

The Sentinel

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Soldier Girl: The Strange Case of Emma Edmonds

Friend of the Roundtable and former presenter John Crosby returned to the "stage" for the April meeting to present the story of Emma (also know as Sara) Edmonds, a Canadian national who entered the United States in the late 1850s and, after a succession of largely boring and unsuccessful jobs joined the 2nd Michigan Infantry in 1861 under the name Frank Thompson. Starting out as a nurse and serving at First Manassas, Emma/Frank's sense of adventure finally got the best of her/him, and a Civil War career as a master of disguise was born.

In her own memoir written after the war, she related that "Little Mac", Gen. George B. McClellan himself, employed "Frank" as a spy in the Peninsular Campaign of 1862. The General was completely unaware of Private Thompson's true identity. On her first spy mission, she blackened her face with silver nitrate, covered her hair with a wig and slipped behind Confederate lines at Yorktown, Virginia, pretending to be a young male slave.

On other occasions Edmonds posed as a female slave, a dry goods clerk and a Confederate infantryman, infiltrating enemy lines at least 11 times without detection. In 1863, she contracted malaria and, rather than submit to a medical examination that could well reveal her "secret," she deserted and resumed civilian life as a woman. Not until 1883 did she confess her secret life as a soldier in the war. After a great deal of pressure placed by her friends, family and former comrades-in-arms, the federal government finally issued Edmonds a pension. She was also the



Emma (Sara) Edmonds, on the left, as the woman she eventually reverted to and lived out her life as...and, on the right, the young "man", Frank Thompson, that she became just prior to enlisting in the 2nd Michigan of the Union army in 1861.

only woman allowed to join the Civil War veterans organization, the Grand Army of the Republic.

Mr. Crosby used very simple "disguises" to tell the true story

of this most remarkable woman, changing from a woman in a bonnet and shawl, to a "man" in a rakish civilian cap, to a soldier in a military issue kepi. His presentation even has a history of its own, having been born as a sort of tribute to a fellow Cape Cod Civil War Roundtable member years ago who had planned to give a talk on Edmonds, but suddenly and unexpectedly died only two weeks prior to the scheduled "show."



John Crosby as Sarah Edmonds

While he is a man impersonating a woman who impersonated not only men but slaves and other women, Mr. Crosby was masterful and spellbinding in his portrayal, keeping one of the larger and most anticipatory crowds in recent memory on the edge of their chairs.

It was noted after the presentation that there may have been as many as 500-1000 such women who joined their armies, both north and south, for a variety of reasons. Some wanted to be near their husbands or beaus, some were searching for family members not recently heard from, and some simply had a sense of adventure much as Ms. Edmonds, believing that the life of a soldier beat the rather restricted and, in many cases, boring life of a mid-nineteenth century woman all to heck.

New Officer Corps Elected

As the beginning of our Roundtable's third year is upon us, a careful reading of the by-laws by member John Crosby revealed that there is a provision for any officer to be elected to a second two-year term. Having thus set the stage, John duly nominated current President Steve Rolfe and current Secretary David Wiley to continue in their positions.

Because of a change in work schedules, Treasurer Kevin Shiflet was forced to step down. Carol Wise, a regular attendee and a re-enactor of women in the war was nominated to take Kevin's seat on the executive board. Carol is

continues

New Officer Corps...

also a regular volunteer at our host Monroe County History Center. She graciously has accepted this responsibility and all nominated officers were duly elected.

While we welcome Carol aboard, it is with some sadness that we bid farewell to Kevin. One of our earliest and staunchest members, Kevin was always there and always helpful in any way. His regular attendance will be a loss to the group. Kevin has, fortunately, agreed to stay on as an advisor to the executive board when he can and has vowed never to lose his enthusiasm for all things Civil War, and especially those connected to the Roundtable. We hope to see his work schedule shift to days soon so he can rejoin us at our monthly general meetings.

It's Time for Dues

Money is always a tough subject to bring up, but this is the time of year we must. Our nominal dues rates (\$5/student; \$15/individual; \$20 family) are the food that feeds the fund with which we purchase refreshments for meetings, gifts for presenters, occasional donations to other worthy causes, etc. We simply ask everyone who appreciates our purpose and practices and who expects to attend meetings on any sort of regular basis to chip in and contribute to "the cause". While this is a very "loose" fund and is not required for meeting attendance, please consider supporting the Roundtable so that it can keep up its good work. If you have not yet paid your 2007-2008 dues, bring them to the next meeting or mail a check to the new Treasurer, Carol Wise, at P.O. Box 153, Smithville, IN, 47458. And a thousand thanks to all who support us.



Roundtable to Donate Flag Photo

The Indiana War Memorial Commission, housed in the War Memorial just north of Monument Circle in Indianapolis, is the repository and caretaker of all Civil War battle flags and banners for the state. Their collection includes the regimental battle flag of the 27th Indiana Infantry, the southern Indiana mustered group that included Company F, The Monroe Grenadiers, of which our own "Big Dave" van Buskirk was a member. This flag, which clearly has great historical significance for the citizens of Monroe County, the State of Indiana and even the nation, is in very tattered and delicate condition and cannot leave its Indy home. However, members of the Roundtable present at the April Meeting voted to pay a bit more than \$30 to have a photo of the flag professionally taken and mounted and sent to us by the commission. The Roundtable will then donate the photo to the Monroe County Historical Society to use in the upcoming summer Civil War exhibit [see next article] and to keep as a permanent part of the gallery display when the exhibit ends.



Another notable woman who posed as a man to serve in the army during the war was Frances Clalin, shown above, left, as the woman she was before 1861, and, on the right, as a state militia cavalryman. She adopted a masculine identity in order to fight with the federal army in Missouri.

Summer Civil War Encampment Still Set

This summer the 42nd Regiment, Indiana Infantry, a re-enactment group of Roundtable member Joel Foust, will hold an encampment on the lawn of the Monroe County History Center on June 9 and 10. There will be the real sights, sounds and smells of what it was like to be a civil war soldier from Indiana, including full uniforms, equipment, camp cooking, and simply the feel of being an 1861-1865 soldier.

Plan on stopping by on Saturday or Sunday and experiencing the feel of military life of the 19th century, chat with the soldiers, examine their gear, watch as they perform the basic manual of arms and even the simple routine chores of the more often than not lonely camp life of a soldier...only infrequently interrupted by the call to battle.

Look for further details as the summer approaches, both in our newsletter and in announcements and promotional material from the History Center, or call 332-2517.

A Call for Artifacts and Memorabilia

In conjunction with the encampment mentioned above, the Monroe County History Center, as mentioned in previous materials, will have a 90-day exhibit on the Civil War, beginning in June and running through August. Those having any documents, pictures, artifacts or even reproductions are encouraged to loan them to the History Center for the exhibit. These can range from family papers to collectors items to modern reproduced materials, or even items that are modern day but provide a new "slant" on the war. Any item will be considered. All items loaned will be meticulously cared for to preserve their condition and integrity for the owners when the exhibit ends in August. For details of how to loan items, security measures, etc. contact the center at 332-2517. Items are being accepted now and will be until shortly before the exhibit opens. The sooner items can be collected, the more time the History Center staff will have to prepare the exhibit, so please don't wait too long!

CONTACTS

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Call any of the above people for questions, suggestions or comments regarding the Roundtable.