

A CHINESE SOLDIER IN THE CIVIL WAR

BY WILLIAM FREDERIC WORNER

In these days when the restriction of immigration is a much-mooted question, it is pleasing to record that some sixty odd years ago there came to this country a poor Chinese youth who lived in our city for nine years, during which time he acquired considerable knowledge of our habits, customs and language. On his return to his native land, he entered the ministry, rose to a position of distinction in the Church and became widely known and honored by Christians and non-Christians alike. My only apology for presenting a brief sketch of his life, especially that part spent in Lancaster, Pa., is to correct the erroneous impressions prevalent concerning this remarkable foreigner.

Hong Neok Woo was born August 7, 1834, in a little hamlet called Antowtson, five miles outside the south gate of the city of Changchow, in the district of Yanghuhsien, China. His people though poor were industrious and independent farmers. His father frequently visited Shanghai for the purpose of selling farm products. On one of these visits he heard of the boys' school, opened in 1845, by Bishop William J. Boone, of the American Church Mission, and he determined to send his son to it to prepare him for working in a foreign "hong". He entered the Mission School at the age of thirteen. Two years later, he was baptized by Bishop Boone in the school chapel and thus belonged to the first generation of Christians in China. The following year he was confirmed by the same prelate.

When Commodore Perry made his expedition to Japan in 1852-1854, for the purpose of concluding a treaty of commerce with that country, several of his ships came in 1854 to Shanghai. One of the ships in the expedition was the frigate "Susquehanna", another was the "Powhatan". During their stay in port the officers were in the habit of visiting the Mission and attending the Sunday services there, it being the only American Mission in Shanghai at that time.

From these officers young Woo learned of the Perry expedition and of its speedy return to America. He formed a strong desire to visit that country by working his way across the ocean aboard one of the ships. The Rev. Mr. Points, an American missionary, negotiated with the officers of the frigate "Susquehanna" for Woo to be taken on board as cabin boy. He was assigned to wait on Dr. John S. Messersmith, the surgeon of the ship. After a voyage of eight months, during which time the ship touched at all the important ports enroute, he landed in March, 1855, at the Philadelphia Navy Yard. A few days were spent in a hotel and then he proceeded, by train, to Dr. Messersmith's home in Lancaster, Penna.

Lancaster at that time contained about 20,000 inhabitants. Woo lived with Dr. Messersmith at 40 North Lime street until the marriage of the latter.

During the nine years Woo lived in Lancaster (1855-1864) it was his custom on Sunday to attend the morning service in St. James' Episcopal Church, of which the Rev. Samuel Bowman was then rector, and to spend the afternoon calling on friends or taking walks in the country. Occasionally, he attended the afternoon service. St. James' Church at that time had a mixed choir of men and women and they sang from an upper

gallery at the back of the church, above the two entrances. In the evening, he visited the other churches in the city and some of the meeting-houses. In his autobiography he says of the latter: (1)

"Sometimes Dr. Messersmith took me to one of those places just to see how people would behave themselves in the name of Divine Worship. One day we visited such a place. The people made lots of noise and did much crying over their sins and confessions. They prayed in a loud voice and sang lustily. Sometimes one would fall down on the floor and do other things which would be described as indecent in any other place. We felt very curious worshipping God not reverently".

Woo was invited to attend the parochial school founded and conducted by Bishop Bowman. He declined, explaining that he was a poor student at the Shanghai Mission School, that he forgot his lessons when the time for recitation came, and that his desire was to become a mechanic. He applied at the Lancaster Locomotive Works for a job, but owing to the depression in business, he was not employed.

Mr. Joseph Clarkson, a neighbor of Dr. Messersmith and organist of St. James' Church for many years, strongly advised Woo to learn the trade of printer, stating that it would be useful wherever he went and would give him a practical opportunity of learning the English language. He accepted the advice and became an apprentice in the office of the "Lancaster Examiner and Herald", where he worked for seven years, four as apprentice and three as journeyman. Later, he was employed in the office of the "Daily Express", as pressman. While oiling a machine in the latter office his right hand caught in a cogwheel and the flesh, skin and nail were torn from the middle finger. He consulted Dr. Henry Carpenter, who instead of amputating the finger advised him to let nature heal it. This course, fortunately, was successful and the finger was saved. Referring to this experience in his autobiography he says:

"Long afterward when I was engaged in hospital work in Shanghai, dressing wounds and caring for the injured, the sight of a wound or injury never failed to remind me of this incident and I was all the more happy relieving others".

On September 22, 1860, he was naturalized as an American citizen in the local court.(2) He was the only Chinese naturalized in Lancaster county and was one of the few admitted to citizenship in this country.(3)

During the Civil War, when Pennsylvania was invaded by the Confederate army under General Lee, he responded to the call for 50,000 volunteers issued by Governor Curtin for protecting the State and strengthening the Northern Army. (4) In his autobiography he refers to his enlistment in these words:

"I volunteered on June 29th, 1863, in spite of the advice of my Lancaster friends against it, for I had felt that the North was right in opposing slavery. My friends thought I should not join the militia and risk my life in war, for my own people and family were in China and I had neither property nor family in America whose defense might serve as an excuse for my volunteering."

Hong Neok Woo, however, did not participate in any fighting. He was enrolled as a private at Lancaster Pa., on June 29, 1863, in Company I, 50th Regiment Infantry, Pennsylvania Volunteer Emergency Militia, commanded by Captain John H. Druckemiller, which was immediately sent to Safe Harbor where it camped on a hill at the mouth of the Conestoga creek. The people of Lancaster county at that time feared the invasion of the Confederate forces, and volunteers were stationed at various points along the Susquehanna river. On July 2, 1863, Woo returned to Lancaster city and was mustered into the service of the State. The Company was sent to Harrisburg, where it was equipped. From thi

place it was transported by train through the Cumberland valley to Chambersburg. After a short stay in the latter town it marched on through Hagerstown to Williamsport, Maryland, and was stationed at Dam No. 5, about five miles above that place, on the Potomac river, where it did picket duty. (5)

Concerning his experience as a soldier there was nothing unusual. His military duty consisted of taking turns at cooking, doing sentinel work, practicing target shooting, etc., etc. "There was one march", Woo says in his autobiography, "which impressed itself on my memory deeply. For one afternoon and night we marched. It happened to be a very warm summer day and I was so tired I could not go any further, and I had to lie on the roadside and rest my sore feet." The Company subsequently returned to Camp Curtin, Harrisburg, Pa., and Private Woo was mustered out of the service at Lancaster, Pa., on August 15, 1863. So far as could be learned he was the only Chinaman who served in the Civil War. (6)

The nine years spent in Lancaster, Pa., were uneventful, on the whole. Among his friends he counted Dr. Messersmith and his sister Miss Harriet, Bishop Bowman and Mr. Joseph Clarkson, the Rev. J. Isidor Mombert, Mr. Edmond Kline, one of the editors and proprietors of the "Examiner and Herald Weekly", Mr. Michael O. Kline, connected with the Lancaster Cotton Mills, and Mr. George M. Kline, the lawyer.

In February of 1864, he decided to return to his native land. He sailed from New York city on board the "Kiukiang", one of the Oliphant Company's new boats built in New York for special service between Hankow and Shanghai, on the Yangtse river. He worked on board ship to earn his passage money, and reached Shanghai in May 1864. One of the first acts on landing was to register his name in the American Consulate.

Shortly after his arrival in Shanghai, he was offered the position of catechist in the American Mission, but he was obliged to decline the offer as his nine years' residence in America had nearly robbed him of much of his knowledge of the Chinese language. For eight months he was practically like a foreigner in learning to speak his native dialect fluently. He subsequently became Archdeacon Thomson's assistant; and in 1866, during the first period of his work, he helped in establishing the first dispensary of the Mission. Out of it eventually developed the present Saint Luke's Hospital, Shanghai.

On May 1, 1867, he was ordained Deacon by Bishop Williams in the Church of Our Savior, Shanghai; and on May 24, 1880, he was advanced to the priesthood by Bishop Schereschewsky in St. John's Chapel, Jessfield. The Rev. Dr. Mombert, who had been Woo's rector in Lancaster, Pa., sent him Dr. Henry's Commentaries and some theological books.

To describe in detail the many activities in which Woo was engaged or to enumerate the humanitarian enterprises which he founded and helped to support, would tax your patience and extend beyond the scope of this article. He served successively as catechist, hospital assistant, physician and chaplain; organizer of and teacher in boys' schools, and general missionary of the diocese. At the age of 72 he began a vigorous campaign for raising money for the establishment of an Industrial Home for poor widows. He was able to secure a large sum with which land was purchased and buildings erected. This Home, which now accommodates more than one hundred women, was the crowning achievement of his life and will ever stand as a memorial of his philanthropy. (7)

He died on August 18, 1919, and was buried in Westgate Cemetery, the oldest Christian burying ground in Shanghai.

REFERENCES.

1. "Autobiography of the Rev. H. N. Woo," published in Chinese and transliterated into English, but not published, by the Rev. Andrew Yu Yue Tsu, Ph. D., of St. John's University, Shanghai.

2. His name appears on record in the Prothonotary's Office in Lancaster, Pa., as "W. Hoong Neok." He wrote it in this way for the reason that in Chinese the family name comes first. While in Lancaster, Pa., he was known as Hong Neok, pronounced "Hun Yock."

3. The Chinese anti-naturalization law (sec. 14, chap. 126) passed May 6, 1882, prohibited the naturalization of Chinese in America.

4. In the Adjutant General's Office in Harrisburg, Pa., his name is recorded: "Ung Hong Neok". The family name Woo is "Ung." More properly it should have been spelled "Ng" without the vowel "U", for it then would be a correct trans-literation of the Chinese character in pronunciation. The change in spelling made the pronunciation easier.

5. Ellis and Evans' History, page 193.

6. On the certificate of his military record his age is given as 24. This is incorrect. He was 28 years old.

7. Vol. 6, No. 2, "Shanghai News Letter," edited by Dr. Pott.

Author: Worner, William Frederic.

Title: A Chinese soldier in the Civil War / by William Frederic
 Worner.

Primary Material: Book

Subject(s): Woo, Hong Neok, 1834-1919.
 United States. Army--History--Civil War, 1861-1865.
 United States--History--Civil War, 1861-1865.

Publisher: Lancaster, Pa. : Lancaster County Historical Society, 1921

Description: 52-55 p. ; 23 cm.

Series: Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society ; v. 25,
 no. 3

Call Number: 974.9 L245 v.25

Location: LCHSJL -- Journal Article (reading room)

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