

Civil War Teacher's Regiment Had Plenty Of Area Men

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NORMAL - In Illinois as elsewhere, Civil War troops came from a wide variety of occupations. In one regiment, many men were future teachers.



The 33rd Illinois Infantry, which originated at Illinois State University in Normal, was famously known as the “Teacher’s Regiment” since a high number of the men were students. The nickname was a nod to the original purpose of Illinois State, which was teacher training.

A number of men from the Riverbend area were in the 33rd, which holds a special place in the history of both the university and the state.

The outbreak of the Civil War in April 1861 riveted the university, which had been founded only four years before as the state’s first public institution of higher learning. Many students remembered that the war was foremost on everyone’s minds, and students could barely concentrate on their studies.

President Lincoln’s first call for troops was for a ninety-day enlistment, but it soon became apparent that more time and men were needed. As one student wrote, the Illinois State president, Charles Hovey, eventually suggested that the Normal men should become prepared for when the call to action arrived.

As a result, he organized the students into a quasi-military unit. An old brickyard near the school was converted into a parade ground, and a local military leader was hired as drillmaster.

Nearly all male students and many teachers joined in, and female students watched the daily drills with anticipation. The group was eventually dubbed the “Normal Rifles” and became a daily part of life at Illinois State.

The ninety-day enlistments expired in July as scant military action had ensued, and Lincoln called for 500,000 more volunteers. Hovey accompanied Jesse Fell, an energetic Bloomington businessman and close Lincoln friend, to Washington during the third week of July, seeking authority to organize what he dubbed a “Schoolmaster’s Regiment.”

Just after the Union debacle at First Bull Run, which Fell and Hovey had witnessed, Lincoln granted permission for Hovey’s plan. Hovey returned to Bloomington and within a short time, over 900 men signed up for the regiment, including at least forty-six Normal students and teachers.

The regiment was eventually mustered at Camp Butler near Springfield on Sept. 18, 1861 as the 33rd Illinois Volunteer Infantry. Many of the Normal students in the 33rd, including the bulk of the “Normal Rifles,” went into Company A.

Dozens of other Illinois State students enlisted in other regiments. In all, at least 117 members of the university community were in uniform. At least fifteen Normal men served as officers in African-American units, a reflection of the racial progressiveness of the university.

In a time of lower literacy levels, the Normal men stood out in the ranks. The 33rd became famously known as the “Teacher’s Regiment” or “Normal Regiment,” though some simply called it the “Brains Regiment,” as some other college-educated men from other institutions also joined.

Not surprisingly, the Normal regiment left an inordinate amount of written material on their experiences in the war. The regiment liked to brag that any privates discharged for mental shortcomings were good candidates for officers in other regiments.

The regiment included some area men, though they were not students at ISU. Some troops from Alton, Jerseyville, and Otter Creek were in Company C, while men from Girard were in Company D.

Lucius Rew, a 21-year-old Carlinville resident, rose to become first lieutenant of Company G. Rew was a teacher as well, though he was not enrolled at Illinois State.

There were also scattered men in the regiment from Edwardsville, Staunton, Shipman, Brighton, Bunker Hill, Greenfield, and White Hall.

Like most Illinois troops, the 33rd saw little action early in the war. By the summer of 1862, the regiment was stationed in eastern Arkansas as part of the Army of the Southwest.

The Union's objective was Little Rock, and Confederates mounted an attack to slow Curtis at the Cache River in Woodruff County, east of the capital. On July 7, 1862, Hovey was ordered to lead a brigade, including the 33rd across the Cache River when two Texas cavalry regiments attempted to prevent the crossing.

The ensuing battle was nearly a disaster as the Federals were overrun, but Hovey and his men stabilized the situation quickly. In 1993, acclaimed Trans-Mississippi theater historian William Shea wrote that "in a moment of inspiration, Hovey dismounted and picked up a rifle and cartridge box from a wounded soldier. He walked forward a few yards, found an unoccupied tree, and methodically began to load and fire in the general direction of the enemy."

Hovey managed to fire two or three rounds before he was struck in the chest by a spent bullet. His regality as a college president, though, belied his toughness, reflective of the "Teacher's Regiment" on the whole. Shea wrote that Hovey "picked up the bullet and shouted above the din that the rebellion 'did not seem to have much force in it.'"

The tide of the battle soon switched from retreat to advance, which carried the fight for the Union. Shea reports that the Illinoisans "loosed a smashing volley at point-blank range against the flank of the Confederate column. The 'storm of lead' practically annihilated the leading elements" of the rebels as Hovey and the Normal men won a smashing victory.

The 33rd was also involved in siege of Vicksburg, which began after failed frontal assaults on the Confederate lines. The assault of May 22, 1863 was particularly brutal for Illinois troops, including the 33rd.

Of the 250 men of the regiment who participated, at least 76 were hit, with twelve dead on the field and several others mortally wounded. William Murray, a Cass County man in the 33rd who was not a Normal student, called the assault "a useless sacrifice of life."

One of the casualties was Jersey County native Daniel Webster, a 22-year-old private in Company D who was farming near Girard at the time of muster. Webster died on May 26, 1863 of wounds suffered in the assault four days before.

Three days after Webster's death, William Biggerstoff, another 22-year-old farmer from Girard, was killed in front of Vicksburg when he was shot through the head and side.

The 33rd later served in the Red River campaign of 1864 and the offensive against Mobile the following year. The regiment was finally mustered out on Dec. 6, 1865.

In all, ten Illinois State students sacrificed their lives for the Union. In the decades that followed the war, the university became nationally renowned for the number and accomplishments of alumni in public education. Many of those alumni were veterans of the 33rd, whose story is like no other in the Civil War history of Illinois.

Tom Emery collaborated with Carl Kasten to create the award-winning Abraham Lincoln and the Heritage of Illinois State University. The book is available for \$28.61 (includes tax and postage) by contacting 217-854-3616 or carlkasten@frontiernet.net. All proceeds benefit the ISU Alumni Scholarship Fund and the university's Pre-Law Fund.