

The Charger

CLEVELAND CIVIL WAR ROUND-TABLE

P. O. Box 444 Vermillion, Ohio 44089

DECEMBER 1982

VOLUME 26 NUMBER 1

220th Meeting

DATE: DECEMBER 14

PLACE: THE HERMIT CLUB

SPEAKER: MEMBER THOMAS E. VAN SICKLE

SUBJECT: (SEE BELOW) HERO OR HEEL?

TIME: CANTEEN 6:00 P.M. CHOW 7:00 P.M.

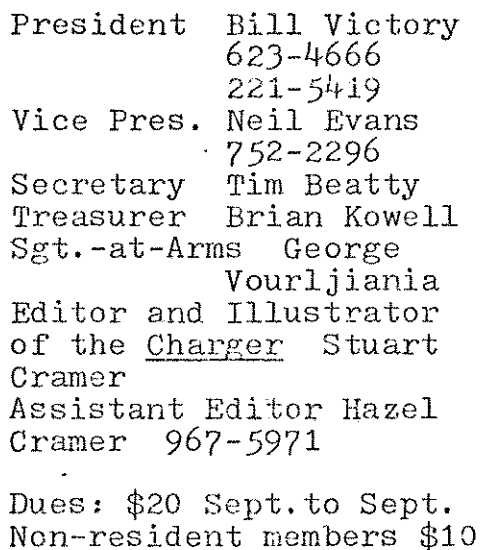
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Dr. Tom VanSickle was born in Dayton, Ohio, on December 2, 1909. He graduated from the University of Akron in 1932 and from Western Reserve Medical School in 1941, becoming a Diplomat of the American Board of Internal Medicine in 1950. From 1942 to 1978 practised Internal Medicine at the Akron Clinic, Akron, Ohio. Today our speaker is with the Veterans Administration as a Medical Rating Specialist.

Tom comes by his interest in the Civil War by inheritance: his maternal great grandfather Jacob Cooper was Chaplain of the 3rd Kentucky Volunteer Infantry, 1862-63, and his maternal great uncle Dr. John B. McDill was a contract surgeon with the Federal Army. But it was Douglas Southall Freeman's Life of Lee, which he started to read in 1934, that really got him hooked, and it was Miller's Photographic History of the Civil War that clinched it...today he has 425 volumes on the subject. His particular interests are CW medicine and the psychology of its major participants. He has given many talks on the subject. Mrs. VanSickle, whose great uncle Pvt. Emerson Merrill of Co.J, 72nd Reg., killed in action, is a musician and is interested in Civil War music. The subject of his talk on Nov. 14:

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DISCOVER HOW ONE STUBBORN DUTCHMAN WENT TO THE HEAD OF HIS CLASS - NOT ONLY IN WINE, WOMEN, AND SONG--BUT ALSO IN MILITARY ONE-UPMANSHIP, THE LAW, NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL INTRIGUE, AND MOST PREEMINENTLY IN SELF AGGRANDIZEMENT ..HERO OR HEEL?



A goodly crowd gathered for the 219th meeting on November 9th to hear charter member Harrison (Jack) Frost repeat his talk given 25 years ago. He started by asking those present at that time to stand - and no fewer than 8 stood up.

What it amounted to was a listing of General Lee's mistakes, according to Montgomery, with

Lee's biggest mistake was his custom of issuing "loose," not specific, orders. This worked all right with Stonewall Jackson, but with men like Generals Stuart, Ewell, and even Longstreet, it allowed too much lee-way in interpretation. Monty thought the ordering of Pickett's charge was monstrous and both he and Eisenhower agreed that Longstreet's plan to go around Little Round Top and flank the Union line was a much better one. Harrison pointed out that without cavalry reconnaissance, Lee did not know what he might encounter there and was justified in turning down Longstreet.

The third error, in Montgomery's opinion, was that Lee did not gather his Corps Commanders that first night. He talked to them individually, but did not learn the whole picture of the disposition of the forces facing him.

On the third day, Lee's fifth error was two-fold. One, he should have 'enfiladed the Union line from'

PLEASE MAKE RESERVATIONS FOR THE
DEC. 14 MEETING. CALL BILL VICTORY
AT 221 - 5419 (guaranteed correct).
Sorry about that wrong number last
month..several tried it and got a
chewing out by the dame who answered.

Fred Gill's Book Review

NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THOSE MAINE MEN

Pullen, John J. The Twentieth Maine, London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1957

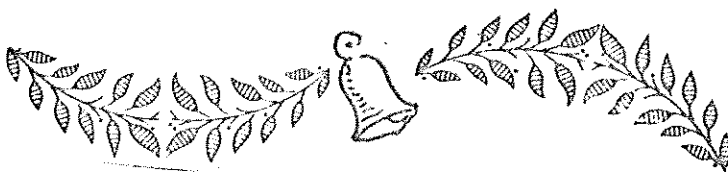
The great rush of regimental histories, while mines of historical detail, are not much fun to read. Many were assembled and published by nostalgic old soldiers or survivors' associations a quarter or a half century after the war. These commonly included rosy and gaseous articles by the surviving major or colonel, which probably lifted the hearts of the remaining ranks but plainly today do not keep you turning the pages.

What these histories lacked were story tellers. The author of this regimental history is a story teller and he chose his story well, for the 20th Maine's story has two unique elements: Joshua Chamberlain and the regiment's fortuitous location on Little Round Top. Without these elements and this author its regimental history would be just like any of the many volunteer regiments that took part in long lists of battles.

The way things developed late that July afternoon at Gettysburg when Vincent threw his little brigade across the until-then neglected hill, the 20th Maine was so situated it became the extreme left of the whole Union line. Chamberlain hurried his companies into line and then carefully studied the land in front and off to his left, for he had that gift of great infantry officers, sizing up the terrain, imagining all the awful things that could happen and thinking ahead to what he could do to frustrate them.

Within minutes Col. Oates' tough Alabama regiments assailed Chamberlain to begin what became one of the most famous classic small unit battles in the history of warfare. When Oates tried to outflank the 20th Maine (he had hopes of routing the whole Union army then and there), Chamberlain changed half his companies to a right angle to the line of battle, thwarting the Alabaman's move. Now as the carnage soared, the 20th Maine had used nearly all of its sixty rounds of ammunition and Chamberlain knew he had little chance to blunt another assault. So what did he do? Not what it said in the book of tactics. He had been in the army less than a year, this theology student and professor, but he knew the book. However, he was that rarity: a natural soldier. He simply saw without dwelling on it what had to be done; so he did it. He ordered bayonets fixed and with no hesitation flung his right-angled companies down the hill like a flail, as someone has said, not waiting for the enemy to organize another assault! Unorthodox? Against accepted practise? Not covered in the book? Of course not, but it took the Rebs completely by surprise, and the two hundred remaining men of the 20th Maine took four hundred prisoners and removed forever a defeat at Gettysburg.

The regiment went all the way to Appomattox, and Chamberlain became one of only two men to receive battlefield promotions to general from Grant. These are only the bare bones of a story that shines on every page, thanks not only to Chamberlain and his hearty band of Maine men, but to Pullen's narrative skill: This regimental history truly leads all the rest.



LITTLE LADY - BIG WAR

Late in November, 1862, Abraham Lincoln received a diminutive, middle-aged lady at The White House. Clasp- ing her tiny hand in his great calloused one, he said, (so the story goes) "So this is the little lady who made this big war."

The little lady was Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of Uncle Tom's Cabin, published ten years earlier. It has since been hailed by historians as the greatest single influence toward stirring up the country over the abolition of slavery.

Harriet had been writing short stories for some time when she caught the fervor of her famous abolition- crusading brother, famous orator Reverend Henry Ward Beecher. She had no preconception of the terrible power to be unleashed by Uncle Tom's Cabin.

When she offered it to the National Era, a small Washington newspaper, the editor accepted the story sight unseen for \$300. Originally Mrs. Stowe planned it as three or four sketches, but these eventually stretch- ed out to 40 and it was a year before she finally wound it up with the flogging death of old Uncle Tom. The serial caused a national furor while it ran in the ob- scure newspaper. A small Boston publishing house put out the book unheralded by any advance publicity and the first edition of 6000 copies was sold out immediately. By the end of the first year 305,000 had been sold; Mrs. Stowe received only 10% of the sales!

Surprisingly, Harriet Beecher Stowe, born and raised in Connecticut, had only spent a few days of her life in the South while visiting friends. She spent 18 years in Cincinnati, Ohio, a station of the Underground Railway, where she picked up many stories and experiences talking to the run-away slaves. The book was actually written while she lived in Maine, where her husband taught at Bowdoin College.

Uncle Tom's Cabin was pirated by foreign publishers in a dozen countries and translated into as many languages, and it appeared for years on hundreds of stages as an ever-popular tear jerking melodrama.* Today it is hard to find a copy!

There is little doubt that this story overplayed the emotional aspects of the evils of slavery and created erroneous impressions of all southerners, to the point of hatred.

Editor's Note: It is interesting to speculate on the difference between the impacts of the above and the Blue and The Gray ...perhaps we should be thankful that the latter was too much of a jumble to produce any real racial or sectional emotional divisions.

* Mrs. Stowe had nothing to do with the theatrical productions and never received a cent; yet it kept actors in work for generations.

TONIGHT!



UNCLE TOM'S
CABIN

The Black and The Blue

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For months CBS publicists pounded out their hoopla about the coming Civil War extravaganza and no doubt achieved the objective of pulling a zillion viewers.

But as far as fulfilling the promises of authenticity, accuracy and historical education is concerned, this soap opera was a real bomb. News-week put it best: "To say that CBS's The Blue and The Gray is a thoughtful comprehensive history of the Civil War is like saying that Dracula is a scientific study of insomnia."

Last month we said it was going to be a Civil War buff's dream, and it was - like most dreams - disjointed, jumpy and mixed up. Sure there were some good scenes, and Gregory Peck made a convincing Lincoln because he is a professional actor. Too bad he couldn't have been supported by Buster Keaton.

We would do well to forget the whole pulpy interruption and get back to the books, Bruce Catton's, for instance. - Stu Cramer

* * * * *

Without previous collaboration, Fred Gill sent in:

A COMMENT ON THAT TELEVISION PROGRAM

On page 2361 of the second edition of Webster's Unabridged Dictionary there is a word, next to the last in the third column, that describes with great precision television's much touted "grand epic of the Civil War." That word is "sleazy," which Webster defines thus: "Wanting firmness of texture or substance." This is the polite way to describe the eight hours of slush which many of us at least started to watch.



The impolite way to describe it is this: Boring, sloppy, childish, uninformative, sleep-inducing, fragmented, full of puffed-up scenes, hoked battle episodes, wooden acting. I was never really sure most of the actors felt certain of who they were supposed to be. And how about that Pennsylvania regiment that never seemed to have any officers? And what about that black-caped guy on the horse who kept appearing everywhere doing what I never really did find out? And that consistently beautiful weather! (and fall foliage in July?)

Despite the great promotion the program had and the hopes of many CW aficionados (one I know who

bought his first TV set to see it), it turned out to be only a soap opera with shot and shell. Imagine, as our assistant editor points out, the chagrin of those school teachers (or is history taught any more?) who recommended it to students expecting them to learn something about the Civil War.

Some "grand epic!"

Sultana Tragedy Revived by Discovery 6

One of the worst marine disasters in the history of this country occurred late in April, 1865, a matter of a couple of weeks after the war had ended.

Vicksburg had been turned into a great repatriation center where thousands of gaunt, worn-out men - most of them Union ex-prisoners of war just released from such horrors of prison compounds as Andersonville, waiting at Vicksburg for transportation up the Mississippi to their northern homes. A huge contingent was slated to travel on the Sultana, a side-wheeler of 1,700 tons with a crew of 85 and by law limited to 376 persons.

While her leaky boilers were being repaired, a regular stampede of passengers boarded the Sultana. They came in unmanageable numbers, far beyond the ship's capacity, but sympathetic authorities looked the other way, so eager were the emaciated ex-prisoners to start toward home and a new life. It is estimated that 2,300 packed into every available space - no rolls were taken.

The boilers repaired, the unbelievably overloaded steamer cast off its lines and slowly churned north against an unusually strong current, due to the river's flood stage. A scheduled stop was made at Memphis, where again a boiler had to be repaired and a few men disembarked; but at midnight, when the mooring lines were let go, they had taken on coal. The steamboat was still fearfully overloaded.

At 2:00 A.M. it happened. Those leaky boilers could no longer hold the heavy pressure of steam, and with a tremendous crash blew up. The explosion was heard all the way back to Memphis, and it blew half of the Sultana apart. Hundreds of sleeping soldiers were hurled bodily into the cold, black water of the river.

Great chunks of twisted metal, fragments of wood, railings, deck beams, furniture and a shower of red-hot coals soared into the air as half of the steamer disintegrated. Fire followed, and soon the water was a solid mass of struggling humans, most of them too weak to swim even if they knew how. As the flames spread in a stout breeze, hundreds, preferring to drown rather than burn to death, jumped from the wreckage.

Estimates of the number killed ranged from 1,500 to 1,900. About 600 were rescued, hanging onto debris, and were hospitalized in Memphis, but some 200 died from burns and exposure.

This overwhelming catastrophe received little newspaper coverage at the time. The nation's mind was on the surrender of Lee's and Johnson's armies, President Lincoln's assassination, and anyway, the Army was not anxious to have the accident publicized.

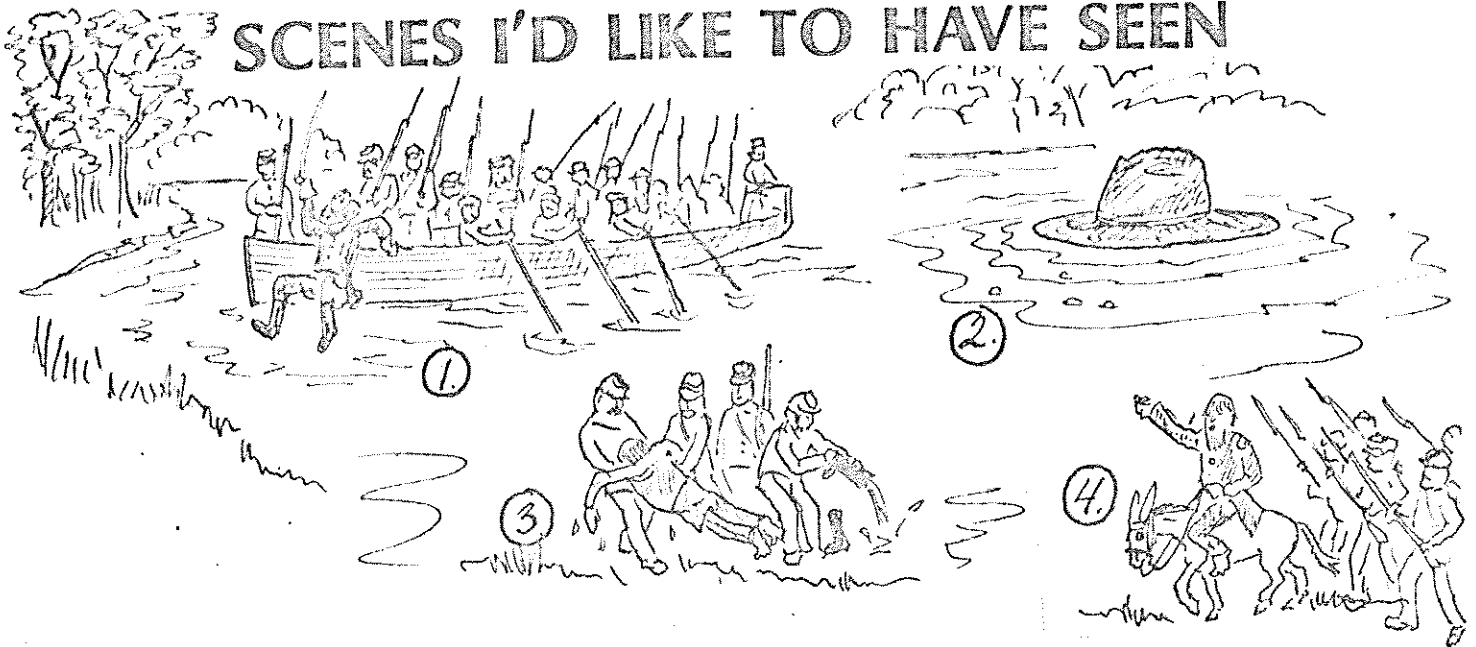
Now the Sultana is back in the news. An article in the Arkansas Gazette, of Little Rock, sent by member Lee Tanger, tells the story of the discovery of what officials are 99% sure are the remains of the lower portion of the hull, found in a soybean field.

The Mississippi's course has been changed during the intervening 117 years, and the wreckage was discovered a mile from the present riverbank. A Washington based private foundation that conducts naval research, "The National Underwater and Marine Agency," is working with a Memphis lawyer and history buff Jerry Potter, who made the discovery, using historic data and a metal detector. Excavations are expected to uncover many artifacts.

It is interesting to note that Mark Twain once wrote of the Sultana, "Some farmer will turn up her bones with his plow one day and no doubt be surprised."



SCENES I'D LIKE TO HAVE SEEN



On July 9, 1863, Union troops commanded by Brigadier General Quincey A. Gillmore, were sent to make an amphibious assault on Battery Wagner on Morris Island near Charleston, South Carolina.

Brigadier General Strong was in one of the first boats to approach Morris Island. Thinking that the water got shallow near the shore, he jumped from the boat, but the beach shelved off abruptly. After a step, Strong went down, and nothing could be seen but his hat drifting down the inlet. When he surfaced, he was hauled out and carried ashore. As his boots were full of water, he had them taken off and led the troops in his stocking feet. After awhile he commandeered a small donkey and continued leading the advance bootless and hatless.

Burton, E. Milby. Siege of Charleston 1861-1865, University of South Carolina Press: 1970
-Thanks to Brian Kowell

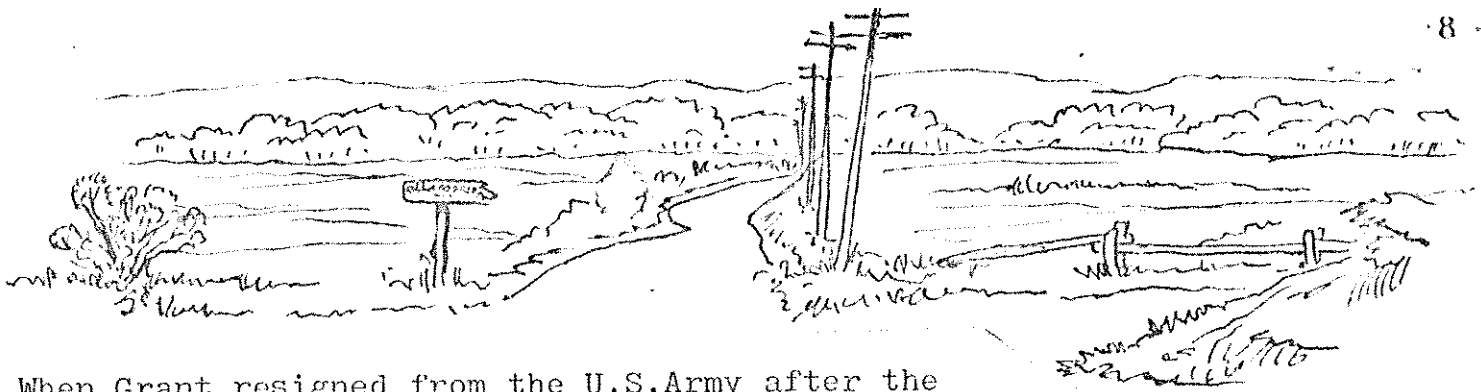
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MONTGOMERY ON LEE..continued from page 1

the town of Gettysburg - he had some 56 cannons that were not used. Second, that order for Pickett's charge, a hopeless tactic with only fifteen thousand men, anticipated by General Meade.

The latter also came in for considerable criticism from the two World War II leaders, for taking 13 days to pursue and get into position to destroy the retreating Confederate Army...but too late. Ike seemed to favor the arguments in favor of Meade....our speaker did not, and in the end branded Jeb Stuart as the real failure of the affair.

It was a well given and received talk, and opened up the age-old controversies about the participating and commentating generals.



When Grant resigned from the U.S. Army after the bitter days on duty in California, his letter of resignation was addressed to Col. Samuel Cooper, U.S. Adjutant General, who later served in that same capacity for the Confederacy. Grant's resignation was accepted by the then Secretary of War - Jefferson Davis.

* * * *

Abraham Lincoln declared the First Thanksgiving Day. Little did he know that November, 1982, would have four turkey days: the 14th, 16th, 17th and the 25th.....

* * * *

After losing the Alabama to the Kearsarge in that classic sea battle off Cherbourg, France, Confederate Raphael Semmes toured Europe as a popular hero figure.

In the last months of the War, having re-entered the Confederacy by slipping through the blockade via Mexico, he commanded the locked-in fleet of ironclads in the James River. After the fall of Richmond, Semmes blew up the fleet and marched his sailors as infantrymen to Danville, where he met fleeing President Davis. There Davis made him a Brigadier General, the only Admiral-General in the War.

* * * *

The Union Army had one company composed entirely of pugilists. There was another made up entirely of members of the New York Y.M.C.A.. It also had the "Temperance Company," which always went into battle cold sober (quite a contrast to many others on both sides).



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Of the 546 nuns known to have served as battlefield nurses, 289 were from Ireland, 40 from Germany and 12 from France. So now you know!

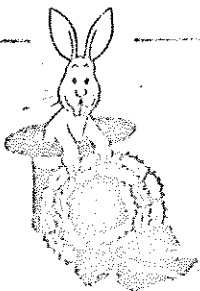
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Shortly before the Civil War began, Secretary of State William H. Seward presented to President Lincoln a plan to avert the coming catastrophe: Provoke war with a foreign power.

On April 1, 1861, Seward wrote a memo to the President, advising that the U.S. should "demand explanations" from France and Spain for their intervention in the Caribbean; if they did not respond, the U.S. should declare war. War would unite the states, Seward claimed, and if Spain could be provoked to fight, the South would join forces with the North, eager to claim Puerto Rico and Cuba as slave colonies. Lincoln rejected the proposal.

Thanks to Lee Tanger

* * * *



And a VERY MERRY CHRISTMAS AND HAPPY NEW YEAR TO ALL...
Your editors, Hazel and Stu Cramer and "staff"-
Fred and Mary Gill, Brian Kowell, Bob Snodell and
all the others who have contributed.