Brian C. Pohanka on "Custer’s Last Stand: The Battle of Little Big Horn Reexamined"

by Barbara Hughett

One of the legendary figures to emerge from the Civil War, George Armstrong Custer, first came to prominence as a dashing young cavalry officer at the First Battle of Bull Run. He was a member of the West Point class of 1861, and took part in every battle of the Army of the Potomac except one. A dashing and effective cavalry leader, Custer had eleven horses shot out from under him during the course of the war, although he was wounded himself only once.

However, it is for "Custer's Last Stand," the Battle of Little Big Horn, on June 25, 1876, that the general has become famous... or infamous. The dramatic demise of the flamboyant and controversial commander of the Seventh U.S. Cavalry has inspired a plethora of books and articles, as well as "Last Stand" paintings and several dozen Hollywood films.

One of the fascinations of Little Big Horn rests in the fact that ongoing research is constantly shedding new light on the enigmatic events of that fatal day. In the summer of 1984, following a catastrophic fire that scorching the rolling Montana hills where Sioux and soldiers clashed, a team of archaeologists launched their own investigation into Custer's Last Stand. The material record of three archaeological surveys of the Little Big Horn battlefield has provided historians with a new understanding of how Indian warriors vanquished the vaunted Seventh Cavalry.

Utilizing state-of-the-art surveying techniques, the archaeologists pinpointed their finds. Microscopic ballistics analyses identified specific weapons by means of distinctive firing pin marks on the expended shells. It was thus possible to trace the movement of individual soldiers and Indians across the battlefield. Most striking of all were the forensic examinations of some thirty sets of skeletal remains. Included as part of the study were "facial reconstructions" of half a dozen skulls located in the course of the surveys.

Coupling these recent findings with the considerable body of interviews conducted with Sioux and Cheyenne veterans of the battle, a knowledge of the personality strengths and weaknesses of Custer and his subordinates, and an understanding of period Army tactics, it is possible to construct a theoretical model of Little Big Horn that is far from the heroic "Last Stand" of dime novels and horse operas. "Custer's Last Stand: The Battle of Little Big Horn Reexamined" will be the topic of Brian C. Pohanka—who participated in the archaeological surveys—when he addresses The Civil War Round Table on February 12.

A graduate of Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, Brian Pohanka was a researcher and writer for Time-Life Books for ten years. While at Time-Life, he

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THE CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE

Founded December 3, 1940
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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 Dan Weinberg, 357 W. Chicago Ave., Chicago, IL 60610.

Founder Ralph G. Newman will address the New Salem
Lincoln League on February 13. His topic will be “Sixty
Years on the Lincoln Trail.”

Former President Brooks Davis delivered his address,
given to our Round Table last month, on “Jefferson Davis
and Abraham Lincoln as Commanders-in-Chief” to the St.
Louis Civil War Round Table on January 26.

BATTLEFIELD PRESERVATION

UPDATE

by David Richert

The Association for the Preservation of Civil War Sites,
working with local groups, has helped preserve nearly 238
acres in three locations—Byram’s Ford, Missouri; Sharps-
burg, Maryland; and Cedar Creek, Virginia.

At Byram’s Ford, the APCWS purchased about forty
acres along the Big Blue River that played a critical role in
the 1864 Battle of Westport. The Monnett Battle of Westport
Fund, the nonprofit arm of the Kansas City Civil War
Round Table, donated $21,300 to the Association to assist
with the purchase. The land will be donated to the Kansas
City Parks Department, which has agreed to manage it as
a historical park along with additional tracts to be donated
by the Monnett Battle of Westport Fund. If the city fails to
live up to the agreement, the property reverts back to the
Association. The Byram’s Ford purchase represents the
Association’s first venture west of the Mississippi River.

In October 1992, the APCWS presented the Cedar
Creek Battlefield Foundation with a check for $25,000. The
Foundation earned the contribution by attracting ten gifts
of $2,500 in 1992 toward the purchase of a 158-acre parcel
near historic Belle Grove Plantation in the heart of the
Shenandoah Valley’s largest battlefield. The gift is the
second in a possible series of four donations by the APCWS
to the Foundation.

At Antietam, the Save Historic Antietam Foundation
earned an APCWS matching gift of $15,000 by persuading
eighteen Civil War Round Tables and other historical
organizations to contribute a minimum of $500 each to
purchase forty acres of the historic Grove Farm. Protection
of the Grove Farm tract prohibits potential development of
the site that would have compromised the scenic approach
to Lee’s Headquarters at Sharpsburg.

In other APCWS news, development of Pamplin Park
Civil War Site near Petersburg, Virginia, is proceeding
rapidly. The entrance road, parking lot, and interpretive
trail will be completed by April 2 when a dedication cer-
emony will be held. In addition, APCWS is already collect-
ing museum objects for display, including a pristine South
Carolina officer’s uniform with Petersburg connections. As
reported in the November “Battlefield Preservation Up-
date,” the Pamplin family purchased the land, which con-
tains fine earthen entrenchments, and requested that the
APCWS develop and manage, at Foundation expense, a
first-class historic site.

With grants from the Shenandoah County Economic
Development Commission and the American Battlefield
Protection Program, the APCWS is working on a master
plan for Fisher’s Hill Battlefield Civil War Site. A parking
area and interpretive trail to the top of Ramsay’s Hill,
complete with historical signs and a brochure, are antici-
pated. The Strasburg Guards Camp of the Sons of Con-
fedrate Veterans is working with the APCWS at Fisher’s Hill.
Also in the Shenandoah Valley, the Association is working
with local officials, landowners, historical groups, and oth-
ers to develop a blueprint for preservation of twelve major
Civil War battlefields in Western Virginia. The goal is to
create a Shenandoah Valley National Battlefield Park.
Copies of the plan are available from APCWS, PO Box 1862,
Fredericksburg, Virginia 22402.
JANUARY MEETING

by Barbara Hughett

Only about one hundred miles separate the Kentucky birthplaces of Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln, and the two men were born less than a year apart. However, their paths to the presidencies of their respective countries were very different. Davis was born into an affluent and educated family, Lincoln into an illiterate family of very modest means. Davis studied at Transylvania University and graduated from West Point; Lincoln was self-educated. Davis’s prior political career was certainly more illustrious than was his counterpart’s.

How did these two men compare as commanders-in-chief of their opposing nations during the American Civil War? “Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln as Commanders-in-Chief” was the topic of Brooks Davis on January 8, when he addressed 140 members and guests at the 517th regular meeting of The Civil War Round Table.

“Webster’s dictionary,” Davis stated, “defines commander-in-chief as the officer or official holding supreme command of the military or naval forces of a nation. Practical application of that definition of the term goes well beyond that, as political leadership must be factored in.” While Jefferson Davis, former secretary of war and hero of the Mexican War, had military expertise superior to that of Lincoln, Lincoln was, by far, the more skilled politician.

It has been said that the South and its leader had no strategy for winning the war. “Actually,” Davis remarked, President Davis “did develop a doomed strategy of defending all of his territory at its borders and to avoid the offensive.... It can certainly be shown that he changed the border-defensive view, realizing that it was not feasible.” Professor Emory Thomas has stated that Jefferson Davis drew heavily on General George Washington’s strategy of winning by not losing.

The main objectives of war, according to General Carl von Clausewitz, are: (1) conquer and destroy the enemy’s armed forces; (2) get possession of the material elements of aggression and other sources of existence of the enemy; and (3) gain public opinion by winning victories that depress the enemy’s morale. “These objectives,” Davis emphasized, “were ultimately understood and executed by the North, while the South never really perfected an overall strategy and a unified command system to accomplish it.”

Working well with people is vital to skilled leadership. While both men made some mistakes in their cabinet appointments, Abraham Lincoln was better able to work with his difficult cabinet members. Both presidents needed the cooperation of the governors of the states at all times. “Lincoln worked actively to aid friendly governors with reelection problems while his opposite number, unfortunately, felt that this activity was to be carefully avoided.”

Jefferson Davis had to cope with problems that his Northern counterpart did not face—such as severe shortages of food and other supplies, and sky-high inflation. The loyalty of the people was mandatory to both presidents. “[Jefferson Davis’s] speeches did exhort the people, but not in the almost magic way Abraham Lincoln’s did.”

In closing, Brooks Davis made the following observation: “It is difficult not to compare Jefferson Davis with Abraham Lincoln, even while discussing their relative ratings as commander-in-chief, for Mr. Davis is usually depicted as a foil. He should be judged by what he did with the potential of the Southern cause. Returning to Montgomery, Alabama, and the heady days of early 1861, and considering the available manpower pool, neither R.E. Lee nor Bruce Catton could imagine that any of the other candidates—such as Robert Toombs, Howell Cobb, Alexander Stephens, Robert Rhett, or William Yancey—would ever approach Jefferson Davis in stature.

“He was probably elected because of a widespread desire for unanimity, respectability, strong leadership, and—above all—moderation. There is no doubt that his administration and personality did not turn out that way until the rising of the ‘Lost Cause’ movement. The question remains: did he get more out of his nation in manpower and economic resources than did his counterpart? The South, after all, lost the war; thus the North and its leaders won the world’s glory.”

The one hundred eighty-fourth anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln will be commemorated in Springfield on February 12. The Twentieth Annual Abraham Lincoln Symposium will begin at 1:30 p.m. at the Old State Capitol. “Abraham Lincoln and the Whig Party” will be the theme of the symposium, and speakers include Daniel Walker Howe, Rhodes Professor of American History at Oxford University, England. The featured speaker at the annual banquet of the Abraham Lincoln Association that evening is Garry Wills, author of the highly-acclaimed Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America. (1992) For further information, call (217) 525-9600. Additional activities in Springfield in honor of Lincoln’s Birthday include the Lincoln Heritage Lecture series at the Lincoln Home National Historic Site. The lectures this year are being given by Harold Holzer and Douglas L. Wilson. The program begins at 9:30 a.m. at the Lincoln Home Visitor Center.

Honorary Life member Ernest A. Griffin spoke on “The African American Soldier in the Civil War” to the Federal Records Center, National Archives, Great Lakes Region, on February 3.

William Hanchett, who addressed our Round Table in 1988, is speaking on the Emancipation Proclamation to the San Diego Civil War Round Table on February 17. Hanchett will also address the annual meeting of the Lincoln Fellowship of Wisconsin, in Milwaukee, on April 18.

Brian (continued from page 1) served as senior researcher, pictorial consultant, and writer for the publisher’s twenty-seven-volume Civil War series. For the past five years, he has been a freelance writer and a leader in the battlefield preservation movement. Pohanka serves as a director of several preservation associations, including the Association for the Preservation of Civil War Sites.

Among his publications are Custer’s Field (1987) and Distant Thunder: A Photographic Essay on the American Civil War (1988). He has written articles for numerous magazines and historical journals, and has served as historical consultant for several video productions, including the Turner Network Television film of “The Killer Angels.”
The New Books
Compiled by C. Robert Douglas


Longtime member William Gimbel died last month. We extend our deepest condolences to his widow Edie and their family.

Member Henry Pomerantz will lead an eight-session adult education study course on "1862 Campaigns" at the New Trier Extension. Classes will be held on Wednesdays, from 7-9 p.m., beginning on March 3. For information, call (708) 446-6600.

Honorary Life member Margaret April wants to thank all her Round Table friends for the flowers and get-well greetings during her recent hospitalization. Margaret is well on the road to recovery and we look forward to seeing her at a Round Table meeting soon.

The history of The Round Table, The Civil War Round Table: Fifty Years of Scholarship and Fellowship, by Barbara Hughett, is available for $50 per copy. You may purchase the book at the monthly meeting or order it from Morningside Bookshop, 260 Oak Street, Dayton, Ohio 45401 (1-800-648-9710). Add $2.50 for postage and handling.

Schimmelfennig Boutique
In addition to The Round Table history, the following items are available at each monthly meeting:
- Lapel pins $3.00 each, two for $5.00
- Mugs $2.00 each, two for $3.00
- Meeting tapes $7.00 each
- Civil War Buff posters $10.00 each
Proceeds from the sale of these items go to support the programs of The Civil War Round Table.

FUTURE MEETINGS
Regular meetings are held at the Holiday Inn Mart Plaza, 350 North Orleans Street (Buttons, 15th Floor), the second Friday in each month, except as noted.

February 12: Brian C. Pohanka on "Custer's Last Stand: The Battle of Little Big Horn Reexamined."
March 12: Frank Byrne on "Civil War Prisons: Myths and Realities."
April 16: Frances Kennedy on "Community Benefits of Battlefield Preservation" (Please note: this is the third Friday of the month.)
May 6-9: Annual Battlefield Tour—Vicksburg.
May 14: William Piston on "Clio and the General: James Longstreet and the Writing of Southern History."
June 11: Carol Reardon on "The Image of Pickett's Charge in American History."

New Members
John H. Beebe, 1294 Asbury Avenue, Winnetska, IL 60093, (708) 446-9135
Tare Coverdale, 1927 Sherman Avenue, Evanston, IL 60201, (708) 332-2067
John P. Gallagher, 80 Joyce Court, Glen Ellyn, IL 60137, (708) 858-9039
Phil Kendall, 1555 Sherman Avenue, Evanston, IL 60201
M.J. Wiet, 6359 North Le Mai, Chicago, IL 60046, (312) 763-1657

Changes of Address
Ella Clausius, F.C.R.C. #350, 3470 North Alpine Road, Rockford, IL 61114, (815) 637-1393
Warren Haskin, 377 Ridge Road, Kenilworth, IL 60043
W. Frank Meacham, 4832 Hunting Hills Drive, Roanoke, VA 24014

A Message From The President
Many thanks to Joyce Warsho for her service as chair of the Publicity Committee for the past two years. Joyce has submitted her resignation regretfully and it has been received in the same spirit. She and fellow committee members Charles Shields and William Hupp devised the public relations system currently in use. Charlie and Bill will continue to work on the committee. However, a new chair is needed! For information about what this position entails, please call me at (708) 251-4745.

Mary Abroe

Charles (Pie) Dufour, journalist, Civil War author, and longtime friend of The Round Table, celebrated his ninetieth birthday on January 17. Dufour spoke at a regular Round Table meeting in 1963, and served as our host and tour guide during the 1964 battlefield tour to New Orleans. If you want to send belated birthday greetings, his address is: Chateau Notre Dame, 2820 Burdette Street, Apartment 10, New Orleans, Louisiana 70125.