



Erie County in the Civil War

John Hildebrandt - April 17, 2011 – Sandusky Register

Company C of the Hoffman Battalion, in formation outside of its barracks at Johnson's Island prisoner-of-war camp in 1864. In 1862, the group of 400 volunteers was recruited to guard the Johnson's Island prison. In 1864, six more companies joined the battalion, which became the 128th Ohio Volunteer Infantry.



Sandusky was 150 years old in 1968. Those of us who are in our late 40s or older remember the Sandusky sesquicentennial. It was a time of celebration: parades, parties, pageants, proclamations, period dress, marching bands and men with beards.

Starting this year, the United States will commemorate, but certainly not celebrate, the sesquicentennial of the Civil War. It was one of two seminal events, along with the Revolution, in our nation's 234-year history. It settled two essential questions: the United States was one nation, not a collection of independent states; and it ended slavery, the economic, social and cultural foundation for the southern half of our country.

The Civil War was a long time ago, and then it was not. I was born in 1949, several years before the last Union and Confederate soldiers passed. The last reunion of Gettysburg veterans, the 75th anniversary of the battle in 1938, is in the living memory of millions of Americans. There were African-American participants in the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s who had been born as slaves.

Our Civil War was a painful event. Today, six generations removed from it, we must rely on what we read and what we see and what we hear. No one we know has experienced it. In just more than four years of war about 620,000 young men died; perhaps 50,000 civilians as well. An equivalent number in today's United States would be 6 million, a horror we can barely contemplate.

In the South, which suffered a higher proportion of casualties, about 25 percent of all males of military age died in the war. Think about the young men in this year's graduating class from Sandusky High School and imagine that in four years one in four would be dead. It wasn't just bullets and cannon balls; disease killed two thirds of those who died in the war.

The war wrecked the South economically. It would take a century for it to recover.

Preserving a union

The war was about many things, but mostly it was about slavery; it was really not a battle over states' rights. The South was determined to protect and perpetuate its way of life, which at base was an economic and cultural system fueled by the institution of chattel slavery. Ultimately, you cannot put a good states'-rights face on it. If in doubt about what the South was fighting for, read the statements of southern leaders in 1861, when they made their case for secession. It is clear they were fighting to preserve the institution of slavery.

Most Northerners did not fight to end slavery, although some did, and most Northerners did not believe the black man was their equal. Most fought and died to preserve the Union, an abstract but almost mystical concept to people living only 77 years after the Revolution created the United States of America.

We also have to resist the easy temptation to layer our 21st century sensibilities on top of the moral universe that existed 150 years ago. Both sides quoted the Bible in justifying their beliefs.

When Abraham Lincoln was elected in November 1860, the South felt compelled to leave the Union. The cascade of state conventions to authorize secession began, and on April 12, 1861, the cannons opened fire on Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, and the deadly dance had begun.

War at home

The war touched Sandusky and Erie County profoundly. In the most immediate way, about 125 men from the area died in the war. There is a marker in Veterans Park in Sandusky that lists the names of the men who died serving in the Union's army and navy.

Sandusky and Erie County were different places 150 years ago. The population of Erie County was 24,474 in the 1860 census. About 14 percent of the population was foreign-born males, reflecting the large scale German immigration of the 1840s and 1850s. Sandusky had three newspapers and 14 churches. The county had 1,413 farms versus 403 today.

There were no software engineers, auto mechanics or cable TV installers listed in the 1860 census, but there were tanners, draymen, barbers, brewers, coopers, saddlers, stone cutters, tailors, sailors and lake captains.

Ohio played a pivotal role in the Civil War. About 315,000 Buckeyes served in the Union forces, and 35,475 paid the ultimate price (the second highest mortality rate behind New York). There are 127 Ohio soldiers resting in the federal cemetery at Gettysburg, including the grandfather of President Richard Nixon, but there are many thousands more resting in federal cemeteries and in countless unknown graves, in places like Shiloh, Chickamauga, Atlanta and Vicksburg.

Ohio regiments made up the largest portion of the western armies under Ulysses S. Grant, William Tecumseh Sherman and James McPherson, who was a native of Clyde and the highest ranking Union officer to die in combat in the war. All were Ohioans, as were generals George Armstrong Custer and Phil Sheridan.

About 1,800 soldiers and sailors served in the Union forces from Erie County. They represented 7.5 percent of the population in 1860, which would be almost 7,000 soldiers based on today's population. Erie County men served in 30 regiments, including several that fought with great distinction.

At Gettysburg, on July 3, 1863, it was the 8th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, mostly made up of men from Erie and Huron Counties, that turned the flank of Pickett's Charge. A monument to their effort on the battlefield exists. The 55th Ohio, with several companies from Erie County, served primarily in the western theater and participated in Sherman's famous March to the Sea.

Sandusky produced one Union general, Brig. Gen. John Beatty, who served in the western theater and fought at Chickamauga and Chattanooga. He served two terms in the U.S. Congress and is buried in Oakland Cemetery.

Lasting impact

There are many tangible reminders of the Civil War in Erie County, including the Ohio Veterans Home, which was built in 1888 to house the aging and indigent veterans of the Union Army; Johnson's Island Confederate Prison (technically in Ottawa County but tied strongly to the history of Sandusky); and the Milan Township Civil War Monument, one of the first erected in Ohio.

Sandusky was a key terminus of the Underground Railroad; many still-existing Sandusky homes housed slaves escaping to Canada.

Arguably, the most famous man ever from Sandusky was Jay Cooke, born Aug. 10, 1821, at what is now the corner of Columbus Avenue and Market Street.



Cooke, a Philadelphia banker and one of the wealthiest men in America, was the architect of a program to sell bonds to finance the unprecedented cost of the Union war effort. He did so successfully, becoming one of the pioneers of mass marketing, and, according to Grant, the man most responsible for winning the war.

The Civil War is not only part of the story of our nation; it is also part of the story of Erie County.

John Hildebrandt is a resident of Perkins Township