



THE CIVIL WAR - Funerals, war news, 25-cent oysters - Erie County vital at the Midpoint of the Civil War

BY JOHN HILDEBRANDT

It is late March 1863. Almost two years have passed since the April 12 bombardment of Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor.

As history, the Civil War is fast approaching its midpoint, but of course the people living along the shore of Sandusky Bay in 1863 do not know that. It will be two more years before Palm Sunday, April 9, 1865, when Lee surrenders to Grant at Appomattox Courthouse in Virginia and the Civil War effectively ends.

No one in Erie County or elsewhere has expected the war to last as long as it has. Most thought it would have been over in a matter of months, hardly years.

There is much war weariness in the North. Militarily, a year that had started out very promising has ended with disappointment in both the eastern and western theaters. In the east, 1862 concludes with the defeat of the Army of the Potomac at Fredericksburg. In the west, Stones River, outside Nashville, is a bloody draw, and Sherman is checked at Chickasaw Bluffs outside Vicksburg.

The Emancipation Proclamation is not yet three months old. The Sandusky Register reports in March that "Negro soldiers have been assigned to guard duty at Hilton Head Island." Four months later, in July, the black soldiers of the 54th Massachusetts (which included a number of men from northern Ohio) will assault Fort Wagner, as depicted in the 1989 movie "Glory."

No one knows what 1863 will bring.

Ohio regiments serve in both theaters, but mostly in the west.

The 101st Ohio, well-stocked with Erie County soldiers, is still in its winter camps outside Murfreesboro, Tenn., recovering from the Stones River battle on Dec. 31 and Jan. 1.

The 8th Ohio, with two companies of Erie County boys, is still in its winter camps in northern Virginia with the Army of the Potomac. In three months it will cover itself in glory—and suffer heavy casualties—helping to turn back Pickett's Charge, the climax of the Battle of Gettysburg.

In Sandusky, the Soldiers' Aid Society collects money and goods to help the wives and families of local soldiers.

It has been a cold winter in Sandusky. The bay and lake were frozen solid as March began and even now, as April fast approaches, there is still ice in the bay.

Most of the Erie County soldiers who have thus far died in the war lie buried far away, many of them in unmarked graves. For those families who can afford it, however, mortuary science has advanced to the point that soldiers' remains can be embalmed and shipped home for burial. It is a growing industry across the North.

Second Lt. Dolsen Vankirk, of the 65th Ohio Infantry, a 20-year-old Sandusky man, is killed Dec. 31 at the Battle of Stones River. His family arranges for his disinterment from the battlefield and his remains are sent to Sandusky by train, arriving in early March. The Rector, Dr. Bronson, at Grace Church, conducts funeral services with additional remarks by the Rev. T.F. Hildreth.

The Register reports the weather is very bad on the day of the funeral, which reduces attendance at the church service.

Vankirk's brother-in-law, Calvin Carr, requests a military escort for the funeral from the troops at Johnson's Island. Again, weather makes it impossible for the troops to get across the bay to Sandusky. Major Hoffman, in command of the troops at the prison, writes Carr a letter of condolence, which is published in the Register.

The Register does not shirk from comment on the young officer's death: "He was slain on the battlefield by traitors, his life blood reddens their guilt." This is wartime, and the Rebels are the hated enemy.

Lt. Vankirk is buried in Oakland Cemetery. At the top of the headstone is the phrase "My Beloved Son." The inscription continues: "Gave his life a sacrifice for his Country at the Battle of Stones River December 31, 1862. Aged 20 years 10 mos." About 150 years after his death, his gravesite will be visited on cemetery tours hosted by the Sandusky Library and Follett House Museum.

Dolsen Vankirk is one of 115 Erie County men who will die in the war. The war lasts four years, which means on average an Erie County man dies every 12 days. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have, over 10 years, claimed the lives of eight Erie County men.

In spite of the bad news from the front and the continuing lists of casualties, Sandusky and Erie County continue to thrive economically. Sandusky is a bustling port city with good railroad access and a government installation—the prison on Johnson's Island—to provide jobs and the local purchase of goods and services. Erie County's population is 24,000 in the 1860 census and growing rapidly.

A glance at the advertisements in the Register for wallpaper (from satin to embossed), pianos, restaurants (oysters for 25 cents), stationery, hoop skirts, hair dye, furs, and confectionaries indicates there is a market for what might be termed luxury goods. It is the opposite situation in the South, where by 1863, as the Union blockade tightens, the population is dealing with runaway inflation and the disappearance of most consumer goods. People are hungry.

In Sandusky, there are ads for sewing machines, threshing machines, furniture polish, vermin extermination (including bed bugs), velvet ribbons, gloves and hosiery, agricultural implements of all kinds, farmland (\$26 per acre), coal oil, books, toothpaste, and a myriad list of pills, ointments, and elixirs guaranteed to cure everything from the common cold to heart disease. This is the golden age of patent medicine.

There is war news daily and war and war-related issues dominate the newspaper. The telegraph allows almost instantaneous reporting of major events and battles. The average Sanduskian is probably as well informed of major Civil War events as today's Sanduskian is of the war in Afghanistan. Soldiers at the front often send letters directly to the Register; in turn, when soldiers are home on leave the Register seeks them out for news.

On March 26, the Register carries an article from the Nashville Union (Nashville was occupied by the Union Army) that details how Cherokee Indians, acting as a provost guard for the Confederacy in East Tennessee, are on retainer for \$5 for every Union soldier they kill. The Cherokees keep track of their tally by cutting off the ears of their victims.

The Register is staunchly pro-Union and a supporter of Lincoln. Rebels are traitors and bear sole responsibility for bringing this calamity upon the nation. Northern Democrats who favor any settlement with the South short of unconditional surrender are also traitors. The newspaper tries to put a positive spin on all the war news.

All is not war, however. As spring continues there will be ads in the Register for day excursions on the steamer Philo Parsons to Detroit and back for \$1.50 per person.