's character in battle shines with the same brilliancy as the cannoneers. And no doubt in the army, life 'round the other guns, and on picket lines, and in battle, in camp or on the march, many of the boys in blue have had an experience similar to my own with some comrades with whom they have messed and bunked in the army days.