

MRRT

1861



1865

A NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION INTENDED TO STIMULATE INTEREST IN ALL ASPECTS AND PHASES OF THE CIVIL WAR PERIOD

MICHIGAN REGIMENTAL
CIVIL WAR-ROUND TABLE

NEWSLETTER

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MARCH 2010

On July 8, 1864, a portion of William T. Sherman's Federal Army had reached the Chattahoochee River, south of Roswell, Georgia, on its march toward Atlanta. John T. Wilder's storied Lightning Brigade, was to cross the river first in the pre-dawn darkness. With no moonlight a thin layer of fog lay over the water as the members of the Lightning Brigade eased into the river. The water was nearly shoulder deep and the men waded with their rifles above their heads. Rebels on the opposite shore soon beheld an eerie sight. As they peered through the fog, they observed the heads and shoulders of the Yankee invaders. It seemed like an entire Union brigade had suddenly arisen from the bottom of the river.

When the Confederates opened up on them, the Lightning Brigade returned their fire. Soon Wilder's men found that miraculously they could work the levers of their Spencer rifles under water, and since the cartridge was metallic, it didn't bother their effectiveness a bit. So they began walking in a crouch, keeping only their heads above water so as to make a smaller target for the Rebels. Suddenly, Wilder's men would raise up and fire their Spencers, then duck down again to throw another cartridge into the breach. The Confederates could not believe their eyes and soon yielded. Federal General Kenner Garrard, observing this, shouted to the Federals, "Bully boys! Whiskey in the morning!"

The truly amazing weapon, a 7-shot repeater carried by the Lightning Brigade, was patented in 1860 by Christopher M. Spencer of Connecticut. By the end of 1865 the U.S. government had purchased 77,181 as well as about 60,000,000 self-contained, rim-fire cartridges. Interestingly, Confederates were unable to use the ones they captured since they lacked the special cartridges and had no metal for their manufacture. A few Federal generals, concerned about the potential waste of ammunition, questioned the Spencer's value, but according to a popular adage of the day, it was "far easier to carry extra bullets than a stretcher." After the war Ulysses S. Grant was asked what won the war for the North. He answered tersely, "Repeating rifles."

On **MONDAY, MARCH 29**, the Michigan Regimental will welcome speaker, George Gouth, who will entertain us with the program, "Those Spencers Who Won the War: Christopher M. Spencer and His Wonderful Repeating Rifle." George is a retired educator and school administrator from Wyandotte Public Schools. He is also a member of the Ann Arbor Civil War Round Table and the Michigan Antique Arms Association. George's presentation will feature displays of all three models of the Spencer Repeaters and their accessories. His program is one that you simply won't want to miss—circle that date now.

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The MRRT wishes to thank last month's speaker, Dan Packer, for his program, "Lincoln's Connections with Women, Indians, and Michigan."

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The **FALL FIELD TRIP** to Wilderness/Spotsylvania is scheduled for a weekend in October. Once again we will be led around by the incomparable Frank O'Reilly. You'll want to be at this month's meeting to find out the exact days of the trip and other pertinent details. As usual, a sheet will be passed around for you to sign up for what many believe is the "highlight of the year."

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The **50th ANNIVERSARY COMMITTEE** will again be in session at 5:30 P.M. before the regular meeting commences at 6:30. This meeting will be of significance as we close in on our May celebration. Tickets for the dinner and all-day affair on Saturday, May 15 can be purchased from Ron Cleveland for a check of merely \$35. You can mail him a check (made out to Jerry Maxwell) or simply bring a check to this month's meeting. (The 50th Anniversary Committee would greatly appreciate your checks in advance, rather than waiting until the last minute. Bills are adding up, and we need to pay a few of them.)

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M. R. R. T. NEWSLETTER

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YEARLY DUES: As of now we have 80 paid members for the year 2010. That means 23 folks who normally pay their yearly dues of \$20 are delinquent. To avoid the dreaded RED DOT on your envelopes (they will appear next month) and the possibility of missing out on your monthly newsletter, your dues are requested now. Simply drop a check (made out to Carroll Tietz) for \$20 and mail it to: Carroll Tietz 10640 Gamewood Dr. South Lyon 48178.

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QUIZ: All questions pertain to Civil War firearms.....

1. In what year did the Spencer Repeating Rifle Company file for bankruptcy? And, which company bought it at auction?
2. Who patented the side hammer on the Colt Repeating Rifle? And, what was this rifle's greatest handicap?
3. Which British-made rifle did most Confederate sharpshooters prefer? And, what was the major weakness of the British-made Enfield rifle?
4. How many rounds and what caliber ammunition did the Henry Repeating Rifle hold? And, which unit in the Army of the Potomac was the only regiment known to carry a Henry in the Eastern Theater?
5. What was the name given to all the mountings and certain decorative features (barrel bands, butt plates, patch boxes, trigger guards) found on rifles? And, what was the primer device invented by a Washington D.C. dentist in 1845 that resembled the caps used in toy cap pistols?
6. Which rifles were most of Hiram Berdan's Sharpshooters originally issued? And, which rifles were Berdan's men later given?
7. In order to qualify as a Berdan Sharpshooter, what shooting test had to be passed?
8. Which Civil War .54 caliber rifle was used in 1847 by Jefferson Davis' regiment in the Mexican War? And, which name was this weapon also honored after German huntsmen or light infantry units?
9. After the Spencer and Sharps, which carbine was purchased by the Federal government in the largest numbers? And, what was the most widely used shoulder arm of the Civil War?
10. Which 2 of the following generals were killed by sharpshooter's bullets? A) John Sedgwick B) Strong Vincent C) Philip Kearny D) Stephen Dodson Ramseur E) Joseph K. Mansfield F) Lewis Armistead G) Leonidas Polk H) George Doles

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Some stories of John T. Wilder's Lightning Brigade.....

Colonel Wilder's mounted infantry and their Spencer Rifles had won the day at Hoover's Gap on June 24, 1863. It was here that Wilder's men acquired a special feeling for their new weapons. During one of the Rebel charges a corporal of the 17th Indiana was shot through the breast; he had always said that the enemy would never get hold of his Spencer Rifle. Being severely wounded he didn't have the strength to destroy his weapon, so he took out his knife, removed the lock plate and threw it away, rendering the gun useless. He then fell back and died. A private of the 98th Illinois remembered thinking, as he fired his rapid-fire repeater while driving the Rebels off a hill, that the "poor devils didn't have a chance."

In the Battle of Hoover's Gap, against a numerically superior force, Wilder lost only 51 men killed and wounded while the ground was strewn with over 200 Confederates. Rebel General William Bate commented later that judging from the fire power of the Union force, he thought he was outnumbered five to one. If there had been any doubts among the leaders of the Union Army about the effectiveness of the Spencer Repeating Rifle before this day, they had now been gloriously and resoundingly dispelled. Wilder's men had moved upon the enemy so swiftly and delivered such a terrific fire with their "seven shooters," that General George Thomas himself directed that from then on they would be known as the "Lightning Brigade."

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M. R. R. T. NEWSLETTER

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At the Battle of Chickamauga just before Confederate John Bell Hood launched his last assault of the day, Phil Sheridan arrived with two brigades. As Sheridan approached Wilder's Brigade on his black horse, his staff officer carrying the general's battle flag, shouted, "Make way for Sheridan, make way for Sheridan!" Wilder's men opened ranks and let the general and his staff pass through. Sheridan swung his division around as if on dress parade and placed them in line of battle over the brow of a hill about 200 yards in front of the Lightning Brigade.

Sheridan ordered his men to advance into the woods which they did in splendid style but in less than two minutes, amid the roar of musketry and Rebel yells, they came pouring back out of the woods with the Rebels hard on their heels. As Sheridan approached Wilder's lines in retreat, the men of the Lightning Brigade could not keep from yelling, "Make way for Sheridan, make way for Sheridan!" A sergeant of the 72nd Indiana said, "He passed through our line, his men following him, like a swarm of locusts." Sheridan's demoralized troops swarmed to the rear. The pursuing enemy, however, had not forgotten how the Lightning Brigade had handled them before with their Spencers, and they halted their pursuit before they reached Wilder's position behind the brow of the hill.

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In mid-August, 1864, one of Wilder's soldiers in the 72nd Indiana from the Lightning Brigade picked up a letter from a Confederate soldier to his wife. The writer apparently had been killed by a round from a Spencer Rifle before he was able to finish the letter. Poetically, it read:

My dear wife,

Your war-worn husband takes his pen in hand, in a strange land, on a foreign strand. My ink is pale, I have no ale. My paper is poor; so is my grub. Our quarters in camp are passable, but quarters in my pocket are not. Last night I had a wagon bolster for a "piller" while I was covered with a sheet of water.....So that you may know how we work in spite of the cussed Yanks, I send you a diary of daily labor. 5 o'clock called up by a roll of the drum, from a roll in the mud; no rolls of bread. 6 to 7, shoulder spades. Throw up the earth, also yesterday's rations. 7:30, another roll of the drum, and we roll logs. Filing off into line, as well as defiling my breeches with the sacred soil of Georgia; drawing ramrods but no pay; no shelling out by the government, but a cussed sight by the Yanks.....My eyes are sunk so far into my head that I can look down my windpipe into my restaurant department.....

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QUIZ ANSWERS:

1. 1869 and the Winchester Repeating Arms Co.
2. Elisha Root and the tendency of one round to set off all of the chambers of the cylinder at once
3. Whitworth and its parts were not interchangeable
4. 15 rounds of .44 caliber ammunition and 1st Maine Cavalry
5. "Furniture" and Maynard tape
6. Colt Repeating Rifles and Sharp's Rifles
7. 10 consecutive shots into a 10-inch circle at 200 yards
8. "Mississippi Rifle" and Jäger
9. Burnside and Springfield
10. A) John Sedgwick and H) George Doles

Make sure you plan on joining us for the third month of our 50th Year—**MONDAY, MARCH 29**—for speaker George Gouth, who will present: "Those Spencers Who Won the War: Christopher M. Spencer and His Wonderful Repeating Rifle." As usual we will meet in the Farmington Public Library (Grand River and Farmington Road). We begin the meeting at 6:30 P.M., but you are welcome to show up early for some camaraderie. See you there.

Also try our website: <http://www.farmlib.org/mrrt/>.

Old Sarge