

Civil War Sesquicentennial Recalls local Soldiers

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

This year, 2011, is the Sesquicentennial of the start of the Civil War. Today's story is inspired by receipt of rather identical Civil War accounts from two alert readers, former local resident Diane (Alexander) Pietenpol, and Ben Bromley of the News-Republic. They tell the story of a remarkable set of coincidences that occurred in the Civil War era involving three local young men.

In a series of Civil War stories several years ago I reported on the staggering statistics of that conflict. Sauk County, with a population then of 18,693, raised 1646 soldiers, of which 285 failed to return. In this article we wish to speak briefly about three Town of Freedom and Westfield soldiers, proudly serving in the famed Company A, 6th Wisconsin Regiment.

The Story of Two Local Soldiers

First, consider Franklin Gerlaugh and William Black Jr. In a series of coincidences, these young friends shared the same birth day, went to country school together, and enlisted together on the same day. On September 17, 1862 at the battle of Antietam, according to the Weekly Wisconsin newspaper, they fought together, and were killed at almost the same instant.

According to the report, Gerlaugh, was struck in the head and was the first to fall. "Black turned his eyes away from the dead face of his comrade, only to receive a wound in the throat, which was immediately fatal". Records state that shortly after their deaths, the two 19 year old friends were buried in the same grave, wrapped only in their blankets.

Gerlaugh's Father later traveled to the burial site with plans to return the young men's bodies to the Town of Freedom for burial, perhaps in the area of the present Rock Hill Cemetery, but this was not possible. The decomposing bodies could no longer be accepted for the long train trip to Kilbourn, (now W. Dells) and thence to the Town of Freedom area. Philip Cheek, of whom we have written several times, was helpful in locating the crude burial site for Mr. Gerlaugh.

Gerlaugh then arranged for reburial at the Keedysville (Maryland) Cemetery, with one headstone for the two young soldiers. At a future date the bodies were again moved, this time to the Antietam National Cemetery. Appropriately, their graves are separate but side by side, but now with separate but identical headstones. Also appropriately, the Cemetery was dedicated in 1867 on the date of the 1862 battle, Sept 17.

Diane also sent a copy of a letter regarding the boys' deaths and burial. Sent to Diane's Great Aunt, Cora Biege, it was signed by a Mrs. Emma Mertzke.

John Alexander and the Regimental Flag

Also in the same regiment was Corporal John Alexander, and he too was to become a casualty on the same day of that terrible battle. As reported in an earlier article, the color-bearer had been shot



The Dedication of the Antietam National Cemetery

Three Years after the Civil War ended

and John stepped forward to pick up the regimental flag. Shortly thereafter he was mortally wounded. John Alexander is Diane (Alexander) Pietenpol's Great Great Uncle.

Bloodied and torn, the regimental flag that Alexander raised survived the war, but was probably among the regimental flags later used shamefully in post-war election campaigns for political purposes. This was called the 'Bloody Shirt' campaign, as related in an earlier article (Dewel, Sauk County and Baraboo, Vol. I, pages 172-177).

We are also grateful to the News-Republic's Ben Bromley, who sent confirming information which he found recently in the State Journal. Antietam, on Sept 17, 1862, was the bloodiest battle in U.S. Military history—in a few hours, 24,000 Americans became casualties. We believe that records will show that other Sauk County men fell on that same fateful day, to know "the sleep that knows no wakening."

Diane reports that the Gerlaugh farm was the property on Hoot Owl Road now occupied by the Berry Farmer. The boys had attended rural school together, but the Black farm was probably in Westfield Twp. then, not far from the Alexander farm nearby in Freedom Twp. It appears that all three families attended the Westfield German Methodist church, still standing and well-maintained today.

This article is dedicated not only to Gerlaugh, Black, and Alexander, but also to the other 282 Sauk County casualties of that uncivil Civil War to preserve the Union.

SIDEBAR-----

History of Veterans Day

Veterans Day is on Friday, November 11 this year. Unlike some other national holidays, which are moved to the nearest Monday, Veterans Day is always officially on November 11, no matter what day of the week it falls on. Some localities still use the following Monday for observance.

Originally it was called Armistice Day, for the 11th month, 11th day and 11th hour which ended World War I. The far more numerous sacrifices of World War II, followed by Korea and Vietnam, caused Congress to rename it Veterans Day. Now, with veterans from conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan plus intervening casualties from other confrontations, Veterans Day honors servicemen from all wars, living and dead.

Rarely mentioned today, however, are the massive sacrifices suffered in the Civil War, which does not have its own day of remembrance. Therefore many descendants include Civil War ancestors in their solemn observances of Veterans Day. Incidentally, Sauk County graves also honor not only a Revolutionary soldier but two veterans of Napoleon's Russian Campaign, as written in a previous article.