

Col. Hambright Slashes Red Tape, Gets Lancaster Regiment In Field

Around reunion "campfires", years later, Henry A. Hambright could afford to be tolerantly amused by the troubles he had experienced in putting Lancaster County's first full regiment in the field during the fall of 1861.

At the time all this was going on, however, 100 years ago, it was far from funny to the harassed former captain of Lancaster's "Jackson Rifles."

Hambright had taken the "Rifles" on the exhausting but inglorious original three-month sortie into Western Maryland and Upper Virginia.

Another Jackson — Thomas J. "Stonewall" — had left the Jackson Rifles and the rest of Gen. Patterson's Pennsylvania command with considerable egg on their collective face by skedaddling over the Blue Ridge to help Beauregard win the Battle of Bull Run.

But Henry Hambright, by virtue of no inconsequential political connections, had obtained a commission as colonel in the Regular Army and the authority to raise a regiment for volunteer federal service.

And this he did, getting the better part of nine companies enrolled from his own native county.

UPSETS GOV. CURTIN

Pretty soon, Gov. Andrew Curtin got wind of this and proceeded to blow the whistle on Hambright's plans. This was because the Lancaster colonel was dealing, so far, directly with the federal government. What crust! Didn't this ambitious militiaman know that such things simply were not done?

Hambright knew this very well; but he also knew the general state of "snafu" in Harrisburg, and the real state of emergency facing the bedeviled federal government.

Tom Scott, the railroad gen-

us and assistant Secretary of War, had wired him at Lancaster: "Need greatest. Come on as soon as you are ready."

'STEAL' 3 COMPANIES

So Hambright had ordered his three companies from Western Pennsylvania (he had no specific orders, yet) to join him at Lancaster. They started, by rail, and were halted at Harrisburg — pulled off the train by orders of Gov. Curtin and shunted into the sprawling Camp Curtin, for assignment to the Pennsylvania Reserve regiments. Some promptly deserted, and came on to Lancaster.

Hambright blew his stack, and was backed by all the Lancaster newspapers of the time. The uproar was such that Curtin reconsidered, the Western companies joined the command for which they had volunteered, and everybody went packing off to Pittsburgh.

Orders finally had come through; Col. Hambright's regiment was to be brigaded with the

77th and the 78th Pennsylvania, and would carry the regimental numeral 79.

The brigade, under Gen. James Negley — who had visited his old buddies of Patterson's Army here in Lancaster only a few weeks before — would be sent to Kentucky, as part of Maj. Gen. John C. Fremont's Army in the West.

Before Lancaster's 79th boarded the rickety old river boats at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania's Gov. Curtin — properly chastised for his original obstreperousness — arrived at Camp Wilkins to present the regiment with a magnificent State flag.



Photo Courtesy Lancaster County Historical Society

COL. HENRY HAMBRIGHT (Rustles Up A Regiment)

INCIDENT ON BOAT

This, and a lot of other more useful equipment, was almost lost a few hours later when an upper deck of the overcrowded troop transport gave way, plummeting the 16 members of the 79th regimental band — the former band of the Lancaster Fencibles — into the jam-packed ranks of their comrades on the deck below.

"What a helluva way to start a war!" screamed the justifiably upset Col. Hambright.

The 79th left several of its men in Pittsburgh as a result of this untoward incident. Dan Clemmens, the great musician of the old Fencibles' band, was one of them; kayoed and badly hurt in the accident. Eventually, he recovered and rejoined.

But the boats steamed wobbily down the rivers and, days later, arrived at Louisville. There followed a 50-mile hike to the rude camps on the banks of the Nolen River, in rugged Hardin County, Ky. It was a forbidding country, albeit beautiful, in late fall.

"Rebels" were all around, but except for the occasional sudden demise of an unwary picket, there was little action for many, many long weeks.

Nonetheless, Col. Henry A. Hambright had his regiment "in the field," at long last. The 79th would be a long time coming home.

Local Troops Chowless On Stalled Train

Some of the unhappiest troops on the movement of the 79th Regiment from Lancaster to near Pittsburgh, a century ago, were the 101 members of the "Normal Rifles."

This company, raised in the record time of two weeks, by Prof. J. H. Wickersham, principal of the State Normal School, Millersville, was counted as one of the best in the regiment, but they still had a lot to learn.

On the trian trip to Camp Wilkins, the high-spirited recruits — most of them Millersville students — consumed all their available rations shortly after the train crossed the Susquehanna above Harrisburg.

According to the troop-train time table, they were supposed to be at Camp Wilkins, near Pittsburgh, in time for breakfast. They reached there 30 hours after leaving Harrisburg.

Heavy military traffic, east-bound, had caused many delays — one of them of more than three hours, in the middle of a mountainous nowhere, 50 miles east of Altoona. It was breakfast time, and no chow.

FORAGE FOR GRUB

Lt. William P. Leonard, of Mountville (there were 19 Mountville men in the company; led a foraging party into the mountain thickets on either side of the stalled train, gathering wild grapes, chestnuts, etc.

The result was far from enough to go around, and a couple of the foragers promptly got lost — necessitating another delay until searchers brought them back.

The "Normal Rifles" had discovered, rather quickly, that troop train movements could be maddeningly abnormal, and acutely uncomfortable.