

A Short History of the Raising of Company “D,” Thirty-third Wisconsin (The “Blakes Prairie Rangers”)

by

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Recruiting for Wisconsin regiments became a tough proposition in late Summer 1862. The Federal gains made in Tennessee and New Orleans earlier in the year became overshadowed by Confederate victories in Virginia and elsewhere. The war fever of 1861 had waned, and a good portion of the young, single men that could be in the army were already serving. That left the recruiters to try to persuade many married men to leave their farms, shops, or stores and enlist for “three years or the war.”

In mid-July, a call for five Wisconsin regiments was followed by “General Orders No. 17” issued by Wisconsin’s Adjutant General Augustus Gaylord, which authorized formation and recruitment of infantry regiments numbered Twenty-six to Thirty-seven, inclusive. Gaylord echoed Federal Government instructions that if the new regiments could not be filled by August 22, the state would resort to a draft. Enlistments dramatically increased. In just eighteen days, between August 4 and August 22, Wisconsin raised some 13,000 recruits.

At the time of Gaylord’s order, eight Grant County companies were already in process of forming. The last name of the proposed captain identified each of the new companies: McDermott, Farquharson, Scott, Swan, Nash, Harlocker, Earnhart, and Frank. Gaylord directed that six of these companies be designated to fill the organizations of the Twentieth and Twenty-fifth regiments. This action left unassigned William Earnhart’s Tafton Company and George Frank’s company from Boscobel. A third company, raised principally from Boscobel by Frank B. Burdick, joined these two companies, plus a portion of a fourth, being raised in Platteville by George A. Carter—himself an early war hero. These organization eventually formed the nucleus of the Thirty-third Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry Regiment.

Captain William S. Earnhart gathered enlistments from the sturdy farmer stock of central Grant County, a region known as “Blakes Prairie.” Here, new recruits from Shullsburg, Tafton, Glen Haven, Wyalusing, New Diggings and elsewhere in the former lead mining region flocked to the company’s banner. Among the excited enlistees were William Holford, an eighteen year old schoolteacher; Luman Cobb of Tafton; Joseph Brookens, also of Tafton; William and Robert Pine, brothers who, although born in Virginia, lately hailed from Tafton; William Garside of Patch Grove; Henry Clay Jackson, who had lived on a farm near Wyalusing; and John A. Orr, whose family homestead was an easy stroll north from the District No 4 School, known locally as simply “Red Schoolhouse.” It was

not long before the boys christened their new company with the sobriquet “Blakes Prairie Rangers.”

Earnhart, along with lieutenants Uriah Briggs and Noble L. Barner, established company headquarters at Red Schoolhouse. There, the new non-commissioned officers received their first lessons in tactics. The balance of the new soldiers learned the “School of the Soldier in a pasture on a farm owned by Horace L. Lord, located just south of the schoolhouse. By day, a dust cloud rolled skyward as the air echoed with the tramp of Earnhart’s company. In the evenings, Mr. Lord put up in his barn and sheds many recruits who lived too far away to go home for the night. His neighbors did likewise.



The field of Horace J. Lord, where the boys of Company “D” drilled.

According to tradition, Earnhart's company carried a flag— a thirty-five star National color apparently of standard dimensions for an infantry color of the period. The origins of this flag are not known, however there is no doubt that the Blakes Prairie Rangers indeed had a company flag. It seems probable from post-war newspaper articles that the flag was used during the time of the company’s organization.



After five weeks of drilling, the time approached for Earnhart's company to depart for rendezvous at Camp Utley, Racine. But before the exodus, the ladies of the Blake's Prairie region provided a gala dinner for the soldiers in a grove of trees near Red Schoolhouse. One of the ladies remembered: “Everyone contributed to the dinner and it was a grand affair. The governor was expected to address them, but he failed to come; but they were bound to have a speech, so brought forward W[illia]m Holford one of the recruits. It was a trying situation for a youngster, but he did his best.”

The *Grant County Herald* newspaper mentioned the event at Red Schoolhouse, noting that the Blake's Prairie Rangers and their families enjoyed a good meal, stirring speeches, and several renditions of the "Marseilles Hymn," for which "enthusiastic cheers in the zouave style" were given in appreciation by the soldiers. The festivities continued with an evening ball in the village of Glen Haven. The festivities continued into the wee hours of the morning.

On October 1, 1862, Orderly Sergeant Alfred H. Fitch formed the company as usual for its customary drill and marched out onto a nearby road. But, instead of returning to Horace Lord's farm as was their custom, the boys followed their company flag and marched northward to Patch Grove and on to Bridgeport. There, they boarded an eastbound train for Camp Utley and for what they termed "The Great Adventure."

Afterwards, an observer wrote: "Many of the boys were disappointed at being deprived of saying one more farewell to their loved ones, and many a maiden heart was saddened by being deprived of the anticipated final leave taking; but they had been prepared for the separation for weeks, and the officers believed their way of handling the company relieved the departure of some of its sorrow."

At Camp Utley, Colonel Jonathan Moore designated the Blakes Prairie Rangers as Company "D" of the Thirty-third Regiment. At about the same time, Captain William Earnhart "suffered a fall from his buggy which was thought to have permanently disabled him." He recovered sufficiently from his spinal injury to accompany his company to the seat of war. In almost constant pain, Earnhart resigned from the service effective March 14, 1863, due to illness coupled with lingering painful disability from the fall at Camp Utley.

Private Jacob Beer of Wyalusing had the unhappy misfortune to become the first soldier to perish from Company "D." Beer died of disease on January 2, 1863. A few weeks later, John Orr died from disease on January 25, 1863. Joseph Orr, John's father, made the trip from Grant County south to Memphis Tennessee in order to recover the remains of his son. On the way north, Joseph detoured to Ohio and the original Orr farm to dig up a small sycamore sapling. The grieving Orr family buried John in Sargent Cemetery just west of Red Schoolhouse, and within sight of the Orr homestead. There, Orr's father planted the sycamore sapling, in memory of John.



Soldiers John Orr (left) and Henry C. Jackson of Co. "D"
(Credit: USAMHI, Carlisle Barracks, PA.)

Epilogue.

After thirty-three months of service in the American Civil War, fortune fell indifferently on other company members mentioned earlier in this story. William Holford, the eighteen-year-old schoolteacher, returned safely, as did Costello Holford—who would one day publish a book-length history of Grant County. Luman Cobb came home from the war wearing sergeant's chevrons. Joseph Brookens returned to his farm north of Tafton, married a woman named Drucilla, and eventually opened the first drug store in Bloomington (renamed in 1867 when the community's original namesake, D. W. Taft, fell out of favor with the local population.) Both Pine brothers came home safely, with Robert returning as a sergeant. Henry Clay Jackson resumed farming on his acreage near Wyalusing, where he would live out his days. So too did Rufus Allen, who carried with him the memory of having his trousers torn off when a Confederate artillery shell flew between his legs at the Battle of Mansura, Louisiana, May 16, 1864 (he was again wounded at the Battle of Harrisburg, Tennessee on July 14, 1864.) Some, like William Garside, never made it home. Garside drowned in the Mississippi River during a swimming mishap on August 16, 1863. Interred by his messmates, his final resting-place soon became lost to memory.



After the war, the veterans embellished the flag of Company "D" with the company designation and numerous battle honors. Perhaps the old color graced the homes or meeting halls of the Blakes Prairie Rangers. Regardless, the men voted Corporal John E. Connell of Bloomington as caretaker of the banner. The memory of the flag soon faded away with the surviving veterans. In 1930, John Grindell, a Platteville resident and curator for the Wisconsin State Historical Society undertook to locate the flag, which had been presumed lost. Grindell located the company flag—still in the possession of the Connell family. Connell's widow promptly donated the flag

and other Company "D" memorabilia to the Society. Amid much ceremony, a military honor-guard from Platteville escorted the now dilapidated banner to Madison. The flag triumphantly entered the Society's collection— where it was again forgotten for more than 60 years. In the 1990s, the Society de-accessioned numerous post 1860s artifacts and memorabilia to the Wisconsin Veteran's Museum. Among the items received by the Wisconsin Veteran's Museum was the company color of the Blakes Prairie Rangers. Reportedly, the color is in desperate need of conservation.

Today, a few visible traces remain of the early days of Company "D." Several of the old veterans lived out their days on Blakes Prairie, and their graves may still be visited in several cemeteries surrounding present-day Bloomington, Wisconsin. Horace Lord passed away, but the pastureland where once stepped the marching feet of enthusiastic young soldiers may still be seen today. The farmland and pastures once worked by

returning veterans like Joseph Brookens remain farmland today, still worked by their current owners.

Red Schoolhouse remains, although the schoolchildren have long ago relocated to other quarters. Captain Earnhart's former headquarters was turned into a cattle shed during World War II. Today Red Schoolhouse stands as a storage shed sheathed in corrugated tin on the Mezera farmstead.

The gravestone of John A. Orr in nearby Sargent's Cemetery (now Blakes Prairie-Sargent Cemetery) eventually fell over and broke. (Fortunately, interested local residents arranged for a modern stone, which has replaced the original. Joseph Orr's 1848 homestead has been torn down to make way for a modern residence. Happily, the Orr sycamore, one of Wisconsin's largest specimens at a hundred feet tall, remains as the last living relic of John A. Orr and his comrades in the Blakes Prairie Rangers.

