

# THE CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE

Volume XLVII, Number 5

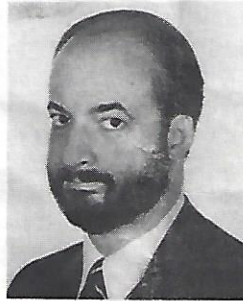
Chicago, Illinois

January, 1987

## Marshall D. Krolick on Captain to Brigadier: The Promotions of Custer, Farnsworth and Merritt

On June 27, 1863, George G. Meade was appointed to the command of the Army of the Potomac. The next day, Meade repeated the request of his predecessor, 'Joe' Hooker, and asked for the immediate promotion of George A. Custer, Elon J. Farnsworth and Wesley Merritt to the rank of brigadier general of volunteers. In his letter of June 28, 1863 to General Meade, the Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, confirmed their appointments, describing them as "three dashing and brilliant young officers who are appointed in violation of red tape and regardless of political influence because of their rare fitness to lead cavalry."

That two captains (Farnsworth and Merritt) and a first lieutenant (Custer) would be promoted to brigadier general over the heads of other more senior officers is most remarkable, and each was immediately assigned to the command of a brigade in the Cavalry Corps of the Army of the Potomac, then commanded by **Marshall D. Krolick** Major General Alfred Pleasanton. What makes this chain of events even more remarkable is that the Federal cavalry was then playing a vital role in the late, critical days of the Gettysburg campaign, as the Union army groped for the units of the Army of Northern Virginia.



At The Round Table meeting on January 9, 1987, Marshall D. Krolick, past president and former editor of our newsletter, will analyze the cast of characters then involved and the reasons behind these more than unusual promotions, as well as the thinking that allowed three men, Custer, Farnsworth and Merritt, all under 30 years of age, with no previous command experience, to be placed in such important roles. His final remarks will deal with the fate which awaited each of them after their dramatic promotions.

Though he was immortalized for his 'last stand' in the massacre at the battle of the Little Big Horn (June 25, 1876), Custer had achieved lasting fame more than a decade earlier in a score of major Civil War engagements. From 1st Bull Run to Appomattox, he took part in almost every important battle of the Army of the Potomac. Graduating last in his West Point class in 1861, he was assigned immediately to the Army of the Potomac. He served on the staffs of George B. McClellan and Alfred Pleasonton, gaining notice for bravery in the battle of Aldie, Virginia (June 17, 1863). After his promotion to brigadier general just



457th Regular Meeting

\*\*\*

Marshall D. Krolick  
on  
Captain to Brigadier:  
The Promotions of Custer,  
Farnsworth and Merritt

\*\*\*

Friday, January 9, 1987

\*\*\*

Quality Inn  
Halsted and Madison  
Cocktails at 5:30 p.m. Dinner at 6:30 p.m.  
\$13.00 per person  
Entree: Cornish Hen, Fish, or Fruit Plate



### Executive Committee meeting

President Pat Sumner has announced there will be an Executive Committee meeting on Saturday, January 24 at 10:30 a.m. It will be held in the Monroe A Room on the second floor of the Quality Inn, Halsted and Madison. All current officers, trustees and committee chairmen, and all past presidents, are urged to attend.

prior to the battle of Gettysburg, he fought with great distinction in all the cavalry battles of the Army of the Potomac. He became one of Phil Sheridan's favorites in the 1864 Shenandoah Valley campaign and cut off the last avenue of escape for Lee's army at Appomattox.

A Michigan native, Farnsworth had joined Albert Sidney Johnston's Utah expedition of 1857-58 to serve as a civilian forage master. When the Civil War broke out, he joined the 8th Illinois Cavalry, then led by his uncle, John F.

(continued on page 2)



# THE CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE



Founded December 3, 1940

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

## Officers

President .....	Patricia K. Sumner
Senior Vice President .....	Daniel R. Weinberg
Vice President .....	William J Sullivan
Vice President .....	Richard W. McAdoo
Secretary .....	Leslie MacDonald
Treasurer .....	Joseph L. Wisheart
Assistant Secretary .....	John M. Coverick, Sr.
Assistant Treasurer .....	Mary J. Abroe
Inspector General .....	Wayne J. Anderson
Registrar .....	Richard W. McAdoo
Newsletter Editor .....	David R. Richert
Assistant Editors .....	C. Robert Douglas Wayne J. Anderson
Contributing Editors .....	Richard E. Clark Marshall D. Krolick
Founding Newsletter Editor: Gil Twiss, 1954-1968	

## Board of Trustees

Terms expiring in 1987: Larry Gibbs, Paul Klekner, Duff McGovern, James Vlazny  
Terms expiring in 1988: W. Frank Meacham, Jr., Marlan H. Polhemus, David R. Richert, Robert J. Schell

## Committee Chairmen

Battlefield Tour .....	William J. Sullivan Joseph Wisheart
Nevins-Freeman .....	
Membership .....	Daniel Weinberg
Nominating .....	Paul Kliger
Publications/Archives .....	Jerry Warshaw Glen Wiche
Honors .....	Don Anderson
Battlefield Preservation .....	Jean Anderson Martin P. Dutch
Publicity .....	
Tape Record Librarian .....	Hal Ardell
Fiftieth Anniversary .....	Paul Kliger
House .....	Hal Ardell
Picnic .....	

The only requirement for membership in The Round Table is a genuine interest in the Civil War and its era. For information, address Dan Weinberg, 18 E. Chestnut St., Chicago, Illinois 60611.



(continued from page 1)

Farnsworth. He rose rapidly from adjutant to company commander, and is credited with service in the more than 40 battles and skirmishes in which his regiment participated until mid-1863. After service on the staff of Alfred Pleasanton, he was promoted to brigadier general and assigned to the 3rd Division of the Cavalry corps under Judson Kilpatrick. He led a night march in search of Jeb Stuart's riders and conducted a skirmish in the streets of

Hanover, Pennsylvania on July 1, 1863 and another near Hunterstown the following day. After the failure of Pickett's charge in the late afternoon of July 3rd, Kilpatrick thought that he saw an opportunity to disrupt Lee's lines as the broken elements of the attacking force fell back toward Seminary Ridge. He ordered a charge of Farnsworth's regiment against Longstreet's position, forming the right flank of the Confederate lines. When Farnsworth protested that the mission was suicidal, Kilpatrick questioned his courage and offered to lead the charge himself. Stung by this slur, Farnsworth pressed the attack and lost a quarter of his command. Though unharmed after a circuitous ride among the rebel troops, he was cut down with five mortal wounds as he inexplicably retraced his path past the Confederate battle lines.

Born in New York City, Merritt's family moved to Illinois during his youth. Although he first considered a legal career, he nevertheless accepted an appointment to West Point. Graduating 22nd of 41 in the outstanding class of 1860, he initially performed some routine service with the 2nd U.S. Cavalry. When war broke out, he principally performed staff duty as an aide of Maj. Gen. George Stoneman, then commander of cavalry in the Army of the Potomac. Upon his return to field duty, he won notice for capable work in the battles of Brandy Station (June 9, 1863) and Middleburg (June 20, 1863). After his promotion to brigadier general, he commanded the reserve cavalry brigade of the Army of the Potomac during the balance of the Gettysburg campaign. In a host of battles and skirmishes in the autumn of 1863, he demonstrated his fitness for higher command. When he was temporarily assigned a division in May, 1864, he served most capably at Todd's Tavern, the war's largest dismounted cavalry fight, and during Sheridan's raid on Richmond, particularly at Yellow Tavern. In August, 1864, he secured permanent command of the 1st Cavalry division in Sheridan's Army of the Shenandoah, and led that command at 3rd Winchester, Cedar Creek and Tom's Brook. During the Appomattox campaign, he commanded Sheridan's cavalry and acted as one of the three Federal commissioners to receive the Confederates' formal surrender. Continuing in the regular army, he became a major general, served in the Indian wars and was superintendent at West Point.

An active and contributing member of the Round Table since 1961, Marshall leads an extremely busy professional life as a partner in the Chicago law firm of Deutsch, Levy & Engel, specializing in handling commercial and residential real estate matters. He enjoys a national reputation as an expert on the Gettysburg campaign and Union cavalry operations, and frequently speaks on these subjects to historical groups across the country. He contributed an introduction to the Morningside Press reprint of Dr. Abner Hard's *History of the Eighth Cavalry Regiment, Illinois Volunteer during the Great Rebellion* (1984), and is currently at work on a history of the 1st Virginia Cavalry, to be issued as a part of the Virginia Regimental Series.

Fellow member Marshall Krolick will participate in a debate concerning the Lee vs. Stuart controversy at the Battle of Gettysburg on January 15 in Cincinnati. His opponent will be Kent Masterson Brown. The program is being sponsored by the Cincinnati Civil War Round Table. For further information, call Alan Hoeweler (513) 563-4008.



## December meeting

by Wayne Anderson

Alan T. Nolan was the speaker at the 456th regular meeting of The Civil War Round Table December 12. His topic, presented to 114 members and guests, was "A Historic View of Robert E. Lee."

Alan stated that Civil War scholarship is entering a new phase. With the passing of time and less emphasis on sectional bias, Civil War scholars can examine the events of this period of American history objectively. Of course, this means that most of the mythology of the Civil War will be discarded.

As an example, Alan pointed out the popular attitudes with regard to Lincoln, who is generally portrayed as a folksy individual who defended friends charged with murder and who helped widows with their legal problems. In fact, Lincoln was a skillful lawyer who had a very lucrative law practice; his clients were railroads and utility companies. In the 1840s, Lincoln even represented a client reclaiming a runaway slave. These examples clash with the image of Lincoln as a small-town, folksy lawyer.

Robert E. Lee is in the same category with Lincoln with regard to the Civil War mythology that surrounds him. Lee is described as a tragic hero fighting for a lost cause. Although the Confederacy fought to preserve slavery, Lee is exempted from this because of his battlefield accomplishments. Alan pointed out that in Lee's will, written in 1846, he owned six slaves, which he probably inherited from his mother-in-law. Lee's personal opinion on slavery was expressed in a letter he wrote to his wife in 1856. He wrote that slavery was both a moral and political evil for whites and blacks. However, immediate emancipation would cause more harm than good. Lee's opinion on slavery was shared by many Southern political leaders at this time. Personally, they abhorred slavery, but slavery was an institution that separated the South from the rest of the nation.

There are two war-time incidents that show Lee's attitude towards slavery. The first occurred during the Gettysburg Campaign of 1863. As the Confederate Army marched into Pennsylvania, free blacks were seized and returned south to be enslaved. There is no data about how many blacks were sent south, but records show that 50 blacks were seized in Chambersburg by the Confederate Army. Tradition has it that Lee was unaware these events took place. However, as an army commander, he is responsible for the actions of his soldiers and seizing civilians is against the laws of war.

The second incident deals with the exchange of prisoners. By 1864, thousands of black men had joined the Union Army. When black soldiers were captured, they were treated more severely than whites captured by the Confederates. In October, 1864, Lee wrote a letter to Grant proposing the exchange of prisoners on a man-for-man basis. Grant replied that his proposal was acceptable, but that black soldiers were to be included in the exchange. Lee replied that only free black soldiers would be included; former slaves would be returned to their former masters. Grant rejected this proposal.

In early 1865, Lee proposed the idea of enlisting blacks in the Confederate Army. Prospective recruits would be offered freedom for themselves and their families if they served honorably. This proposal was never implemented even though the Confederacy's resources to wage war were

shrinking, and thousands of blacks were fighting for their freedom as soldiers in the Union Army.

In conclusion, Alan said Lee's views on slavery were the conventional ones of a nineteenth century Virginia aristocrat. Personally, he disliked it, but he did support it. As Alan pointed out, it is the historians who have separated Lee from his viewpoints on slavery, and the mythology of Lee fighting only to serve his native Virginia continues today.

---

*Note: The following article was not ready in time for inclusion in the December newsletter; we are pleased to present it here.*

## November meeting

by Wayne Anderson

"The Bloody Angle of Spotsylvania: May 12, 1864" was A. Wilson "Will" Greene's topic when he addressed the 105 members and guests who attended the 455th meeting of The Civil War Round Table on November 14.

As Will explained, the fight at the "Bloody Angle" was the longest sustained battle during the Civil War. For nearly 24 hours, Union and Confederate soldiers were continually engaged in close combat, much of it hand-to-hand. To add to the soldiers' misery, it rained heavily throughout the day, and the battlefield became a sea of mud.

After the Battle of the Wilderness, Grant ordered Meade's Army of the Potomac to march south and seize Spotsylvania Court House. This area was of importance because several key roads intersected near the court house. If the Army of the Potomac arrived there first, it would place itself between Richmond and Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. During the night of May 7, 1864, the Union and Confederate armies were marching towards Spotsylvania. Because they had the advantage of interior lines, and because of some good fortune, the Confederates arrived first. Immediately, the Army of Northern Virginia began to construct field fortifications.

The Confederate battle line took shape as the troops arrived and extended the Confederate right. Johnson's division of Ewell's corps arrived on the evening of May 8. Because it was dark and the terrain was heavily wooded, the Confederates followed the contour of the ground to establish their line. Two brigades from Johnson's division extended their lines farther to the right and then bent back towards the original Confederate line, the "Mule Shoe" salient came into existence.

On May 8 and 10, the Army of the Potomac attacked the Confederate lines with little success. However, an attack organized by Colonel Emory Upton penetrated the Confederate entrenchments at the base of the "Mule Shoe" and captured several hundred prisoners. The Union attack demonstrated that the "Mule Shoe" was vulnerable to a well-led, organized attack, and Grant commenced to plan it.

During the night of May 11, Hancock's II Corps marched around the Union lines and headed toward an assembly area from which it would attack the top of the "Mule Shoe." No one knew the exact location of the Confederate lines and there was much confusion in organizing the march. A staff officer from Mott's division was able to sketch the Confederate lines on the wall of a building, and with this information the II Corps was eventually formed into an attack formation.

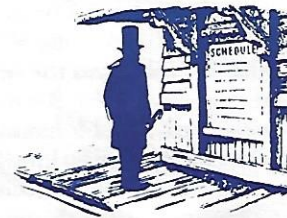
At 4 a.m. on May 12, the soldiers of the II Corps were roused from their sleep. By 4:20 they were under arms and

*(continued on page 4)*



## The New Books

compiled by Dick Clark



## BULLETIN BOARD

McMillan, Malcolm C. *The Disintegration of a Confederate State. Three Governors and Alabama's Wartime Home Front, 1861-1865.* Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986. \$16.95.

Mendenhall, Willard Hall. *Missouri Ordeal, 1862-1864. Diaries of Willard Hall Mendenhall,* transcribed by Margaret Mendenhall Frazier, introduction by James W. Goodrich. Newhall, GA: Carl Boyer, 1985.

Mosman, Chesley A. *The Rough Side of War: The Civil War Journal of Chesley A. Mosman.* Edited, with a bibliographical sketch and notes by Arnold Gates. \$25.00. 1st lieutenant with Co D, 59th Illinois.

Murray, J. Ogden. *The Immortal Six Hundred.* Little Rock, AR: Eagle Press, 1986. \$30.00. Original of 1905.

Neely, Mark E., Jr. and R. Gerald McMurtry. *The Insanity File: The Case of Mary Todd Lincoln.* Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986. \$19.95.

Nevin, David and the editors of Time-Life Books. *Sherman's March: Atlanta to the Sea.* Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1986. \$14.95. In series: *The Civil War.*

Olmsted, Frederick Law. *Defending the Union: The Civil War and the U.S. Sanitary Commission, 1861-1863.* Edited by Jane Turner Censer. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986. \$40.00. Volume four in the series: *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted.*

Osborn, Thomas Ward. *The Fiery Trail. A Union Officer's Account of Sherman's Last Campaigns.* Edited, with an introduction by Richard Harwell and Philip N. Racine, and with a foreword by William S. McFeely. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1986. \$22.50. Major Osborn was chief of artillery in the Federal Army of the Tennessee.

Ripley, Warren, editor. *Siege Train: The Journal of a Confederate Artilleryman in the Defense of Charleston.* Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 1986. \$24.95.

Schildt, John W. *Hunter McGuire: Doctor in Gray.* Chewsville, MD: Antietam Publications, 1986. \$13.50.

---

**We report with sadness** the recent death of fellow member Lumir Buresh of Kansas. Lumir, who was a frequent companion on battlefield tours, was a member of the Kansas City Round Table and active in their efforts to preserve and interpret the Westport and Mine Creek battlefields. He was the author of a book, *The Battle of Mine Creek.* Our sincere condolences are extended to his family.

(continued from page 3)

moving toward the Confederate entrenchments. The early morning fog masked their movement. The II Corps quickly overtook the Confederate pickets and penetrated the abatis, about 150 yards from the Confederate lines. The Union soldiers raised a yell, surged forward, and poured over the Confederate lines at the "Mule Shoe." In less than an hour, Johnson's division was captured along with 20 cannon.

The Confederates quickly counter-attacked and drove

### Future meetings

Regular meetings are held at the Quality Inn, Halsted and Madison, the second Friday in each month, except as noted.

January 9, 1987: Marshall D. Krolick on "Captain to Brigadier: The Promotions of Custer, Farnsworth and Merritt."

January 24: Executive Committee meeting, 10:30 a.m., Quality Inn.

February 20: Ralph G. Newman on "Robert Todd Lincoln in the Civil War." **Note:** This is the third Friday of the month.

March 13: Howard McManus on "The Battle of Cloyd's Mountain."

April 10: Mike Chesson on "The Bread Riots in Richmond."

April 30-May 3: Annual Battlefield Tour—The Trans-Mississippi.

May 8: Betty Otto on "Maryland Campaign, September 1862."

June 5: Mark Boatner on "How the Civil War Dictionary Came Into Being." **Note:** This is the first Friday of the month.

### New members

Ron Carlson, 3540 Wesley Avenue, Berwyn, Illinois 60402 (312) 749-7999.

John H. Maitland, 116 Ray Street, Poplar Grove, Illinois 61065 (815) 765-2455.

A. Bingham Seibold, III, 1433 N. Dearborn Parkway, Chicago, Illinois 60610 (312) 337-0832.

---

the II Corps to the outer side of the entrenchments. The VI Corps attacked at 8:15 a.m. to support the II Corps, but it was repulsed and took position at a bend in the Confederate line which is forever known as the "Bloody Angle." Union and Confederate soldiers fought from the opposite sides of the entrenchments for more than 15 hours. The dead and wounded clogged the trenches. There was a continuous rattle of musket fire and it rained throughout the day. Soldiers from both sides claimed that they never experienced another such day in their entire wartime service.

Early on the morning of May 13, the Confederates quietly withdrew to a new line. The Yankees were too exhausted to make another attack. Instead, they collected the dead and evacuated the wounded. In several trenches the dead were piled four feet high. Many of the corpses were riddled with bullets beyond recognition. Both sides had suffered heavily. Union casualties were about 7,000. Confederate casualties were slightly less, but Johnson's division ceased to exist. Eight Confederate general officers were either killed, wounded or captured. This was a heavy blow to the command structure of Lee's army. "The Bloody Angle" was not a decisive battle. However, it was another step in wearing down Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Grant could replace his casualties and bring to bear all the resources of the north against the Confederacy.