



Former Manitowoc County Superintendent of Schools Civil War letters have historic merit.

Monograph 61 1987

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MANITOWOC COUNTY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

OCCUPATIONAL
MONOGRAPH 61

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Occupational Monograph 61 is an account of the experiences of Edward R. Smith as a soldier in the Civil War. At the time he was a resident of Burlington, WI. Following his service in the U.S. Army, he returned to Burlington and became a school teacher. After ten years of service in the schools of Walworth County, he came to Manitowoc and became a teacher in its schools. He then went to Two Rivers and was a principal of a school there. In 1897 he was elected to the office of County Superintendent of Schools, serving a two year term. Mr. Smith was one of the founders of the Wisconsin Teachers Association. His interests were great in nature study, music and literature.

Mr. Smith's grandfather was Aaron Smith, who was a soldier in the Revolutionary War, serving in the army under General LaFayette in the battle at Yorktown.

Edwin Smith, a grandson of Edwin R. Smith was born in New York state, and came to Manitowoc County in 1936 and lived here until the time of his death in 1950. He was employed by the American Bureau of Shipping. He was the husband of Winnifred Smith, who resides at Winghaven, near Two Creeks.

We have been granted permission by the Burlington Standard Press to reprint the letters of Edward R. Smith. To maintain

FORMER MANITOWOC COUNTY SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS CIVIL WAR LETTERS HAVE HISTORIC MERIT

As written by: Edward R. Smith

authenticity of the letters mistakes in the spelling and grammar have not been corrected. We gratefully acknowledge their kindness in permitting us to publish the experiences of Mr. Smith as a soldier in the Civil War, stationed near Washington D.C. during the three years of his military service.

We can recall having published only one other article relating to experiences of a Manitowoc soldier in the Civil War. This article was published in a Society newsletter.

**Burlington Boy's Civil War Letters
Have Historic Merit**
Burlington Standard Press —
Monday, September 29, 1975
Volume 113, No. 16-A

"Get down, you fool!"

This sharp order was shouted to President Abraham Lincoln when he persisted in exposing himself on a parapet at Fort Stevens to observe exchange of shots between Union artillerymen and Confederate sharpshooters on the outskirts of Washington, D.C. during a Rebel raid aimed at the nation's capital in July, 1864. It was the only time during the Civil War that Lincoln was under military fire. There is no question he was in danger. A surgeon standing three feet from him was fatally struck.

The brash young officer who dared to call the President a fool was Oliver Wendell Holmes, who became associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

The incident is told in Margaret Leech's "Reveille in Washington," available at the Burlington Library.

What the Leech book will not tell you is that Edwin Ruthven Smith, a Burlington soldier, saw Lincoln when the Confederate bullets were zinging around him, and the next day met the President briefly and had the honor to perform a small service for him. The details of that dramatic occasion will be related in "Pokin' Around" two weeks hence.

For the present, let us become acquainted with the "boy in blue" from Burlington and browse through the revealing letters he wrote home during the war. The bulk of these, 107 in number, are in the safekeeping of a Manitowoc County woman, who kindly allowed this reporter to read them. A few other wartime letters from the

same soldier are preserved by the Burlington Historical Society.

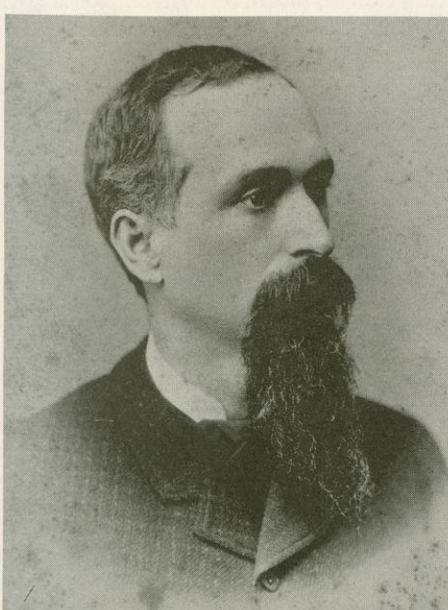
After the war, Smith taught school at East Troy and Waterford and in 1872 was appointed principal of Lincoln School in Burlington. Eleven years later he left for Manitowoc, where he became county superintendent of schools. He subsequently operated a pharmacy at Port Washington and retired to California, where he died in 1917 at age 72. His ashes were brought home ten months later for interment in the Smith family plot in Burlington Cemetery.

HIS FATHER CO-FOUNDER BURLINGTON

The Smith name has meaning for Burlington people. Edwin's father was Lemuel R. Smith, one of the founders of Burlington, who homesteaded here in 1835. The rich-soiled prairie tract he staked out for his farm was immediately west of the White River, in what is now Spring Prairie township. Before town and county lines were mapped out, this pioneer Lemuel Smith and his brother Moses and one or two other men formed the nucleus of the little settlement that sprouted into the community of Burlington.

The patriarch of the family, Aaron Smith, Edwin's grandfather, was a veteran of the American Revolution and the War of 1812. He followed Lemuel to Burlington and lived with him until his death in 1839.

Edwin, the next soldier in the family, was born in 1844. He was the first of four children of Lemuel and Melissa (Campbell) Smith. In boyhood days he trudged two miles to school in Burlington. According to his obituary, he was a youth "passionately fond of books, eager of an education . . . was intensely interested in the anti-slavery contest and in the question of the union of the states." His father is mentioned in some accounts for having aided black people who traveled through Burlington on the Underground Railway as they fled from slavery in the South. In the same way, earlier members of the Smith family in New England provided a secret refuge for two high British military officers who defied the English crown. Edwin had



Edwin R. Smith (1844-1917) in photo by Melandy & Packard of Manitowoc; Circa 1896. He spent 10 years here as a teacher, Two Rivers principal and county superintendent of schools.

strong patriotic feelings. He was proud of his English ancestors who settled in Massachusetts in 1634 — proud of his grandfather and other antecedents who fought to liberate America from English rule.

When the Civil War came, Edwin knew his duty. He had just turned 17 when the booming Secessionist gunfire against Fort Sumter in 1861 signaled the opening of the bloody, agonizing conflict that was to rage on for four years. Without revealing his intentions to any teacher or classmate, Edwin "stole over" to Racine to be one of the first boys from Burlington to enlist. A recruiting officer rejected him because of his age. The following year, in August, 1862, he was accepted as a volunteer with the First Wisconsin Heavy Artillery and assigned to Company A, which was ordered to Washington.

Edwin was in the Army for three years, his discharge coming at war's end in 1865. Most of that time he was stationed at various forts hastily built as a ring of defense around Washington. In comparison with other Burlington men in the Civil War, Edwin had a soft snap. True, as his letters show, he could have used more rations when food supplies ran low. His quarters were not always comfortable. He occasionally heard the whine of bullets from the rifles of Confederate pickets and scouts who came close to the Washington perimeter. His ears detected distant cannonading. But rarely did he experience peril from the enemy. He was once hospitalized — from ague rather than battle wounds. He was accustomed to the parade ground and often marched in regimental reviews, but he never had to advance through the muck and gore of a corpse-strewn Chickamauga battlefield. He was not on hand for death's harvest at Gettysburg or Antietam, the carnage of a Bull Run, Shiloh or Vicksburg.

The closest Edwin Smith ever came to war's grim reality was when Confederate General Jubal Early staged a diversionary attack on a part of the Washington defense line — the engagement which President Lincoln observed firsthand in 1864. This was a nuisance raid rather than a full-scale battle.

But if it was Smith's lot to be out of war's direct path for three more or less quiet years as a defender of Washington, he took his duties seriously and endeavored to be a first-rate soldier. He helped build fortifications, cut wood for the government's use, stood guard duty, was pressed into service as company cook, and volunteered as a litter carrier for badly wounded casualties brought back from the fighting fronts to recuperate or die at makeshift hospitals in and around Washington.

Whenever he rated a pass, he enjoyed going to the theater or roaming about as a sightseer. At Alexandria, across the Potomac, he sometimes mingled with Confederate civilians.

"IT SEAMES AN AGE TO ME"

In his letters home he wrote lucidly and extensively of his observations and happenings. Even if Smith had not met Lincoln, these letters would still comprise an important historical testament of a Burlington soldier in the Civil War who spent practically his entire enlisted time within sight of the Capitol.

The main portion of the letters is in the possession of Mrs. E.R. (Winnifred) Smith, whose late husband was the namesake grandson of the Civil War soldier. Mrs. Smith lives near Two Rivers.

All but 12 of the 107 letters are dated. These place Edwin either in the District of Columbia or close-by in Virginia, at Forts Willard, Ellsworth, Reno, Slocum, Stevens, Worth, DeRussy and Case, as well as Battery Rogers and in one or two temporary work camps, between 1862 and 1865.

In addition, there are 19 letters written singly or jointly by his mother and father to him, and other items.

Passages have been culled from this extended correspondence to give you a sampling. The first existing letter from father to son is dated Oct. 12, 1862, and begins, with the spelling just the way it was:

"It is not yet two months since you inlisted as a soldier of your country, but it seames an age to me." Then follows this advice about keeping warm while sleeping in tents:

"If they are good for anything, I should think that 4 blankets would keep 2 men from suffering in a good tent in ordinary weather. Soldiers in the Revolution had one Blanket to each man large enough to cover three men, they spred one on the ground or straw as the case might be and the other 2 to spred over the three men in one Bunk. The above after nearly seven years practice your grandfather pronounced comfortable loging, and his field of operations was from West Point to York Town and still farther north all through New England but his oppinion of comfort might differ widely from yours or mine... The work hear as usual goes on slow. The Buckwheat and corn is nearly cut. Corn good. Buck wheat poor. We commence mowing the orchard the Second time next Tuesday. All well. Yours with respect, L. R. Smith."

As a postscript, the father adds that the "1st Wisconsin (infantry) has been in a fight at Perryville Kentucky and had 58 killed and 120 wounded." Though stationed on the outskirts of Washington, Edwin sometimes has to rely on his folks to keep him abreast Civil War developments that they

obtain from the Burlington Standard, Elkhorn Independent and Milwaukee Sentinel — three newspapers that he frequently mentions by name in his letters. Newspaper vendors usually hawk their sheets at the forts where he stays. However, he writes two or three times of periods when newspapers are not being distributed, hinting at attempts to suppress calamitous news of Union army reverses.

In one letter he tells his folks that "our officers are trying to start a newspaper in the Co., to be run by the Co. alone." This probably does not materialize, for he never mentions it again.

His mother writes: "It is too bad you are not allowed papers. If I knew those we send you were not allowed to go through, I would cut out the war news and send it in an envelope. Last night's dispatches say they were fighting in Pennsylvania near Gettysburg."

Apparently letters back and forth are not subject to a censor's sharp eyes. In a couple of his letters Edwin describes Washington's fortifications, at least those where he is on duty, enumerates the guns and their fire-power and even diagrams artillery placements.

A mother's yearning for her absent son is a constant thread through all of Melissa Smith's letters. These are usually composed at night, after her long day's work as a busy farm wife. She admits her tiredness at times, but most of her letters are spritely and newsy. For example, this intriguing but firm from the local scene:

"Old Weatherhoat of Burlington tried to cut his throat in a drunken fit, but did not succeed in making much of a wound. Some one said he wanted to cut a hole to put in a tunnel so as to get the licor down faster." And this:

"Yesterday a Family passed here



Melissa Campbell Smith (1825-1911) Edward's mother, whose letters were preserved with his.

soldiers in most camps or on the march in the more active military arenas of the war.

Whatever he saw was grist for the letters he wrote to his mother and father at Burlington. A few of his letters were donated to the Burlington Historical Society, including one that tells of his personal involvement with Abraham Lincoln and which will be the subject of next week's "Pokin' Around." Held by Mrs. Winnifred Smith, of rural Two Rivers, are 107 letters that form the greater part of Edwin's writings to his parents. Mrs. Smith, who is the soldier's granddaughter-in-law, also has a bundle of letters the parents wrote to Edwin, and these provide many glimpses of Burlington during the Civil War. To pick up the correspondence where it left off in last Monday's Standard Press . . .

On Dec. 26, 1862, Edwin assures his folks that "for the last six weeks we have lived like kings. We have good pork with flour gravy for breakfast, For dinner, roast beef or vegetable soup or baked beans. For supper, apple sauce. We frequently get the best of beef stake for breakfast."

For awhile, beefsteak on the hoof is plentiful. In one letter the soldier reports: "Today I saw a drove of Army beeves, said to contain 1,000 head. A few days ago I saw a drove of 2,300 — mostly four and five year old steers."

On Christmas Day, 1862, he and several other men of his company receive a pass to visit Mount Vernon. This farm youth is emotionally stirred by the home and tombs of George and Martha Washington and writes a glowing account. He mentions that the experience produced a hazard.

"We had to go beyond our infantry pickets . . . Mount Vernon is something of a neutral ground. Yet there are bands of Rebels patrolling about, 'seeking whom they may devour.' We were taken prisoners when we came back, by our own pickets, and were kept two hours, 25 of us — our corporal having lost the pass."

The day after Edwin and his companions were at Mount Vernon, Rebels do indeed swoop down there and "could have taken us easily, there being only two revolvers in our whole crowd."

Edwin takes his turn standing watch and in January, 1863, writes his mother: "This guarding is serious business. We are obliged to load our rifles at night, not from fear of the enemy, but for the purpose of stopping our own boys from climbing over the parapet." Some of the blue — clad Yanks sneak out for a night's fun, but this "entails the risk of being shot at, courtmartial, and loss of a month's pay."

A HYMN . . . THEN DEATH

Five men desert at one clip. Later,

another man slips away to join Col. John Mosby's Raiders, a small band of Confederate guerillas that harasses and outwits federal forces. This turncoat is eventually captured and brought back to his regiment to face his doom, which Edwin describes in these gruesome words:

"Yesterday a soldier was shot for desertion. The company had to go but luckily I was on guard and got rid of a very disagreeable job. . . . The boys say that he was perfectly calm and unmoved walking along the troops following his coffin, stepping as steadily as the guards that had him in charge. He joined in the Hymn in a clear strong voice. . . . Four shots passed through him causing instant death. He was laid on top of his coffin and all the troops presented filed past."

Operating swiftly and secretly, Mosby's men on one occasion get close to the outer defense lines of Washington and stage a fight in which "12 of our men were killed." Edwin is five miles from the fatal scene, and "there are 3 regiments of cavalry between us and Mosby so we are safe."

It is difficult for Lemuel Smith and his wife, Melissa, to believe that their boy is relatively safe as long as he is stationed at Washington. Dire news of Union defeats and heavy losses in other locations makes them fret. In one of his letters to Edwin, the father accuses Union General George B. McClellan of "treachery" for leaving Washington defenseless, adding that other men in command "may commit the same error and leave Washington exposed to an attack, consequently if you can obtain one of those vests I think by all means you better as the first precaution." He means a steel vest that has come on the market and is touted to be bullet-proof.

Burlington has several sorrowing homes because of sons who charged into some skirmish or battle they were destined to survive. Some local boys, acquaintances of Edwin, have narrow escapes in the Battle of Murfreesboro, Tenn. The father informs him:

"Mrs. Fairbanks told that John Fairbanks run his team 4 horses 5 miles right through the Rebels and they fireing at him in every direction and he went through. The bagage of the company all safe. The Rebs captured 33 waggons of supplies from the same train that John was in, which left many a poor fellow without tent or blanket until they could be supplide from Nashville. . . . Col. Utly of Racine has had the greatest list of mortality of any Regament I have herd of." In the same letter, this graphic bit from the same battle:

"Edgar Finch stod in the trenches 48 hours halfway to his knees in mud and water without Boots. He wrote that he was so fatigued that he actually fel asleep under the enemy fire."

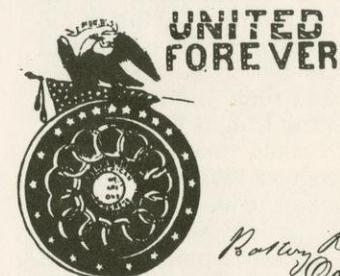
The mother, in a glum mood, repeatedly asks Edwin to see a photographer. "There is nothing I should prize so much as your picture and if you should rest in a soldiers grave it would be a precious memento to me."

THE "GOBBLING DUTCH"

In spite of her foreboding, Melissa Smith manages to be chatty about the home front. Of Burlington's Fourth of July observance in 1863 she writes:

"Well I went to the great Burlington celebration. It was about on a par with others you have seen there. Though I think the speaking was good judgeing from what I heard of it. I rode down with Lum Gaylord and family in their carriage. We drove as close to the speakers stand as we could, staid in the carriage, and if it had not been for the gobbling of the dutch around us we could have heard all distinctly. . . . There was the usual accompaniments, music and singing by the German glee club. I saw upon the stand one poor fellow who had lost a leg, but could not learn who he was. This is the first gathering of any kind I have attended since you went away. . . . I trust you will be with us next Fourth, If the Rebs are sent to where they belong."

Poking fun at German people is indulged in several letters exchanged between mother and son. Nothing in that vein is perceived in the father's letters. Edwin writes of hearing the brigade band serenade his captain on a promotion to major. "The band is here playing as only Germans well filled with whiskey can play. . . . They play a



Battin Rogers Jr
Oct 25 1863

Dear Mother,

Your letter
came to hand last night
also two papers. I notice
that the mode of both
the "Standard" and "Southland"
are copied from the "Nashville
Daily Journal," where is
the office of the Standard
in looking over the advertising
you will find that of
have forgotten a good many
of the Burlington town folks.
I believe that of will

Most of Edwin's wartime letters home were written on plain paper. This embellished letterhead with its patriotic insignia appears only once in the collection of 107 letters.

tune and then he gives them a drink of whisky. I suppose they will play as long as the Liquor lasts."

An undated letter from the father mentions that Arthur (Edwin's younger brother) "and I have joined the Burlington League. There are near 100 members, nearly all American born. You will see by the papers that the Union League are very numerous through all the loyal states supported by the best men of the nation."

When he departed from Burlington, Edwin was "intensely interested in the slavery question," but now the boy begins to show slackening sympathy for the black people. The first hint of this appears in a March, 1863, letter: "I am sorry the Negroes are coming into Wisconsin. They carry the smallpox. If I were a voter I believe I would vote against them coming into the state. Their place is in the Army."

The mother replies: "There has no Negroes come into this vicinity yet." (Expect for those who passed through on the Underground Railway.)

In another letter (Burlington Historical Society), Edwin ridicules Negro teamsters who panic and drive their mules and bouncing wagons lickety-split in front of him because of a false alarm that the Confederates are right behind them. A year later, however, a letter home conveys this view:

"This morning I saw a Regt of Colored Troops and I shall have to admit that they were as soldier-like in appearance and marched as well as any white troops that I have seen."

He learns too that the black troops have performed heroically under fire, and he is pleased to be stationed with them when they are brought to Washington to rest after extended action at the front.

HELPS WITH THE WOUNDED

Writing to his father, he describes Alexandria, Va., as a "place not much larger than Racine and not one half as pretty." It is a hustling commercial town, but the businesses have been usurped by northern men. And "every third house is a house of ill fame." For the first time he mentions his proximity to war wounded.

Alexandria's "largest hotels and halls and some of the churches are used as hospitals. In these hospitals may be found men wounded in every place where a shot or piece of shell could possibly hit them."

Once he chafed because he has been a soldier for a year "and have not yet seen an armed Rebel. . . . I want to see more of the reality of war." He has second thoughts about that when wounded soldiers are ferried into Washington in an increasing stream. When barracks and hospitals are filled, the overflow goes into private homes. "Last Wednesday I called upon Miss Miller. She has some 60 wounded

soldiers under her charge all wounded while retreating across the Rapidan. It is a hard sight to see some of them."

From Fort Ellsworth, Va., he sends word: "In the distance can be seen the white shining pillars of the Capitol House. . . . All around us are the convalescents, thousands in number." A mile away is Fairfax Seminary, which has been requisitioned as an army hospital. Edwin meets a boy from Burlington, Bill Sheldon, who was wounded at Antietam. Fifteen other convalescents, who did not get proper housing, "were chilled through and died from cold last night."

This becomes a continuing theme in his letters. In May, 1864, he writes: "The wounded have been passing up the river (Potomac) for the last 3 days in great numbers. . . . Just before dark two steamers having on board some 800 arrived at a dock near here. They were put into ambulances and taken to the different hospitals — a sorry looking lot of men. Steamers are passing up and down the river in great numbers bringing up wounded and taking down reinforcements. Volunteers were called for to go and help take care of the wounded. I went for one. We helped 800 poor fellows. . . . I saw more suffering in the five hours we were at work than ever before in my life. . . . The men are very badly hurt. Many of them cannot live but a few days."

One casualty he helps to bury is "Wade of Rochester. . . . He was a good boy and well liked." (There is a memorial to this lad in Rochester Cemetery.)

In the spring of 1863 he is "detailed to go after wood 11 miles away." He is one of 60 men who load 150 cords into railroad cars. This is supposed to be fuel for the army, but he charges that the "government confiscates it to sell to the public in Washington for \$8 a cord."

In March, 1864, he is sent to a big wood camp where "we do not live as well, do not have as good beds, cannot go to church, and know nothing of what is going on in the world. Yet we have no guard duty, no inspection, no reviews, no white gloves, no shoe blacking, no Roll Call, and no one to lord it over us. We go to bed when we have a mind to and get up when we like." It sounds like a sinecure, until he explains that in 20 days he and 249 other men "cut and loaded on to the cars 2,500 logs, all of oak, either 15, 19 or 20 feet in length, and varying from 15 to 40 inches in diameter. . . . We have got to cut 4,000 logs before we are relieved. . . . The timber is for Bomb Proofs and to Build a Bridge across the Potomac at Washington. We lived at first in a brush house but this burned up one day. . . . Then we built a log house."

CRITICAL OF BURLINGTON STANDARD

A copy of his hometown newspaper reaches him at this wood-cutting camp. The paper had started publishing 10 months previously, and Edwin writes his folks: "I take the Burlington Standard but do not get much news from it."

To keep him in good working condition the Army prescribes a "gill of whiskey every morning before breakfast. It is mixed with quinine to keep off fever. But I had just as lief drink turpentine as the stuff they call whiskey. It burns a fellow's stomach for hours."

What else is news for the folks at home? Having met its quota of logs, the work crew returns to its regular base in the defense line, and Edwin draws a pass to visit the Capitol. "This morning I went through the Govt. Bakery. It is a great thing. The Foreman told me that some days they bake 200,000 loaves." (Note: This is factual. A subterranean level of the Capitol was converted during the war into a huge bakery that produced bread by the wagon train load for shipment to the Army of the Potomac and other forces.)

Another sight for Edwin: "They placed the Statue of Freedom upon the Dome of the Capitol this week (December, 1863). As they got it finished, a salute was fired and the forts around Washington kept it up all afternoon."

On another occasion he reports hearing a "terrible explosion." A powder magazine blows up at Fort Lyon.

Twenty-one are killed, 16 critically injured. A little later, "The RR Bridge near Fort Worth was set on fire by a gang of 19 Rebels." The Steamer Tompkins "loaded with powder blew up at midnight — much noise."

"MY EARS RUNG . . ."

In March, 1864, he is picked as gunner to demonstrate the firing of a big new Parrott cannon at Camp Abbot, Va. This is done in front of "Gen. Haskins, Chief of Artillery of the U.S. Army," and accompanying brass, their staffs and "their ladies," all of whom have arrived at the fort "on board the President's boat River Queen." Only three loads are fired, but these are sufficient for Haskins to tell Edwin's captain that he "intended making a number of experiments with the guns of our battery." Edwin requests his parents to "please send by mail a geometry book. It will cost not more than 20 cents and will be of use to me as I have got to calculate all the distances in the experiments to be made here."

Edwin has a close call when several generals return in June for another demonstration. The soldier writes:

"The last shell fired from the gun I was on burst at the middle but did no damage. When the 200 pound shell burst within 15 feet of me my ears rung too much for comfort." He explains that a 40-pounder is the usual load for the gun.

Some of Edwin's most descriptive writing concerns the Russian fleet he sees steam up the Potomac for a courtsey call on Washington. The ships anchor close to his fort. The Russian officers are invited to inspect the fort. In return, Edwin and many others of his company are piped aboard the ships for zesty Russian hospitality.

Meanwhile, the war is getting Edwin's father down. "Our hired man is slow. We don't dare turn him out, for fear we can't find another." Even more serious, the co-founder of Burlington is ready to pull stakes and head for other pastures. "I wish we could sell our farm and get out of this neighbourhood," He informs Edwin. Fortunately, the discouraging mood does not last.

As time allows, Edwin's mother devotes herself to war work. One task is to pick currants, quantities of which are dried to be sent to the soldiers. Spring Prairie has a Soldiers Aid Society, which sometimes meets at her father's place and she attends. "There is none in Burlington," she tells her son. "I don't know why, unless it is that they are too penurious or too lazy." "A Soldiers Aid Society was organized in Burlington three months after Melissa Smith wrote this. The first meeting was held at Plymouth Church in November, 1863, to make bandages, knit socks and mittens. But by then, the war was more than half over.)

Abe Lincoln and the Boy from Burlington

conclusion: *Burlington Standard Press* — Monday, October 13, 1975
Volume 113. No. 18-A

How many Burlington persons are known to have met Abraham Lincoln face to face?

Three, for sure.

One was John Fox Potter. Potter is rightfully claimed by the East Troy area. But he worked and lived in Burlington awhile before being drawn into politics and winning a seat to Congress, where he gained his famous epithet of "Bowie Knife" Potter for a duel that was never fought.

Another was Lathrop E. Smith who, a few years before moving to Burlington from Beloit in 1863 to launch this newspaper, personally conversed with Lincoln while the latter was in Wisconsin to campaign for the presidency.

The third party to confront Lincoln was Edwin R. Smith, an obscure private stationed at or near Washington during the last three Civil War years as a member of Company A, 1st Wisconsin Heavy Artillery. Twice he met Lincoln and swapped a few

words with him, even sharing his canteen and blackened coffee cup with the President. He also saw Lincoln fired upon — not that fatal night at Ford's Theater but on the earthen rampart of Fort Stevens, on the outskirts of Washington, when Confederate sharpshooters took pot shots at the lanky man in the stovepipe hat.

Edwin learned well his lessons in reading and writing as a Burlington student. His mind was sharp and he had an observant eye. He wrote letters home as though he enjoyed doing it and not from a sense of filial duty. This combination of talents, coupled with his being located at Washington, enabled him to send back descriptive letters that were better than average for a Yank in uniform. These form a remarkable odyssey.

By great luck, most of the letters still exist, though there are a few gaps in his correspondence. Portions of these letters were quoted in the last two "Pokin' Arounds," though by no means do the quotes cover all the subjects and details that caught his interest.

The letters first came to my attention when they were mentioned by Mrs. Winnifred Smith, granddaughter-in-law of Edwin Smith, during a visit she paid to the Standard Press last spring. An opportunity to read them did not materialize until a month ago, when I was in Mrs. Smith's part of the state. She lives near Two Rivers. The collection of 107 letters, plus other items, was entrusted to me for a week.

Mrs. Smith said that Edwin had written an account of his meeting Lincoln. A lot of Union soldiers met the President, for he took pains to pass among them as often as he could. Lines of them formed at the White House, and when it was possible for the burdened chief executive to spare the time, they would shuffle past him for a quick greeting. Thousands of Union veterans proudly boasted that they "shook hands with Old Abe."

One of Smith's encounters with the President was of this nature.

The other was far more intimate and appealing.

A FASCINATING MANUSCRIPT

In Edwin's collection turned over to me by Winnifred Smith was a lengthy account of the military defenses of wartime Washington. This he delivered as a speech at some unspecified gathering of veterans 24 years after the war was over. He described the forts, breastworks, rifle pits and other features, titling the manuscript — "The Defense of Washington read at GAR, July 21, 1888." The GAR was a veterans' organization formally named the Grand Army of the Republic. There is nothing to indicate where this speech was delivered, but it could have been in

Manitowoc County where he was a school principal and later county superintendent of schools.

He relates that for nearly two years Washington "was in no immediate danger of formidable attack. Yet there were but few weeks during all that time that rebel troops did not appear and operate within sight of the Capitol dome. Scouting parties, cavalry raids and Mosby's guerillas kept the garrisons on the alert and the authorities at Washington in constant anxiety."

In spite of this, in May of 1864 Gen. U.S. Grant "withdrew nearly all the Heavy Artillery from the defenses, leaving their places to be filled by One Hundred Day men. Lee knowing of this defenseless condition sent Gen. Jubal Early by Shenandoah Valley with 30,000 men to attack either Baltimore or Washington." An inferior Union force under Gen. Lew ("Ben Hur") Wallace tried to stop Early 30 miles from Washington and was "overwhelmed with a loss of 2,000 men. Two days later, July 11, Early appeared in force in front of the weakest point in the defenses of Washington — Forts Stevens and DeRussy. These occupied the northwestern angle of the system and were bare of troops. Our battery, the 1st Wisconsin, after an all-night march got possession of DeRussy just as Early's men came in sight of it. Two skeleton batteries of the 4th Regt were with us and occupied Stevens at the same time." (The two forts were within close viewing distance of each other.)

On the morning of July 11, the two forts opened up on Early, who spent the day probing their strength. The Smith narrative continues:

"Our battery occupied a work needing 1,000 men for its proper defense. Yet we not only had to man its guns but during the first day had to furnish the picket skirmish line in our immediate front. A motley array of Marines, Home Guards, district militiamen, quartermaster clerks and convalescents kept up a show of defense along the rifle pits. Our well-aimed Parrott guns kept the rebel batteries from getting within striking distance. From prisoners taken during the day we learned that Early was to assault the works during the night. Darkness stopped our work for the 11th and we laid by our shotted guns all night anxiously awaiting what we felt would be a successful attack. For some unexplained reason, Early deferred his assault. . . . Late in the afternoon of the 12th help began to arrive from Grant's Army and at 5 p.m. the 1st and 2nd Divisions of the 6th Corps marched out and formed line of battle. Early soon learned that he had missed his opportunity and after a stubborn resistance withdrew. . . . Keep in mind that this affair took place upon the soil of the District of Columbia, not only

within sight of the Capitol but almost upon its very street.

"The Union loss was 54 killed and 319 wounded. Rebel loss 500 killed and wounded. Washington was never again seriously threatened . . ."

Smith explains that Early's attack on Washington "was the basis for the indictment of Jefferson Davis (head of the Confederacy) for treason. In this indictment it is recited that said Davis invaded the District of Columbia, etc., etc., inflicting a loss of 500 killed and wounded citizens of the United States."

Smith concludes his narrative by telling about Lincoln under fire, beginning:

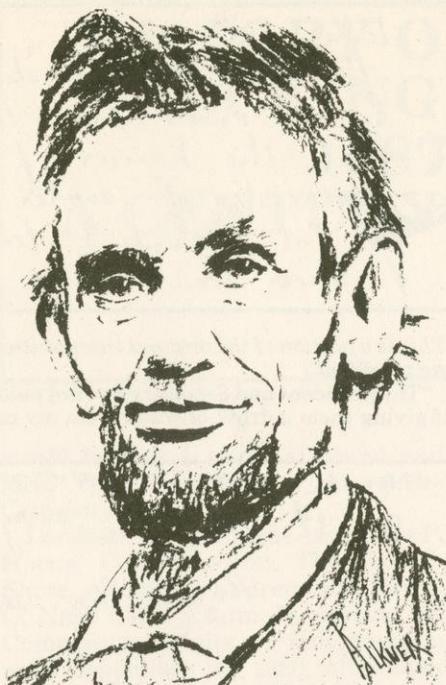
"One more incident and I am done. Mr. Lincoln, with Mr. Seward (Secretary of State), was at the scene of action several times during these two days. We had the rare experience of seeing a President of the United States under fire. Indeed, so rash or indifferent was he that Gen. Wright threatened to remove him by force if he continued to expose himself."

In his book "A Stillness of Appomattox," Bruce Catton, the Civil War historian, puts Lincoln on the Fort Stevens parapet just as described by the Burlington soldier as an eyewitness. Wrote Catton: Lincoln "was tall and gaunt, towering over everybody, an obvious target, standing right where Southern sharpshooters were peppering the place with Mini bullets."

THE PRESIDENT IS THIRSTY

Now for the happenstance that brought Lincoln and the Burlington boy together for a minute or two, less than a year before Booth's bullet blotted out the President's life. As Edwin tells it to a GAR group in 1888:

"My personal experience with Mr. Lincoln is a pleasant memory. Alighting from his carriage he passed through our squad (at Fort DeRussy) for the purpose of getting a view of what was going on in front of us, remarking as he did so, 'I want to take a look at these farms in front of you.' As he passed back he smilingly said, 'Boys, you do not look much scared.' Entering his carriage he asked if anyone could give him a drink of water. My canteen had been freshly filled from a spring nearby, and stepping to the carriage I poured a liberal portion into my blackened quart cup. Wishing to say something I remarked, 'It may not be very cold.' 'Never mind,' said Mr. Lincoln, 'if it is only wet.' Secretary Seward and Col. Baker were with him, both refreshing themselves from my sooty coffee boiler. 'Let each man smoke his own cigar,' said Mr. Seward, taking one from his pocket and lighting it. All smiled at the joke and the carriage drove away. No one would have suspected from appearances or remarks that such a load of



Abraham Lincoln 1809-1865

"— rebel bullets overhead seem like a partly remembered dream. But the voice of Mr. Lincoln, his kind smile and a quiet 'thank you, my boy,' are as fresh in my recollection as if it had been 24 hours instead of 24 years ago." (Edward Smith — *A talk in 1888, perhaps in Manitowoc County*).

responsibility was resting upon all concerned. The noise of the skirmish line, the roar of our artillery and the hum of the rebel bullets overhead seem like a partly remembered dream. But the voice of Mr. Lincoln, his kind smile and quiet 'Thank you, my boy' are as fresh in my recollection as if it had been 24 hours instead of 24 years ago."

Smith, a private at the time, was made a corporal just before he was discharged a year later.

WHERE THE CORROBORATING LETTER?

His account of this chance meeting with Lincoln gripped me, but it was puzzling that a corroborating letter was lacking in the collection held by Winnifred Smith. If this lowly private had figured for a couple of minutes in the life of the Great Emancipator, he surely would have winged off a letter to his folks about it. Here was an unexplained omission in Edwin's 107 wartime letters.

On returning to Burlington I discussed this with Francis Meurer, our diligent and foremost local historian. Francis broke the news to me that a few of Smith's letters had been presented to the Burlington Historical Society years ago by a member of Smith's family and that one of them was the letter I sought.

Writing to his mother on July 17, 1864, he summarizes the action that has taken place earlier that week and terms it "our first experience at the front." He goes on to say:

"We fired the first cannon in defense

of Washington and more shots in the two days than all the other forts on the line. . . . We could not get a good range to suit us inside, so we dragged the piece, a 30 pound Parrott rifle, outside of the fort and sent several shrieking shells among the fellows, leaving more than one of them in such a condition that they will never get to Virginia unless taken in a coffin."

"Monday, the President and Secretary Seward paid us a visit at Ft. DeRussy and I had the honor of giving them both a drink of water from my canteen.

"The President looks poorer than when I saw him last summer. Seward is not a very smart looking man. He looks like a great many farmers that I have seen. Lincoln was dressed very shabbily — his coat being split quite badly at the elbow. He evidently does not intend to put on much style, especially among soldiers. He would not allow any fuss to be made over him, no guard turned out, no salutes or demonstrations of many kind.

"At the time of the heaviest fighting Tuesday evening, Lincoln and wife were on the parapet of the fort next to us. A shot from the Rebs struck a surgeon standing within a few feet of old Abe. I guess that if enemy had known who he was that they would have tried hard to hit him. Seven cannoniers were killed in the same Fort Stevens by the sharpshooters. None of our Garrison were hurt although several balls struck the parapet and others went singing overhead."

Immediately after the attack on Washington, Edwin draws a new assignment. He is made company cook, which he reports is "not very agreeable work." Fussing over the cook pots, at least he can reflect on his brief encounter with the head of state.

The earlier meeting that he referred to came the year before, in August, 1863. At that time he wrote home: "I went to Washington Tuesday. . . . I first went to the Presidents House and met Old Abe just as I stepped into the door. He looked very anxious and careworn and is full as beautiful as his pictures" — the underscored word probably indicating that Edwin did not regard the President as a handsome man.

THE ASSASSINATION

In mid-April of 1865, his letters turn grim. "Since we received the news of the awful murder of the President everything has been confusion and gloom."

Another letter calls it a "horrid dream. It does not seem possible that what has happened could be real. . . . We will have to fire half-hour guns all day."

And this: "I have just been uptown and every house without exception was trimmed with crepe. Everyone looks sober. The streets are crowded and Secessionists if they do rejoice do it

secretly. Rumors are very plenty. Arrests are being made all the while."

The long war ends and soon he is writing that his discharge is in the offing. He orders a suit of "citizens cloths" from Washington tailor for \$40.

His mother prudently suggest in a reply to him: "As you are to bring a trunk home, you must bring your blankets. People are buying them for bedding. Don't throw away your old clothes if you have room in your trunk for them, for it will not cost more to bring it full."

A presentday reader of the letters wishes that he might have looked in on Edwins joyous homecoming 110 years ago, or that the soldier had set down on paper an account of his return to Burlington. All we know is that his father, Lemuel, and brother, Arthur, went to Milwaukee to meet him. The mother and three-year-old Nellie, Edwin's little sister born a month after he went off to war, excitedly await him in the cobblestone farmhouse a few paces from the White River.

WHERE SHOULD THE LETTERS GO?

One wonders if Edwin's trunk contained the blackened metal cup he held out to the President. Though that relic is presumably gone, Edwin's absorbing letters are almost all intact.

Winnifred Smith wrote to this reporter concerning those 107 letters in her possession: "If you think they'd best be put into some historical archives, I'd appreciate suggestions."

A good repository for the letters would be either the archives and manuscripts division of the State Historical Society at Madison or the Lincoln National Life Foundation at Ft. Wayne, Ind.

The best place of all, in this reporter's belief, is in the keeping of the Burlington Historical Society. The society already has a few of the Smith letters, including the historically most valuable one telling of meeting the President at Fort DeRussy. The letters deserve to be brought together into one collection. Thus they would gain their greatest worth to those persons of present or future generations most genuinely interested in the history of this community.

When his life's course was done, Edwin Smith's ashes were brought home to Burlington. His letters should come home, too.

* * * * *

Editor's Note: The original letters of Edwin R. Smith and his parents remained in the possession of Winnifred D. Smith until 1986. To the great pleasure of Burlington Historical Society, Mrs. Smith, a naturalist and outstanding community leader here, and her grandchildren donated the letters — **preserved in perfect condition** — to that Society. These treasures had found their proper home.

taken in effect. Monday the President and Secretary Seward paid us a visit at Ft. DeRussy, and I had the honor of giving them both a drink of water from my canteen. The President looks nearer than when I saw him last summer, Seward is

(This is a portion of the original letter written on July 17, 1864. Where he tells of his meeting the president.)

"The president and Secretary Seward paid us a visit at Ft. DeRussy and I had the honor of giving them a drink of water from my canteen."

as it is not very agreeable now.

Remember me to all.

your affectionate son
Edwin,

(This is the closing of the letter in which Edwin meets the president.)

"Remember me to all your affectionate son

Edwin.

MANITOWOC COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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