

Vol LXII, #2

Michigan Regimental Round Table Newsletter—Page 1

February 2022

MEMBER RENEWAL

The MRRT celebrates its 62nd year in 2022 – and now is a great time to show your support by renewing your membership! (Or become a new member!).

Membership is \$25 a year – or \$5 for students. Checks should be made out to Treasurer **Jeanie Graham** (the bank does not like checks made out to the RoundTable) and can be mailed to her home at **29835 Northbrook, Farmington Hills, MI 48334-2326**

Sadly, friend and member Dr. Ernest (Ernie), Abel, PHD, died on January 22, 2022, from pancreatic cancer. We really enjoyed having Ernest as a member for several years and speaker for the Roundtable on multiple occasions. His presentations were terrific! He spoke on the medical aspects of President Lincoln's assassination, John Wilkes Booth, and Dixie (the song). He is survived by his wife, two children, and five grandchildren.

Please visit our great website at <http://www.farmlib.org/mrrt>. Links to interesting Civil War programs are available. Gerald Furi of the Farmington Library is doing a terrific job keeping the website up to date.

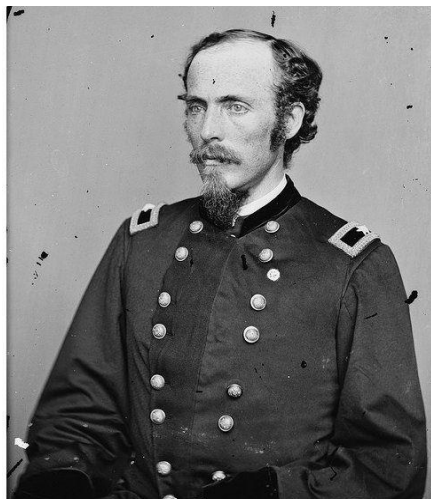
Our February speaker will be Bruce Zellers who will be speaking on the “*Breakdown of the Political System / The Coming of War*”. Bruce will explore the provocations and the misjudgments of politicians on both sides of the aisle and Supreme Court justices that resulted in war between the North and South. Bruce teaches American History at Oakland University in Rochester Hills and at Greenhills School in Ann Arbor. His major emphasis is the Civil War and World War 2. He provides book reviews for the *Michigan War Studies Review* and the *Journal of Military History*.

Wearing a mask during our meeting is a personal decision. Masks will be available for your personal use.

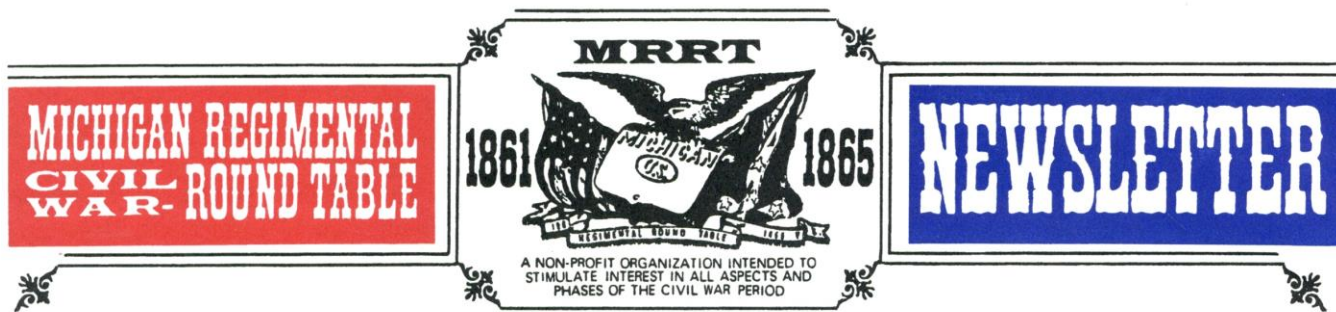
Civil War Essentials – Emerson Opdyke-the Citizen Soldier who disobeyed an order and saved an Army

Throughout history, soldiers have been taught to obey a direct order promptly and faithfully from their superior regardless of their personal opinion of its wisdom. The whole basis of military discipline depends on it. **At the battle of Franklin, TN on November 30, 1864, Emerson Opdyke violated that principle and thereby probably prevented the defeat and possible destruction of General John Schofield's Union army.**

Although Opdyke's ancestors had fought in the Revolutionary and 1812 Wars, Emerson was not a soldier by training or inclination. He was born in 1830 in Ohio and prior to the Civil War had become a prosperous merchant living in Warren, Ohio. After the war began, Opdyke mustered into the army as a 1st Lieutenant in a volunteer regiment. His natural ability caused him to be promoted to captain and charged with training other officers in the regiment. He made his mark at the battle of Shiloh where he was wounded while rallying his men.



He then resigned his commission and returned to Ohio where he organized and became Lt. Colonel of the 125th Ohio Volunteer Regiment. Eventually to be known as “Opdycke's Tigers” the unit was sent to Kentucky in 1863. The regiment was in Rosecrans' army during his Chattanooga campaign. At the battle of Chickamauga in September 1863, the 125th Ohio was part of General George Thomas' Union force which held Horseshoe Ridge as the remainder of the Union Army fled back to Chattanooga. **In November 1863, he led his troops up the steep slope of Missionary Ridge to help overcome the Confederates there and drive General Bragg's army away from Chattanooga into Georgia.**



Opdycke was given command of a brigade during the 1864 Atlanta campaign. At a place called Rocky Face Ridge near Dalton, Georgia in mid-May, the 125th Ohio fought what was called a “*private battle*” with the 20th Alabama on a steep-sided ridge so narrow that neither side could be reinforced. **Days later at Resaca, Opdycke was wounded again but was back in action by the battle of Kennesaw Mountain in late June.** During August 1864, his brigade, consisting of four Illinois and one Wisconsin regiments in addition to the 125th Ohio, was transferred to General George Wagner’s division (three brigades). After the capture of Atlanta, the 4th Corps, including Wagner’s division, and the 23rd Corps were detached from General Sherman’s army and sent north under General John Schofield’s command into Tennessee to join General Thomas’ army assembling at Nashville, TN.

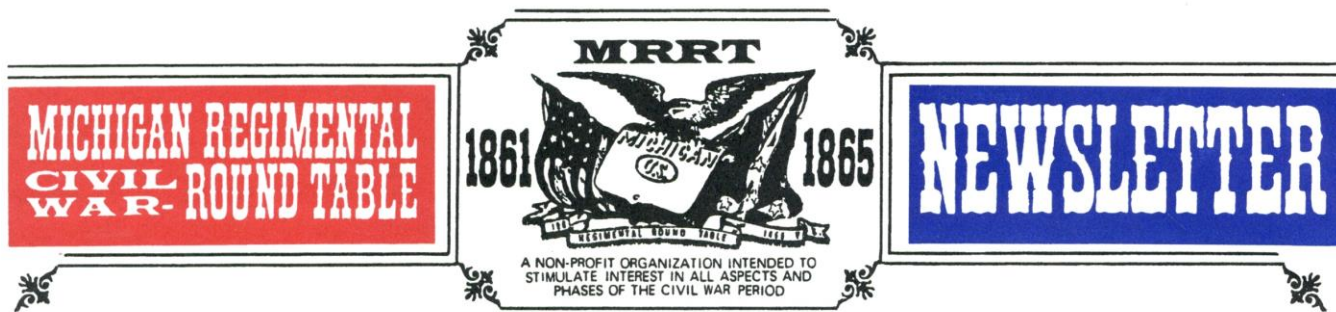
At the pivotal battle of Spring Hill, Tennessee on November 29th, Opdycke’s brigade arrived just in time to help prevent General Forrest’s cavalry from capturing the village itself. As the Union army escaped up the Columbia Pike overnight to Franklin, Opdycke’s brigade, as the Union rear guard, sparred with Forrest again. **When they approached Franklin in the morning, they found Wagner’s division had been left out ½ mile in advance of the horseshoe-shaped main line of defense Union commander General John Schofield was setting up around the south side of the town.**

Schofield had likely positioned Wagner’s men there to prevent any possible Confederate attempt to move east around the left flank of the Union position – a possibility the Yankee commander was most worried about. Schofield did not expect Wagner to try to resist a direct frontal assault by the Rebel army; he was to fall back to the main defenses if he saw Confederates deploying for that purpose. As Opdycke’s brigade reached this advanced position, General Wagner ordered him to fall in beside the other two brigades. Opdycke vigorously objected to this, reportedly saying, “*troops out in front of the breastworks were in a good position to aid the enemy and no one else*”. The two officers continued to argue while Opdycke’s brigade moved to the main defenses. **Wagner finally gave up commenting, “Well, Opdycke, fight when and where you Damm please; we all know you’ll fight”.** After the brigade passed through the main line, it moved several hundred yards north and fell out to rest and eat.

Emerson Opdycke’s objection to staying out on an isolated position proved well founded. Wagner’s force could perhaps hinder a rebel flanking maneuver but could not stop a direct attack by Hood’s army. General John Hood was enraged that the Yankees had been allowed to escape his trap at Spring Hill and seems to have concluded that the Army of Tennessee had lost its offensive spirit after all of the defensive fighting it had done around Atlanta. He was determined to assault the enemy where he found them to allow no more chances to slip away. **On the afternoon of November 30th, he ordered an attack on the visibly strong Union line even though some of his army, including his artillery, had not yet arrived at Franklin.**

Hood’s error was to be partly offset by George Wagner’s inexplicable decision to not fall back to the main defenses as soon as he confirmed that Hood was actually going to directly attack them. His decision to stay in his advanced position until the Confederates had nearly reached it added the only uncertainty about the outcome of the attack. The battle would have been even more of a Confederate disaster than it proved to be had his fleeing troops did not provide the Confederates with a human shield. The rebels followed so close to Wagner’s men running toward the main fortifications that the Union soldiers there were reluctant to fire for fear of hitting their own men. Because of this, many Confederates reached the Union line alongside Wagner’s men and were able to penetrate it where the Columbia Pike passed through it. The mob of fleeing troops from Wagner’s division caused some of the other Union defenders to begin to fall back in panic.

This was Opdycke’s finest moment. He led his brigade back from their rest area in a bayonet charge that stopped the rebel penetration of the main line. From then on, the battle became a close quarter slugfest in which men on both sides fired at point blank range, used their bayonets, and clubbed the enemy with rifle butts. Some threw rocks or



punches. With the Union line stabilized, many Confederates found that they could neither advance nor retreat. The carnage was unbelievable – Opdycke later wrote *“I never saw the dead lay near so thick. I saw them upon each other, dead and ghastly in the powder-dimmed starlight”*. The bloodbath only ended late that night.

Opdycke was promoted to brevet major general of volunteers for his actions at Franklin (and Wagner was relieved of his command!). He went on to fight at Nashville in December. At wars end, he became a brigadier general. **He left the army in 1866 and moved to New York City where he again became a businessman.** Emerson died in 1884 after apparently accidentally shooting himself while cleaning a pistol.

Quiz Questions: This month’s questions pertain to “Michigan’s Hero”, General George Custer.

1. Which other two officers were promoted to Brigadier General with Custer on June 29, 1863, two days before the Battle of Gettysburg began?
2. At which two battles, fought less than a week apart, did Custer’s brother, Tom win two Medals of Honor?
3. Which Federal general did Custer say *“he would follow....to the ends of the Earth?”* And, which general did Custer boast, *“I do not believe a father could love his son more than (he) loves me”*?
4. Which old West Point friend did Custer defeat at Tom’s Brook and what did the Federals dub this Confederate rout?
5. In Custer’s last year at West Point, what was his best subject? His worst subject?

Our thanks to “Old Sarge” for his help with these great questions.

Civil War Essentials – The Willard Hotel, Washington, D.C.

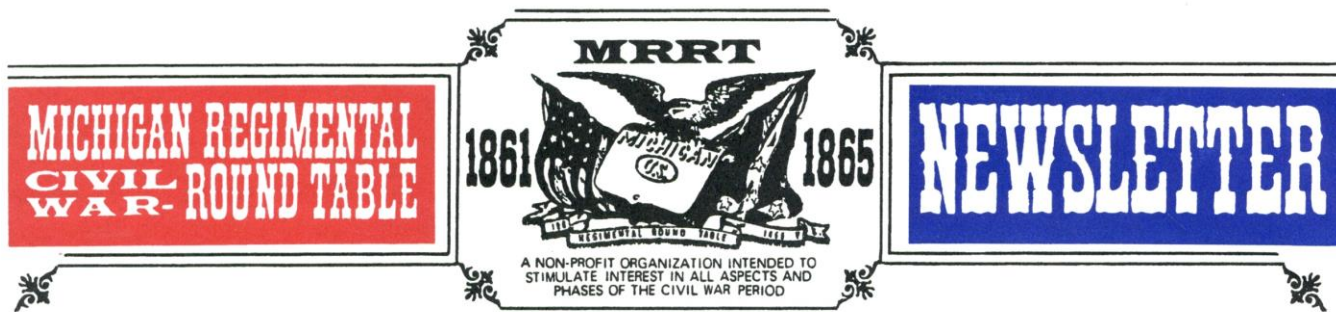
The Willard Hotel is a luxury hotel located at 1401 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, two blocks east of the White House. The hotel began in 1847 when brothers Henry and Edwin Willard rented out six buildings on the corner of 14th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue. The buildings were combined into a single structure, then expanded upwards into a four-story

hotel. Henry Willard purchased the building in 1864, during the Civil War. The Willard family sold it in 1946. 82 years later. The Willard Hotel stands in use today.

The Willard Hotel has numerous connections to the Civil War. They include:

- **During the war, author Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote that *“The Willard Hotel could more aptly be called downtown Washington than the Capital, the White House, or the State Department”*.**
- From February 4 to the 27th, the Peace Congress, made up of delegates from 21 of the 34 states, met at the Willard trying to avert civil war. The seven states that had already seceded did not attend. The Congress failed because it was too late for a compromise regarding slavery.





- **During November 1861, hearing a Union regiment sing “*John Brown’s Body*” as they walked past her window at the hotel, Julia Ward Howe wrote the lyrics to “*The Battle Hymn of the Republic*”. The Battle Hymn became the Union song during the war.**
- **On February 23, 1861, Detective Allan Pinkerton smuggled President-Elect Abraham Lincoln into the Willard amid several assassination threats, The President-Elect and his family then lived there until his inauguration on March 4th, holding several meetings in the lobby and doing business from his bedroom.**
- **Not-yet-colonel Elmer Ellsworth, a close friend of Abraham Lincoln, and his friends John Hay and George Nicolay lived there when Ellsworth got the measles from the Lincoln boys immediately before traveling to New York City to form the 11th New York Fire Zouaves. Colonel Ellsworth became the first Union officer to be killed in the war. He was shot on May 24, 1861, during an attempt to remove a Confederate flag at a boarding house in Alexandria, Virginia, across the Potomac River from Washington. John Hay and George Nicolay were close personnel assistants of President Lincoln during the war. After the war ended, they worked together on a multi-volume biography of the President, *Abraham Lincoln: A History*, that helped create the President’s historical image. John Hay was at President Lincoln’s bedside in the Peterson house after the President was assassinated.**
- **General Ulysses Grant and his fourteen-year-old son, Fred, stayed there in early-1864, when President Lincoln appointed him Lieutenant General and commander of the Union Army. The General arrived in Washington late in the afternoon of March 8th with no one there to meet him at the train station. He then arrived at Willard’s travel-weary and ruffled, a plain linen duster hiding most of his uniform. The registration clerk told him that there might be a room available on the top floor. General Grant said that this would be ok and then signed the book, “U.S. Grant and son, Galena, IL”. The clerk saw this and then became much more attentive. A nice room was suddenly available on the 2nd Floor. He carried the General’s luggage up the room. Later the General and his son came down for dinner. It was quiet for a while until the other diners realized who was there. Three cheers were given for General Grant.**
- **Most Union generals stayed at the Willard while they were visiting Washington. Non-military individuals staying at the Willard included P. T. Barnum, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Jenny Lind, Mark Twain and Charles Dickens.**
- **Much later, Martin Luther King wrote his “*I have a dream*” speech in his hotel room at the Willard prior to the August 28, 1963, march on Washington.**

Quiz Answers:

1. Elon Farnsworth and Wesley Merritt
2. Namozine Church and Saylor’s Creek during the 1865 Appomattox Campaign.
3. George McClellan and Alfred Pleasonton
4. Tom Rosser and “*Woodstock Races*”
5. Artillery tactics (**best subject**) and Cavalry tactics (**worst subject**)

Civil War Note- Clothing

Some soldiers said that they found in their clothing lice with the letters **I.W.** engraved on their backs-evidence that the vermin were “*In for the War*”. In one battle, a Union colonel was waving his sword with one hand while feverishly scratching himself with the other hand.