

The Sentinel

VOLUME 2, ISSUE 9

MAY 2007

Oates of Alabama – The Rest of the Story

Member Dick Worsena brought the finish to the story of one of the more fascinating characters of the Civil War, Col. William Oates who commanded the 15th Alabama Infantry against Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain's 20th Maine on Little Round Top at Gettysburg on July 2, 1863. Last fall Dick recounted the early years of Oates and what led him to Confederate command and how he came to be on that historic knoll at just the right time to earn a page in history.

But there was much more to this man who went on to lead a life later in the war, and in Alabama after the war, that included periods as severely wounded and lost an arm as a commander at Chickamauga, a successful lawyer, a state representative, a U.S. representative, a one-term governor of the state and a brigadier general in the Spanish-American war. On the flip side, he was bombastic, a philanderer, father of two illegitimate sons (one white and one black), a publicly outspoken proponent of integration while actually believing that blacks were inferior, and a man who held his future wife in his arms when she was 15 months old then married her when she was nineteen and he was 48.



Oates in March, 1864



The 15th Alabama meets the 20th Maine

Gathering from a 50-cent proof copy of the now published book *Gettysburg Requiem: The Life of Colonel William C. Oates* by Glenn Lafantasia, Worsena helped the group discover the 48 years of life that Oates had after the battle that made him famous (by losing it). After the war, Oates became quite wealthy when he realized that the acquisition of land was that thing which most guaranteed a man not only current comfort but continued security throughout his life. As a lawyer, he frequently accepted land as payment, or used his earnings to buy more land. This success was the thing that led him to be able to become a politician and advance up the ranks of Alabama's political hierarchy, eventually to become a long-serving U.S. representative and the state's governor for one term, although a fairly impotent one. But, alas, Oates was never able to achieve his life-long dream of becoming a United States senator, even though he tried diligently to maneuver himself to Washington. A brief appointment as a brigadier general in the Spanish-American War in

continues

1898 led to little more “filler” for his life’s résumé as his command never made it to Cuba and he resigned his command in less than a year.

Oates was a larger than life enigma and much too complicated to be summed up in a short space such as this. If this kind of 19th-century war hero/scoundrel/public servant/philanderer and much more interests you, I am sure that Dick Worsena would urge you to grab a copy of Lafantasia’s book and find out the details for yourself.

What Will You Do With Your Civil War Library Someday?

Most of us have a collection of Civil War materials in the form of magazines (do we ever get rid of them?), books, photos, tapes, CD’s, DVD’s, etc. But what do we do with them? Mostly we read them or watch them once and then just look at them for years as they sit on shelves across the room. A suggestion was made at the meeting to develop some way to share this material, either through a periodic “media swap” or, perhaps with the assistance of the Monroe County History Center’s genealogy library, begin a sort of lending library of materials with donated items from those wanting to do a bit of house cleaning. Watch for future announcements on this topic. If you have an idea, contact anyone on the executive board or, better yet, attend the next exec board meeting on the first Tuesday of June at the history center.

It’s Not Too Late to Donate to the Summer Civil War Exhibit

The major Civil War artifact exhibit that has become a reality through the generous support of member Bob Willey and others will begin in June at the Monroe County History center and run through most of October is close at hand. If you have an item you would like to loan, contact the MCHM at 332-2517 or drop by anytime they are open, Tuesday-Saturday from 10-4.

Encampment Programs Sought

If you would be interested in presenting a program inside in the education room during the day of the upcoming encampment on the lawn of the history center, contact the history center or an exec board member and a time can be set.

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