



Copperheads disappear from Erie County

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SANDUSKY

There were once lots of copperheads living in Erie County. Copperhead snakes have largely disappeared, however, eliminated by changes in habitat and relentless persecution by their human enemies.

Copperhead voters have disappeared, too, defeated by the fortunes of history and their political enemies.

During the Civil War, Ohio was not a Republican monolith. Although Lincoln won both his presidential elections in 1860 and 1864 with the help of Ohio's electoral votes, Ohio was deeply divided politically. In 1864, Lincoln carried Ohio with 56 percent of the vote, which meant 44 percent of Ohioans voted for George McClellan, a so-called War Democrat who favored a negotiated peace with the South and whose personal views bordered on being pro-slavery.

Erie County also went for Lincoln in 1860 and 1864. In 1864, Lincoln won by a total of 632 votes. Kelleys Island voted for McClellan. Many neighboring counties also went for McClellan, including Ottawa, Seneca, Sandusky, and Wyandot.

Copperheads were a group of Democrats who opposed the war and desired an immediate peace settlement with the Confederacy, including the acceptance of slavery in the South.

The leader of the Copperhead movement was two-time Ohio Congressman Clement Vallandigham, who believed in state's rights, including the right to secede from the Union. He also believed that the Federal government had no power to regulate slavery. He blamed abolitionists, and Abraham Lincoln, for starting the war.

Republicans started calling these antiwar Democrats "Copperheads," likening them to the venomous snake. Surprisingly, Copperhead Democrats took to the name, reinterpreting the copper "head" as the likeness of Liberty, which they cut from copper pennies and proudly wore as badges.

Vallandigham coined the Copperhead battle cry: "To maintain the Constitution as it is, and to restore the Union as it was." Slavery included, of course.

The Copperhead movement peaked in 1863 and 1864, as war weariness spread across the North. Copperheads and most Democrats were also vehemently opposed to the draft, which had been instituted by Congress in early 1863.

Vallandigham was arrested for treason by Gen. Ambrose Burnside in May 1863, because of his public statements against the war and President Lincoln. Among other statements, he said the war was being fought not to save the Union but to free blacks and enslave Southern whites. Following a military trial, he was sentenced to prison for the duration of the conflict. A firestorm of protest erupted from his backers, including some prominent War Democrats, and Lincoln, not anxious to anoint a martyr, banished him to the South. The Confederate government didn't know quite what to do with him either, and shipped him to Canada.

Vallandigham decided to run for Governor of Ohio in 1863, in absentia (from Canada), and was easily nominated by the Ohio Democratic Party. He lost, however, to Republican John Brough by more than 100,000 votes, receiving only 40 percent of the votes cast.

In Ohio the Copperhead movement was strongest in southern counties and in some of the ethnic wards in the larger cities. Copperheads represented a wing of the Democratic Party, much as today the Tea Party might be considered a wing of the Republican Party.

There were certainly Copperheads in Erie County. In September 1863, during the race for governor and the state legislature, the Sandusky Register reported on the Democratic "Convention" of Berlin Heights, which featured a pitch for votes from representatives of Vallandigham, who was running his campaign from Windsor, Ontario, across the river from Detroit.

Earlier, in August, the Register reported on a Democratic Party gathering in Vermilion, which attracted up to 3,000 voters, many of them ardent Copperheads. Characteristically, the Register referred to the two main speakers as "two as arrant Copperheads as ever spit out their venom against the government or hissed their treason in the ears of the people."

In the mid nineteenth century, most newspapers were stridently partisan. There was no pretense of objectivity.

If you wanted to read another point of view, you had best buy another newspaper. As pointed out in other articles in this series, the Sandusky Commercial Register, the journalistic ancestor of today's Sandusky Register, was strongly and even obsessively pro-Union and pro-Lincoln.

In Port Clinton, a Copperhead candidate for state representative was fined \$5 for allegedly "knocking down" an "aged, gray-haired cripple" who had expressed the opinion that there was no difference between Jefferson Davis (president of the Confederacy) and Clement Vallandigham.

Enthusiasm for the Copperhead movement waxed and waned with the performance of Union armies in the field. There was incredible war weariness in the North in the summer of 1864, but before Christmas Atlanta had fallen and Lincoln had been reelected. The North knew it was going to win. The Copperhead movement quickly withered away.

Vallandigham died in 1871 in Lebanon, Ohio, at the age of 50, the victim of a bizarre accident.

He was representing a man accused of murder in a barroom brawl. Vallandigham attempted to prove the victim had in fact killed himself while trying to draw his pistol from his pocket when rising from a kneeling position. As Vallandigham conferred with his fellow lawyers in his hotel room, he showed them how he planned to demonstrate this to the jury.

He grabbed a pistol, which he assumed was unloaded.

It was not.

He shot himself in the head and died.

His client, however, was acquitted.