

THE CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE

Volume XLIV, Number 5

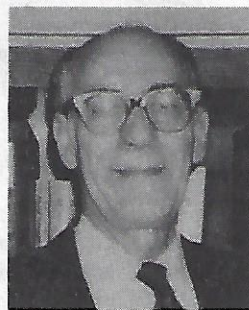
Chicago, Illinois

January, 1984

Myron "Mike" Cohn on The Signal Corps and the Military Telegraph in the Civil War

Improved technology is a normal companion of war and the American Civil War was the proving ground for many technical advances. At The Round Table meeting on January 13, 1984, past president Mike Cohn will describe how the telegraph and related communication systems were put to military purposes, especially by the Union forces.

Albert Myer, an army assistant surgeon on service with Colonel E. R. S. Canby on the southwestern frontier in the 1850's developed a flag signalling system using a single flag. The swing of the flag in a coding scheme represented letters and numerals. However, the code in use at that time (just a few years after Samuel F. B. Morse's invention) differed considerably from the code used today. Myer was able to present his signalling to the Secretary of War in 1857, and in 1859 gave a demonstration to a board of officers headed by Colonel Robert E. Lee. Further testing was recommended, and Lt. E. Porter Alexander was detailed to assist him. The tests proved successful and Myer was appointed the army's first signal officer with the rank of major. At this early stage, there was no signal corps and Myer set about the task of establishing a training school at Fort Monroe to prepare the men detailed to him. Once trained, the men returned to their respective units as signalmen.



Myron "Mike" Cohn

When the Civil War began, E. Porter Alexander joined the Confederate army as a captain, and was appointed signal officer, reporting to the quartermaster general. His training methods and the organization he established were so effective that at First Bull Run in July, 1861 the signal teams' alertness and skilled work was credited with the rapid deployment of Confederate troops in time to repel and rout the Federal forces.

Early in the war, the civilian telegraph companies were taken over by the Federal War Department, and although they remained a civilian function, they reported to Secretary of War Stanton. The system was designated as the Military Telegraph and had no connection with the Signal Corps, except for a few of the highest ranking administrators. President Lincoln took control of the civilian telegraph lines under enabling legislation enacted by Congress in 1861. Anson Stager, a Western Union official was commissioned a Colonel and was the head of the military telegraph system. He was technically under the control of



427th Regular Meeting

Myron "Mike" Cohn
on
The Signal Corps and the
Military Telegraph in the Civil War

Friday, January 13, 1984

Hotel Continental
505 N. Michigan
King Arthur Room, 3rd Floor
Cocktails at 5:30 p.m. Dinner at 6:30 p.m.
\$13.00 per person
Entree: Chicken Piccata



Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs, but in practice reported directly to the Secretary of War.

Major Myer developed a tactical field telegraph system for use in the field, using battery wagons for portability, and functioning independently of the military telegraph system. In an attempt to eliminate the need for skilled telegraphers, he made use of the Beardslee magneto-electro telegraph machine. This machine functioned by setting a dial pointer to the letter to be transmitted, and turning a crank to generate the current required for transmission. The pointer on the receiving machine would point to the letter that was transmitted. The system was slow, and the machines frequently didn't synchronize, resulting in a receiving letter

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THE CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE



Founded December 3, 1940

18 East Chestnut Street
Chicago, Illinois 60611
Phone: (312) 944-3085

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The only requirement for membership in The Round Table is a genuine interest in the Civil War and its era. For information, address Ward C. Smidl, 1104 Whippoorwill Lane, Palatine, Illinois 60007.



More talks on tape

The following cassette tapes of previous talks to The Round Table are now available for purchase (these are in addition to the tapes listed in the October newsletter).

18. E. B. Long, "A Broader Approach to Civil War Strategy" (11/10/77).

19. T. Harry Williams, "The Civil War in Louisiana" (4/17/64).

20. T. Harry Williams, "The Valley Campaign of 1864" (6/11/65).

21. T. Harry Williams, "A Yank at Oxford" (6/7/68).

Tapes are \$5 each and may be ordered at meetings or by mail from Research Center Committee Chairman Leslie MacDonald, 2744 W. Rascher Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60625. When ordering by mail, please include \$2 per order (not per tape as previously indicated) for postage and handling. Make checks payable to The Civil War Round Table.

Lincoln Symposium

A symposium, "Lincoln and the American Political Tradition," will be held at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island June 7-9, 1984. Among the papers to be presented are: Don E. Fehrenbacher, "The Words of Lincoln;" James M. McPherson, "Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution;" Michael F. Holt, "Lincoln and the Politics of Union;" William E. Gienapp, "Who Voted for Lincoln;" Stephen B. Oates, "Abraham Lincoln, Republican in the White House;" and Robert H. Wiebe, "Lincoln's Democracy." There will also be several workshops and an exhibit.

Registration materials for the symposium will be mailed in March, at which time exact fees will be set. For further information, write or call Frank J. Williams, Chair, The Lincoln Symposium, 2 Williams Street, Providence, Rhode Island 02903 (401) 331-2222.

Gettysburg National Military Park has received a new slide program depicting the story of the battle through photographs of the park as it looks today. The program, which includes taped narration, sound effects, and music, was the gift of the InterNorth Corporation. InterNorth is underwriting several such programs for the National Park Service.

Nominations for the Harold L. Peterson Award for the best article on any facet of American military history published during 1983 are now being sought by the Eastern National Park and Monument Association, a non-profit educational group which seeks to promote the historical, scientific and educational activities of the National Park Service. The award is named for the late chief curator of the Park Service.

Articles that deal not only with military history, but also with economic, political, social and cultural developments affecting American military history from the time of settlement until the present are eligible. Three copies of articles nominated must be submitted to the ENP&MA Executive Secretary, Box 671, Cooperstown, New York 13326, by March 15, 1984.

A reminder: College and high school students interested in the Civil War are welcome to attend the talk portion only of Round Table meetings free of charge. The talk ordinarily begins about 7:30 p.m.

December meeting

Dynamic changes in the lives of nineteenth century American women were outlined in an interesting presentation by Karen Osborne when she addressed 84 members and guests at The Round Table meeting December 9. She narrated how the Civil War represented a world-shattering revolution for women, in that it forced or allowed them to change and it brought them into all aspects of the nation's commercial, agricultural and business life. Prior to the war, the woman's role had been that of "chief cook and bottle washer," and this was the only job they knew. But, with the advent of war, they rolled up their sleeves and went to work.

On the farms, they suddenly became managers and this new role, thrust upon them through the departure of the men of the family, was often very difficult. This problem was even more acute in the South, as the women feared that their slave labor force would either run away or rise up against them in their search for freedom. Due to the ever-tightening blockade, women in the South faced a lengthening list of shortages of commodities such as medicines, soap, clothing and food. Women in both the North and the South developed ways to solve their problems, as they reached out to one another for answers and support—they now had to find the solutions to their problems themselves.

Karen examined the deeds of various women as they coped with life in the 1860's. When her husband, Wisconsin Governor Louis P. Harvey, drowned while on his way to Shiloh with supplies for the wounded, Cordelia Harvey began visiting and caring for Wisconsin soldiers on the battlefields and became the commissioner for the U.S. Sanitary Commission in St. Louis. Karen describes her as 'frank, tactful but compassionate;' she was called the 'Wisconsin Angel.'

Another woman, Mary Ann Bickerdyke, was responsible for the closing of the Memphis government hospital due to the poor conditions and adverse treatment provided there. She selected the 100 worst cases and accompanied them to Cairo, Illinois. They were then taken by wagon to Madison, Wisconsin, for care and treatment. Of those 100 cases, 93 survived, a remarkable record in those days of primitive medical care.

'Mother Bickerdyke', as she became known, appeared on 19 battlefields and was happiest when she was following the army. She worked long hours and was concerned for the men on the firing line. In November, 1863, on the battlefield of Lookout Mountain, men were freezing to death. She found an abandoned breastwork and asked the soldiers to take it down so that it could be used for fuel. If they did, she would make hot toddies for them. The local medical director told her she would be arrested. She persisted and saved many lives through her initiative. On one battlefield, General John A. Logan noticed a light bobbing about on the battlefield. He sent a man to investigate and the man returned to report that it was Mother Bickerdyke using the lantern to peer into the faces of the wounded to see if life remained.

Prior to the Civil War, nursing was done by men. However, on June 10, 1861, Dorothea Dix was appointed superintendent of all U.S. army nurses. She was highly opinionated and established requirements that all nurses be at least 30 years of age, and be plain in appearance, with no bows, curls or hoop skirts. The men treated were too ill to care how the nurses looked and some nurses circumvented Miss Dix's directives.

There were other examples of heroism performed by women, and the Official Records include a story where a

troop train was alerted by two lanterns swinging on the tracks ahead. It proved to be two women who had hiked to warn the train that rebel troops had destroyed a trestle ahead. The most heroic women were those who risked their lives as they passed through the lines carrying contraband such as needles, surgical supplies, etc. to ease the burdens of war.

Karen then related the activities of the more well known spies, such as Pauline Cushman, Rose Greenhow and Belle Boyd. Cushman, a beautiful spy for the North, had already performed valuable services when she was captured with compromising papers on her; she was taken to Bragg's headquarters, court-martialed and sentenced to be hung. However, the Confederate evacuation enabled her to escape this fate and she was rescued by Union troops.

Rose Greenhow was a popular Washington hostess before the war and knew everyone of consequence in the capitol. She developed the most complete spy network of either side and sent information to Beauregard of McDowell's plans prior to the battle of 1st Bull Run. Arrested in August, 1861, she still was able to get a message through to the Confederate authorities.

Belle Boyd, as a 17-year old girl, took information to Stonewall Jackson on Union troop movements during the 1862 Valley campaign. She was arrested twice and released on both occasions. In 1863 she escaped to England where she went on the stage. She returned to the states and died at Kibourne, Wisconsin, while on tour.

There were some 400 cases, Karen related, where women packed up, disguised themselves as men and went off to war. One of the most interesting was that of Jennie Rodgers, an Irish immigrant who came to this country as a stowaway and enlisted in the 95th Illinois infantry as Albert D. J. Cashier. She served through the war years unnoticed and in 1899 took a physical examination for a veteran's pension. She passed the exam without comment and her true sex was only discovered in 1911 after she was struck by an automobile.

In her address, Karen stated that at the outbreak of the war, women stood at the crossroads—one road would have them continue in their customary role in the home while the other road would take them into new fields of endeavor. A study of their new roles, she said, may boil down into facts and figures, but we must not overlook the psychological and sociological forces at work.

Lincoln exhibit

An exhibit of more than 150 items associated with Abraham Lincoln is now on display at the Museum of Our National Heritage in Lexington, Massachusetts. Among the items are the original Emancipation Proclamation, issued January 1, 1863 and the Second Inaugural Address of March 4, 1865, written in Lincoln's own hand. The material has been assembled from institutions and private collections around the U.S. The exhibit, which commemorates the 175th anniversary of Lincoln's birth, is scheduled to run through April 15.

The District of Columbia Round Table newsletter reports that Peggy Davis, widow of Homer E. Davis, has contributed funds for two memorials to her late husband. She has donated \$5000 to Bud Robertson's "Campaigning with Lee" seminars and \$10,000 to establish the Homer E. Davis Scholarship in Civil War History at Virginia Polytechnic Institute. Homer, a long-time member of the D.C. Round Table, was well-known to many of our members.

THE NEW BOOKS



(compiled by Dick Clark)

Current, Richard Nelson. *Speaking of Abraham Lincoln. The Man and His Meaning for Our Times.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983. \$17.50.

Davis, Jefferson and Alexander Stephens. *Robert E. Lee.* Edited and with notes by Colonel Harold B. Simpson. Hillsboro, TX: Hill Junior College Press, 1983. \$10.00. Biographical studies originally published in 1886 and 1890.

Edmonds, David C. *The Guns of Port Hudson. Volume One. The River Campaign.* Lafayette, LA: The Acadiana Press, 1983. \$15.95.

Hanna, William F. *Abraham Among the Yankees. Abraham Lincoln's Visit to Massachusetts.* Taunton, MA: The Old Colony Historical Society, 1983. \$9.95.

Kim, Donggill. *Abraham Lincoln. An Oriental Interpretation.* Seoul, Korea: Jungwoo-sa, 1983.

Music of the Confederacy. Recording conducted by George Carroll; performed by musicians from Musick Virginia and Heritage Americana, sung by Lewis Freeman. Cassette: \$13.50 to be ordered postpaid from Music of the Confederacy, Box 31, Upperville, Virginia, 22176.

Nolan, Alan T. *The Iron Brigade.* Third edition. Berrien Springs, Michigan: Hardscrabble Books, 1983. Published for the Historical Society of Michigan, Ann Arbor. \$15.00. With new preface, several new illustrations and an introduction by James I. Robertson, Jr.

Siepel, Kevin H. *Rebel.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983. \$18.95. On John Singleton Mosby.

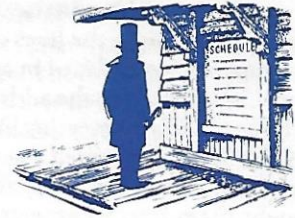
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different from the transmitted letter.

Myer recognized these problems and advertised for skilled telegraphers for the field telegraph corps. The advertisements came to Stager's attention and he wrote to Secretary Stanton, stating that he would lose valuable personnel and that there should not be divided responsibility for telegraphic communications. Stanton agreed with Stager, ordered Myer to turn over the field telegraph operations to Stager, and relieved Myer of his command of the Signal Corps. However, Myer's efforts were eventually rewarded when the Signal Corps was officially established on March 3, 1863. Myer was reinstated as chief signal officer in 1866 and served in that capacity until his death in 1880.

Mike's interest in Civil War communications relates naturally to his life-long hobby of amateur radio. During World War II Mike utilized this skill as a radio operator in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the highly successful military espionage operation of the government. An accounting major at DePaul University, Mike is presently manager of data processing systems for Polk Brothers in Melrose Park, Illinois. He and his wife Jacqueline, also a member of The Round Table, have two children, Merle and Michael, and reside in Skokie.

BULLETIN BOARD



Future meetings

Regular meetings are held at the Hotel Continental, 505 N. Michigan, the second Friday in each month, except as noted.

January 13, 1984: Myron "Mike" Cohn on "The Signal Corps and the Military Telegraph in the Civil War."

February 17: Marshall Krolick, Bill Sullivan, Jim Vlazny and Gordon Whitney in "Senate Confrontation, November-December, 1860" with Ralph Newman as Pres. Pro. Tem.

March 9: Col. Roy K. Flint on "Cold Harbor."

April 13: Richard McMurry on "John Bell Hood."

May 2-6: Battlefield Tour to Washington, D.C.

May 11: To be announced.

June 8: Dan Jordan on "John S. Mosby."

July 29: Picnic

Change of address

Ben L. Carleton, 175 E. Delaware Pl., Chicago, Illinois 60611.

Russell receives Bell Wiley Award

Jerry Russell, founder and national chairman of Civil War Round Table Associates, has received the first Bell I. Wiley Award of the Civil War Round Table of New York. The award will be presented periodically in memory of the late Dr. Wiley, the distinguished Civil War historian, author and professor. It is to honor persons who contribute to the understanding and preservation of that which pertains to the Civil War, in other than literary and artistic endeavors. Russell was cited for his "often unheralded efforts to interpret and preserve Civil War historic sites."

According to an item in the Harpers Ferry Round Table newsletter, a new 13-minute slide show has been installed at Manassas. It features many original photographs and sketches that illustrate the campaigns of both First and Second Manassas. The show was made possible by a \$7000 contribution from the Sons of Confederate Veterans.

Funds sought to preserve G.A.R. building

A group of people in Aurora have reactivated the G.A.R. Memorial Association to save and restore the G.A.R. building in downtown Aurora. They need to sort, preserve and file papers, pictures, records, etc. The material covers many Illinois regiments, infantry, cavalry, artillery and navy, as well as 125 regiments from other states. The building itself is also in need of repair.

In order to raise funds for this work, the organization will hold a military ball on February 18. The cost will be \$12.50 per person. For further information, contact Glenn and Joyce Clark, 5917 Blodgett Avenue, Downers Grove, Illinois 60516 (312) 968-1893.

The above information is from the Salt Creek Round Table newsletter.