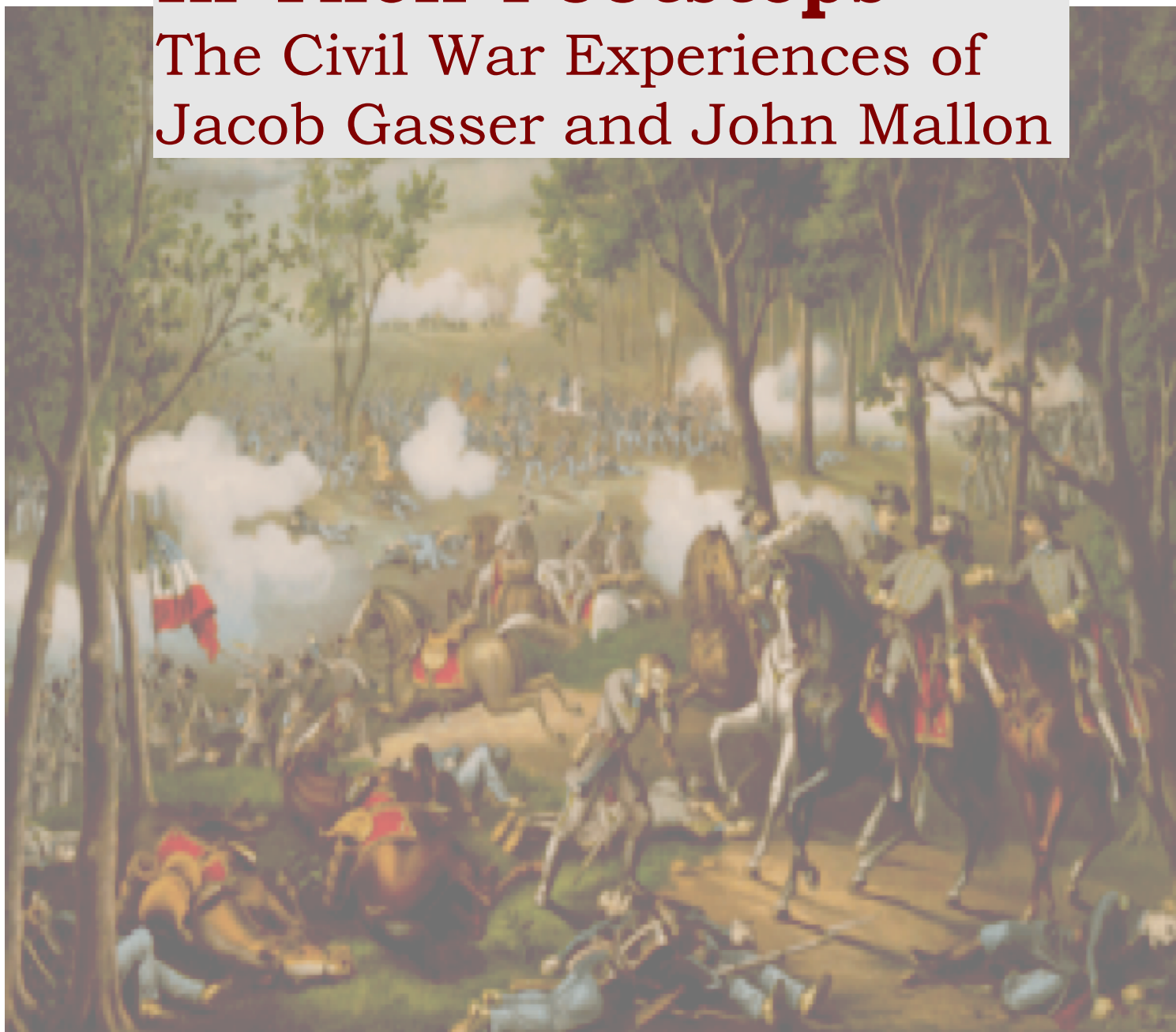


In Their Footsteps - The Civil War Experiences of Jacob Gasser and John Mallon



By Robert Gold
Edited by Susan Sprecher

Introduction

When we picked Virginia as our vacation destination, we had no clue it would take us on such a personal and emotional journey.

Robert wanted to tour two of the most famous Civil War battle sites: Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville. Stonewall Jackson's campaign in the latter is still taught at West Point as one of the most audacious in history. It was the battle Stephen Crane writes of in The Red Badge of Courage. We stayed nearby in Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy. But when we made those plans, we did not know that my great grandfather Jacob Gasser (paternal) took part in those two battles. Or that my great great grandfather John Mallon (maternal) was a POW in Richmond's notorious Libby Prison.

Almost as an after-thought, Robert mentioned to our hired guide that I had two grandfathers who fought in the Civil War. He urged us to get their names, regiments to see if they participated in the Virginia arena. If yes, he promised to put us in their footsteps. A call to Aunt Nita reminded me there was an obituary for John Mallon. Emails to Cousins Nola and Rhonda put it in my hands. Then, I pulled out Uncle Stanley's box of articles (yes, I still have some) and of course, found a document that provided the needed information for Jacob Gasser.

And so -- this past fall – we walked in our grandfathers' footsteps.



The following account is based on what Richard Chapman – our guide and a passionate student of the Civil War - showed us and on Robert's follow-up research. Uncle Stanley –you tried to get us to do this twenty years ago. Sorry it took us so long.

Susan

Private Jacob Gasser, 26th Wisconsin Volunteers

This is the story of the Civil War experience of a young man - Jacob Gasser. It is also the tale of the unit he served in: Company K of the 26th Wisconsin Volunteers.

Jacob Gasser was born in 1838 in Switzerland. He came to the United States, in 1856, at the age of 17, and resided in German-speaking Sauk County, WI, population 20,000 - a tight-knit area of friends and fellow farmers. In late summer of 1862, in response to a call from President Lincoln for another 300,000 volunteers to fight the raging Civil War, Jacob enlisted in Company K- the Sigel Rifles of the 26th Wisconsin Volunteers. He was mustered into the army on August 15, 1862. All of Company K was raised in Sauk County and included ten officers and 103 enlisted men. (Among them names still familiar in the county: Ott, Schneller, Von Wald, Fuchs, Diehl.) The 26th Wisconsin contained nine other companies, totaling 1101 men. The officer corps of the regiment was entirely German speaking as were most of the enlisted men. Some joined for patriotism, some to see the world, some for the grand adventure and others because friends and neighbors signed up. Whatever their individual reason for enlisting, they had joined an army trying to put down a secessionist civil war in the South. And they were now at war.

Company K spent a number of weeks in Madison, at Camp Randall; then in Milwaukee, along with the rest of the 26th Wisconsin, learning the basics of soldiering. They got seven weeks to turn farmers into soldiers, teaching them to march, obey orders, bivouac, and most importantly learn to shoot a 59 caliber Springfield musket.

Almost immediately, the ranks of the regiment and the company began to shrink as twelve men died of disease picked up in the close confines of a civil war camp. Never before, had these young men been so close to others for such a protracted period of time. Teaching hygiene, in the cramped encampment, was as important as the instruction of soldiering.

October 6, 1862: the regiment marched out of its camp in Milwaukee to trains waiting to take them to the war. They marched with great fanfare through streets lined with crowds, cheering for their new heroes. They waved the American flag, bands played, and one can imagine many an eye in the crowd was filled with tears for their departing soldiers. The men marching off could not have imagined what awaited them.

The Battle of Fredericksburg

By early November 1862, the 26th was now part of the 11th Corp of the Army of the Potomac. The unit of 12,000 men was also primarily German speaking; its division commander Franz Sigel, a German. After long tiring marches, the regiment found itself on the north side of the Rappahannock River, right across from the small Virginia town of Fredericksburg - only 50 miles from the southern capital city of Richmond. Stationed on a bare hillside, the division had a panoramic view of the river as well as the Confederate defenses.

During the Battle of Fredericksburg, fought the first week of December 1862, Jacob's unit had a birds-eye view of what turned out to be a Union Army disaster. Union troops crossed the river while under fire and Jacob's unit, which was kept in reserves, watched the Union repeatedly attempt (and fail) to storm up Marye's Heights. It was a bloodbath for the Army of the Potomac: over 13,000 casualties out of a force of 75,000 men. Jacob would have seen the disaster unfolding - heard the cannon fire, the musketry, the screams of the wounded and the dying as they were brought back across the river. He would have seen more blood and gore than he could ever have imagined. His unit was not engaged, but Jacob got his initiation into the gore and bloodshed that was the Civil War.

The picturesque serenity of the Lacy House (seen below and where the 11th was stationed) stands in stark contrast to what transpired 150 years ago. The 11th Corp occupied the farm and turned the home into a hospital. Clara Barton almost lost her life here when two soldiers she was talking to were felled by a cannon from across the river. As I snapped these scenic shots, our guide pointed to a window right above my head: It was the operating room and the window through which they tossed the amputated legs and arms. The pile, he said, reached up to the window. The walls and floors so soaked with blood, the house was never habitable again. I was jarred this way throughout the day and forced to think about a war and a man who lived that war.

Susan



Following the battle, the Union retreated back over the river. The Union made one more attempt to cross back over in January 1863. Unfortunately for Jacob and the Union Army, the weather turned wintry and the march to the river became known as the Mud March. The rains lasted a solid week and the army literally sank into the mud: some claimed it was over five feet deep. Horses, mules and wagons were swallowed up in the gooey brown mass. After this last attempt, the Union Army withdrew into winter quarters as weather in central Virginia prohibited winter campaigning.

All that winter soldiering had been disappointing. Their German officer corps was replaced, as was Commanding General Franz Sigel, who was replaced by a man who intensely disliked Germans: O.O. Howard. The soldiers must have had their fill of poor leadership, rotten salt pork, hardtack filled with weevils and muddy disease-

ridden camps. More soldiers were dying of disease than from actually fighting. Gone was any romance or glory of war. Soldiering, no longer a lark was something to simply survive.

As spring 1863 arrived, a new general took over the Union Army. His name was Joseph Hooker and he had a master plan to win the war. The Hooker-led Union Army stole a march on Lee's Confederate Army, which was strung out along the Rappahannock River. The 26th Wisconsin, as part of the 11th Corps and along with most of Hooker's forces, marched up-river from Fredericksburg and crossed over into a dense forest called the Wilderness. Hooker based his army around a small crossroads village called Chancellorsville. He hoped by turning Lee's left flank he would force Lee to come out from behind his fortifications and fight a numerically superior Union Army. Lee had 55,000 men; Hooker could count on his 130,000. The 26th Wisconsin became the extreme right hand regiment, of the extreme right hand flank - left dangling at the end of the four-mile Union line. The defense ended with them and it seemed only a matter of days before Lee would retreat and Richmond would fall. The war's end seemed so near.

The Battle of Chancellorsville

"Why did we run? Well, those who didn't run are there yet."

*Private William B. Southerton
75th Ohio Volunteers*

In the late afternoon of May 2, 1863, in the camp of the 26th Wisconsin, it must have seemed as if the world had gone to sleep. It was so quiet. The air was still and hot; the canvas tents stifling. Campfires were lit, food was cooking and guns were stacked. Men's thoughts drifted toward home and the end of the war. All was quiet as the men settled into the approaching evening.

Out of the woods and towards their campsite, came a rush of rabbits, deer and wild turkeys. Then there was a silence. The men looked around. Some stood up; some just turned their heads at the sight. And then the woods exploded. Suddenly there was a great roar, screaming, and mass explosions of musketry and cannon fire. Screaming men and bullets were everywhere, as 24,000 of Stonewall Jackson's Confederate troops poured out of the woods directly at the 26th

Wisconsin and the right flank of the Union army and shot volley after volley into the faces of the regiment.



The 26th Wisconsin was in the most vulnerable position, camped closest to the woods from which the Confederates attacked.

Company K, and the entire 26th Wisconsin, were engulfed and swept away in 15 minutes of chaos and terror. The entire 11th Corps was routed and the Union Army stood at the precipice of another disaster. Officers tried to rally the men, but too late to save them. All regimental order vanished: the 26th nearest the woods simply broke and ran under the Confederate onslaught. Every attempt to rally the Union Right only offered Jackson's infantry a more inviting target. The human toll was devastating. Unit after unit of the 11th Corps fled the field for the safety of the rest of the Union Army.

After a three-day bloodletting, the Union Army retreated back across the river yet again to lick its wounds. The Union's 11th Corps -which had entered the battle with 12,169 men- suffered 517 men killed, 1218 wounded and 1682 captured or missing. A loss rate of over 25%. Company K suffered 13 dead and 27 wounded. Blood and death was everywhere. Friends and neighbors dead, wounded and missing. This was much worse than Fredericksburg, because this time they were in the middle of this hell.

Many tried to scapegoat the 11th Corps for cowardice, for running away. (After all, most of them were foreigners and did not even speak English. What did you expect?) Why regiments decide to advance or to retreat at any battle is a mystery: see enough friends and neighbors go down, they are convinced they have to withdraw? Their lack of faith in officers? Company K, the 26th and the 11th Corps experienced both. Company K suffered 40 casualties out of around 80-90 men; a rate of almost 50%. One out of every two men Jacob knew were now dead, wounded, or missing.



(A Marker at the Battle site.)

“A spirit of depression and lack of confidence manifests itself everywhere”

Frederick Winkler, the 26th Wisconsin

It was described as a stampede and the 11th Corp was later dubbed “The Flying Dutchmen”—a derisive term that suggests cowardice and places blame. In fact, they succeeded in holding back Confederate progress until dark. There are numerous accounts that the 11th Corp and the Wisconsin 26th acting bravely in a nearly hopeless situation. Major General Captain Shurz sought (in vain) a congressional hearing to set the record straight. He wrote in the New York Times: “A Scapegoat was wanted for the remarkable blunders which had caused the failure of the Chancellorsville Campaign.” And, historians say the 11th Corps fit the bill.

The Battle of Gettysburg

After what history considers his greatest victory, Robert E. Lee led his victorious Southern Army north in an invasion of the north into Maryland and Pennsylvania. The Union Army, now led by George Meade, tried to stay between Lee and Washington D.C. Finally, on July 1, 1863, less than 60 days since Chancellorsville, the two armies clashed again at a small Pennsylvania crossroads town called Gettysburg.

The Union's 11th Corps was one of the first three to arrive on the rapidly expanding battlefield at Gettysburg. The Corps, marching into battle, was now down to 9197 effectives; Jacob among them. After some preliminary fighting, Jacob's regiment and corps were routed again by a tidal wave assault by Confederates attacking from two directions. The rout started with men taking small steps backward while re-loading, then taking larger steps backward while the Confederates closed in on them from two or three hundred yards away. Soon, the retreating line began to lose individual soldiers; then groups of them. Finally the entire line panicked, turned and ran. They fled the immediate area of battle, up the hill to a ridge that overlooked the town. The ridge was named Cemetery Ridge. Yet another disaster befell the 11th Corps and the 26th.

Gettysburg was another unprecedented bloodletting. During the three-day battle, the 11th Corps suffered 368 killed, 1922 wounded and 1511 captured or missing. Another 356 men would die within a few weeks from their wounds. 3801 men, out of the 9197 present for duty, were put out of action: a loss rate of 41%. The 26th entered the battle with 516 men and they suffered 41 killed and 72 wounded. Company K suffered 6 killed and 7 wounded out of 50 or so men fit for duty. A young lifetime worth of friends, comrades, neighbors and relatives gone. And not just gone, but blown apart in a sea of gory blood.

Retreating and running does not begin to cover what happened. The unit was declared, “shattered.” (Today we call it posttraumatic stress.) Some - who had a bellyful of terror, fighting, blood, and suffering – outright deserted. Remember, these men were less than a year removed from their homes and families; nine months from their glorious send-off, and just two months away from the hell that befell them at Chancellorsville.

Amazingly, they reformed up on Cemetery Ridge and fought bravely throughout the rest of the three-day battle. The Union Army rallied after the first days’ disaster and rout and went on to win what turned out to be the deciding battle of the Civil War. But, the war did not end for either Company K or the 26th Wisconsin.

Though hollowed out by the sixty days of blood baths that were Chancellorsville and Gettysburg, and reduced to barely 350 men, the 26th Wisconsin, along with their hated commander O.O. Howard, were transferred to William Sherman’s western army. They fought many more battles and suffered more deaths, but nothing to compare to what they experienced that summer.

Jacob was part of this history. He saw the blood, the dead, the wounded. He saw the men from his pre-enlistment disappear in the smoke and destruction of battle. How could he not have been affected by what he saw? In 1863, he was all of 25 years old, from a small tight-knit farming community, which made an enormous sacrifice to keep the Union whole. As the contemporary saying went: Jacob had seen the elephant.

Whatever happened to Jacob that afternoon at Gettysburg no one will ever know. He was reported missing; then reported “possibly” deserted. But let the record show, he was mustered out of service with an honorable discharge two years later, on the 20th of June 1865, along with the rest of Company K and the 26th Wisconsin. The Grand Army of the Republic honored him after his death. Jacob returned home and married

a local girl in 1869, raised a family (including our grandmother Anna Gasser Sprecher) and made a life. Jacob died in his own bed in 1916.

Private John Mallon, the 19th Wisconsin

John Mallon was born in 1837, in Cayuga County in New York State. He moved to Reedsburg, Wisconsin, in 1850, at the age of 13, with a married older sister. He spent the next ten years there.

Following the bombardment of Fort Sumter in April 1861, President Lincoln called for a further 300,000 troops to put down the rebellion. John enlisted in Company A of the 19th Wisconsin Volunteers. The enlistment took place at Camp Utley in Racine on January 26th, 1862, and the unit was mustered into federal service on February 22nd: 1122 Wisconsin boys.

Early on in their service, the unit was called upon to guard Confederate prisoners at Camp Randall. John and his mates must have gotten an earful from these early prisoners as these men were the first to rally to the southern cause: they were true believers - not afraid to remind their guards the war would be short and the South victorious. While not the most exciting duty, this assignment allowed Company A and the rest of the 19th to become thoroughly trained: to learn the ways of soldiering. They were taught to march in formation, to police their campsite, to shoot their newly issued muskets. These skills -learned in their early military apprenticeship – must have benefitted them. For John, perhaps his experience in a POW camp, aided him when he was a POW.

On June 2nd, 1862, the regiment left Camp Randall and headed off to war. Their first stop was Washington D.C., where they disembarked at the train station and paraded

past the President and his guests at the White House. They marched up Pennsylvania Avenue to the capital where they bivouacked on the capital grounds. They embarked four days later, this time by ship, to Norfolk, Virginia. Near Fortress Monroe, at the tip of what was called the Peninsula, it was only eighty miles from the Rebel capital at Richmond. They arrived on June 6th and went into camp as a reserve to the Federal forces currently engaged with Robert E. Lee's Rebel Army in a campaign that came to be referred to as the Seven Days Battle. John's unit did not see combat and spent the time getting acclimated to a southern summer and assorted camp diseases. All that summer and throughout 1863, the 19th was engaged in skirmishing, patrolling and small engagements in southeast Virginia. Though they were never engaged in any of the large battles currently waged in northern Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania, they suffered casualties in lower intensity fights. (A bullet can kill a man in a small battle as well as a large one.) Disease was also taking its toll on the regiment. Campsites in malaria-ridden wetlands, under less than hygienic conditions, claimed as many casualties as did actual battle.

The 19th Wisconsin fought minor skirmishes and disease and boredom as the Civil War headlines of great battles took place elsewhere. What they did see clearly and up close was slavery and its horrific circumstances. The unit operated in an area known as the Tidewater. This part of Virginia boasted many large plantations with hundreds of slaves. The presence of units, such as the 19th, allowed slaves to escape and find freedom behind the shield of federal units. Union soldiers saw firsthand what freedom meant to these people. And what their contribution meant. The issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation that summer only clarified what they were fighting for and what they were fighting against.

Finally in October 1863 the regiment saw major action. The unit was transferred out of the military backwater of southeast Virginia to the military district of North Carolina on the coast, in New Berne. It was another backwater assignment for the unit where they were responsible for both the defense of New Berne as well as

running a camp for escaped and escaping slaves from the area around their camp. Again they bore witness to the horror of slavery and the joy of freedom.

By spring 1864, the war had been raging for three years. Casualties on both sides were catastrophic and rising quickly with Grant's Overland Campaign in northern Virginia. Though the Union had a larger population to draw upon for soldiers, the draft riots the prior summer dampened any enthusiasm for a further draft. The Union was starting to run low on new infantrymen. So, the 19th was transferred again: this time to the Army of the James, under the dubious leadership of General Benjamin Butler - a war democrat and a political appointment. Southerners dubbed him "Beast Butler", a sobriquet earned for his ruthless overseeing of the occupation of New Orleans in 1862. Butler was vehemently anti-slavery and he instilled that in his troops who began to both befriend and allow ever-increasing numbers of escaping slaves and freedmen to cross over into Union territory.

Also in spring 1864, war came to Company A and the 19th. And they were primed and ready. May 13, 1864, the unit fought a battle at Drewry's Bluff right outside of Richmond: the regiment suffered four killed, 26 wounded and one missing. Less than three weeks later, they fought again at Cold Harbor and suffered further casualties. Three weeks after Cold Harbor, they engaged in battle outside of the fortified southern city of Petersburg. This time one dead, eight wounded and one prisoner: John was one of the wounded after he took a minie ball in his left temple. A serious injury, John was hospitalized for a few weeks and then given more time to recover while in camp.

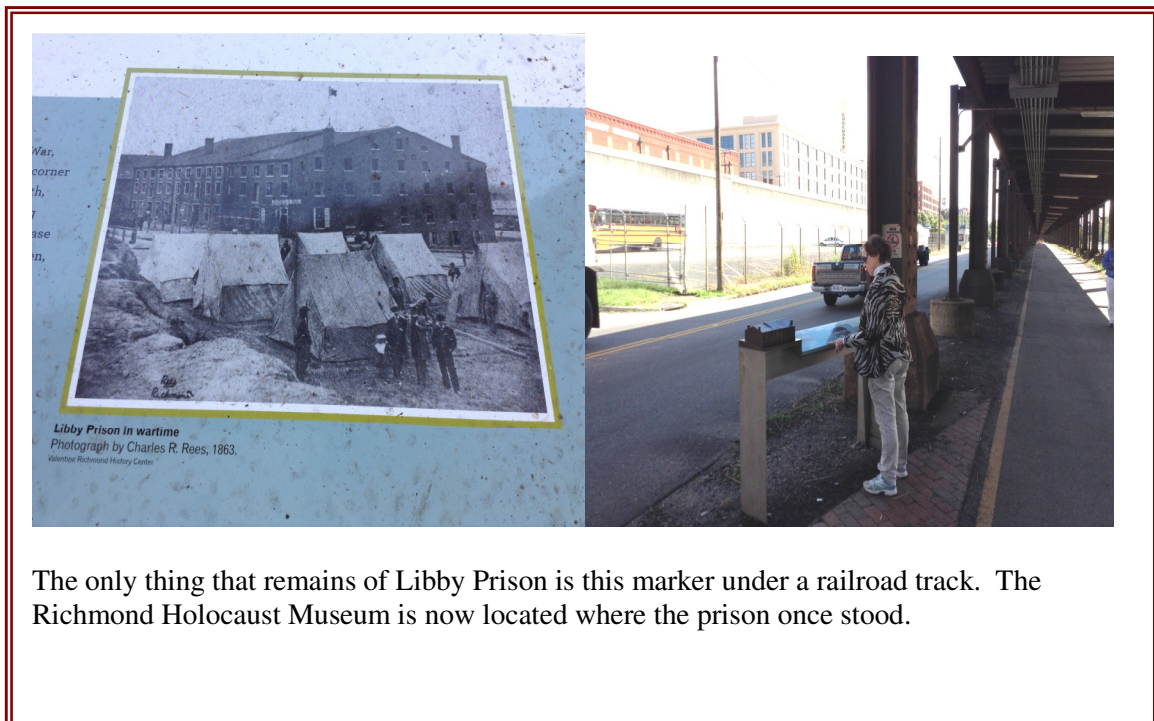
The war raged on that summer and fall; John returned to his unit in the field. Skirmishing was a daily occurrence. By October 1864, John was veteran of almost three years of combat when his regiment marched off for one more assault on Richmond.

October 27, 1864: just eight miles from Richmond (in the same area as a previous battle fought two years before) John's unit engaged in a bloody struggle for the town of Fair Oaks and its lines of Rebel fortifications. The 19th was hurled back at the last minute and suffered severe casualties: 23 dead, 33 wounded, six missing and 86 prisoners. John was both wounded - in the leg - and taken prisoner.

Family legend has it that the doctors wanted to amputate his leg but John refused. He lay out in the rain and let the rainwater cleanse the wound, thus saving the leg. Whether true or not, John was wounded and about to enter captivity and experience a new hell in the Rebel prisoner of war camp called Libby Prison.

Given many names by prisoners, none would come close to describing the conditions John would face. One prisoner attempted with the following:

“Men were penned, naked, mad, diseased, starving, living in filth. The attached hospital was unfit for stables, and patients seldom admitted until they were ready to die.”



The only thing that remains of Libby Prison is this marker under a railroad track. The Richmond Holocaust Museum is now located where the prison once stood.

The war was going well for the Union, so prisoners saw no immediate prospect of parole or exchange and expected to remain there till the end of the war. It must have been hard for those prisoners to keep their faith and their sanity, let alone stay alive under the conditions they lived with. The death rate was astronomical; their bodies worn down from a lack of food, medicine, from disease and from poor treatment. One account by a prisoner recorded the casualties:

“The majority of the prisoners die of chronic diarrhea. During the past month, 337 cases suffering with this disease were admitted to Libby’s hospital. The death from this disease, during the month, sum up to 265. Of Typhoid fever cases for the last month 64.5% have died, from diarrhea 59.7%”

Even the strongest, healthiest of men would be brought down but somehow, some way John survived the ordeal at Libby. He lived and was transferred to another camp - equally notorious - in Salisbury, North Carolina. Again, John survived the trip to the camp and the four months he spent there. According to this account from his obituary, he did so heroically:

“There was not a man in the company more willing to assist a comrade than he. He was never known to shirk his duty, he was known to offer half of his rations to a comrade while in prison who was worse off than he, which meant a good deal when they were carted out in the dead wagon by the hundreds, having been starved to death.”

He was freed with the end of the war, in April 1865. He made it through. He was honorably discharged from service on April 29, 1865. He served over three years, was wounded twice and held as a prisoner of war in two hellholes that rivaled the Japanese POW camps of WWII.

John enlisted when he was 24 years old; the war ended when he was just 27 years old.

He spent his mid-twenties as a fighting soldier and prisoner of war. The regiment he served, the 19th Wisconsin, was never engaged in a major battle. Yet, by the end of the war, 50% the 1122 men of the Wisconsin 19th, were ravaged by war.

In September 1865, John married Miss Lucy Dickens. He lived his life on his farm; he

had one son and four grandchildren. His granddaughter, Ethel Mallon Yanke (our grandmother), spoke of him in adoring terms. John died January 13, 1914. He was 76 years old. Ten of his comrades were present at his funeral; six of his company acted as his pallbearers.

The Fate of the Men of the Wisconsin 19th

Killed and died of wounds	4
Died of disease	118
Prisoners of war	92
Died while a prisoner	14
Disabled	228
Missing	7
Deserted	49

(Source: William f. Fox,
Casualties In The American

Epilogue

These are the stories of the Civil War experiences of two men. Stories of two young men who lived within miles of each other in rural Wisconsin. Who may or may not have ever met. Both enlisted in the Union Army early in the war. Who knows for what reasons? Though in different units, they served for much of the war within 100 miles of each other. Both served for a substantial period of time; both lived to see its end. But this is where the similarities of their experiences ended. They experienced two very different wars.

Jacob Gasser was at the scene of three of the bloodiest battles fought in the war. He was a close observer of one: Fredericksburg. A participant in the other two: Chancellorsville and Gettysburg. He witnessed a nightmarish amount of death, of

blood, of gore. Jacob saw more than he could have imagined when he enlisted a year before that.

What is courage? Did Jacob “skedaddle” after that first day at Gettysburg? (A Wisconsin Historical Society document lists him among the deserters after the third day of battle) Did he panic after what he had seen those last 60 days? Or, was it a clerical error in the confusion of battle? What we know for fact is that Jacob Gasser was mustered out, with the rest of his regiment, at the end of the war with an honorable discharge. On his grave, in Honey Creek Cemetery, there is a veteran’s star from the Grand Army of the Republic- placed there at the time of his death. Not something done for deserters. What that young man saw and experienced at a very young age defied description. If the portals of hell opened for him to look inside, it could not have been more terrible than what he lived.

We can never know how those experiences may have haunted him, but the fact remains he came to be honored and respected by his family, by his community and by his friends. Again, what is courage?

John Mallon never experienced the bloodbaths of the large scale battles fought in Virginia. He did experience the slow wastage of men – his comrades- in a slow grinding, slogging match of low intensity combat, and from camp disease. He was wounded – twice – and captured. Then he got to see and experience the living hell on the inside of two infamous Confederate POW camps. Courage is measured in many ways; surviving a Civil War POW camp takes it own form.

The hell these two men lived through was different. The ways they saw death were different. The way they coped with those memories was probably very different. Both men returned from the war to their hearth and kin and made a life for themselves and their families.

For one week this past fall, 150 years after the Civil War, we were able to walk in our grandfathers' footsteps. We tried to imagine what they went through; reflect on their sacrifice and service. And to honor for what they did and the post-war lives they built.

After all, what is courage ?

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