

William Thompson Phelps
Company A
Third Tennessee Cavalry Regiment
Born 1830 – Died April 27, 1865

He was my great, great uncle. In the family, he was called Will. In the Third Tennessee, His nickname was “Dad”. I am honored to speak about his life this morning.

When I looked up “eulogy” in the dictionary, I found it comes from a Greek word meaning “to praise” or “speak well of”. *That* has already been done by one far more qualified than I. When Major William A. McTeer, an officer in the Third Tennessee, wrote his memoirs after the Civil War, he remembered Will Phelps *well* and gave this glowing account of him.

(I quote Major McTeer) “There was a very large... man in the Third, known throughout the regiment, and brigade, in fact as “Dad” Phelps. He was an excellent soldier, kindhearted, and brave as a lion. He had the largest horse in the regiment and had bought a fine Henry rifle, shooting with great accuracy and carrying sixteen loads.” Once, during a battle in Mississippi (now I am paraphrasing), “Dad” was cut off from his unit and had to save himself. The Rebels were close on his heels, within shouting distance, and began calling him names like “you damned Yankee rascal” and things even less complimentary. Will took the name-calling personally. He wheeled on the Rebels, shouted back, and went to work with his Henry rifle. The pursuit and name-calling was *over*.

Major McTeer’s fond remembrances of Pvt. Phelps are brimming with insight and deserve a closer look.

Why was Will Phelps, called “Dad”?

It could have been solely his age and stature. He was thirty-four when he volunteered, so he was at least ten years older than most of the men. And he was a hefty six-foot-plus when the average soldier was five-eight. But with the positive attributes that Major McTeer ascribed to him, “excellent soldier, kindhearted, and brave as a lion”, he may well have been a father figure to many of the younger men, including his 20 year-old brother, John Michael Phelps, with whom he enlisted. My guess is that he was called “Dad” with a good measure of humor, affection, and respect.

Major McTeer called him “an excellent soldier”. What did he mean by that?

Most likely he meant, among other things, that Pvt. Phelps was motivated – that he believed his country was worth fighting for; that he kept his weapon, horse, and gear in good condition; that he knew how to take orders and use common sense; and that he looked out for the soldier on his left and right. From the Roman legions to our troops now in Afghanistan, what it takes to be an excellent soldier hasn’t changed much. It is uncomplicated and timeless.

Kindhearted?

Though Will Phelps was big and fearless, he must have had a gentle spirit. Maybe he was quick to share his rations or speak a kind word to a young soldier who needed to hear a kind word. With his size he could have pushed people around, but those who do are never called “kindhearted” are they?

Brave as a lion? What about brave as a lion?

His officer said he was not only an excellent soldier and kindhearted
BUT.....BRAVE AS A LION!

We know what bravery is. It needs little explanation, other than to note, in this case, it is one battle-tested soldier speaking of another. That makes it special, I think.

It might be added that it took a brave man just to get *into* the Union army from Confederate-held Blount County, Tennessee. Will Phelps and his brother John, had to have walked the 150 miles from here to Somerset, Kentucky where, records show they mustered into the Third Tennessee Cavalry. The formidable terrain of the Cumberland Mountains would have been hard enough, without the threat of Confederate patrols and bushwackers.

Major McTeer, who had a keen sense of humor, also noted in his remembrance (I am paraphrasing again) that Will carried a few extra pounds of body weight and sometimes used words that he had not learned in Sunday School. To which I am inclined to smile and respond.....”nobody’s perfect”. I think I can speak for those present who have worn the uniform in times of hostility in saying, that when

the chips are down and the going gets tough, we'll take all the Will Phelps' we can get.

"Excellent soldier, Kindhearted, and brave as a lion." Who among us would not settle for those words as our epitaph?

II

Now that we have spoken of the good character of William Phelps, let's look at his life events. Will's mother and father were Henry Phelps and Rhoda Lebow Phelps. When Will was born, they lived in Claiborne County, north of Knoxville. He was their second child and first son. **(The following was revised 10/30/16 after extensive and conclusive research in Germany and the US). Will's grandfather, Valentine Volp/Fulp, came to America with his father George Volp when he was 8 years old. They later moved to North Carolina and he then later moved to Tennessee.** They were staunch protestant Christians.

Will Phelps was just a lad when his mother and father with six children moved from Claiborne County to Blount County in the 1830's. By 1850 they lived in the Middlesettlements community. Will, now 19, had ten brothers and sisters. In 1858 he married Nancy Fletcher Jones from a few miles up the Tennessee River. They had no children. Will's father died in the late 1850s.

After the election of Abraham Lincoln in late 1860, an already hot political climate began to boil. The following April, South Carolina militia attacked Union forces at Ft Sumter and we went to war with ourselves. Tennessee joined the Confederacy, through we East Tennesseans were four to one against it. Later that year, local Unionists burned several railroad bridges in East Tennessee and Confederate occupiers responded with hanging and martial law. Confederate recruiters with guns roamed the countryside. One group shot Will's brother Jeff in the back and left him for dead for refusing to join the Confederate army. Another captured his brother Rich, though he later escaped. Within 18 months, four Phelps brothers were in the Union army and a fifth was recovering from gunshot wounds. Mother Rhoda had five children still at home. Times were tough.

After Will and John Phelps joined the 3rd Tennessee Cavalry in 1863, they fought in one major battle and numerous skirmishes. In September, 1864 their unit was assigned to guard a key railroad trestle near Huntsville, Alabama. The railroad from Nashville to Atlanta was crucial to General Sherman's southern campaign and his now famous "march to the sea. On September 23rd, confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest appeared with 4,000 cavalry, attacked, and overwhelmed the 750-man contingent guarding the bridge. Will, John, and much of the regiment, were taken prisoner and marched off to Cahaba, Alabama. With the war coming to a close in the spring of 1865, the prison was closed and the Union soldiers were sent to Vicksburg, Mississippi.

At Vicksburg, the war-weary men were placed on civilian steamships to transport them to Camp Chase, Ohio for discharge. Will and John Phelps, on their way home at last, were assigned to a ship named the Sultana. The Sultana's boilers were in poor condition. Major repair was needed, but the civilian owners were being paid by the head and by the mile. Money trumped safety. Military authorities on the scene dithered about what to do and wound up doing nothing.

When the sultana docked upstream at Memphis, more cargo and passengers were added. A ship that was designed to carry 376, now had more than 2,000 aboard. In addition to the human cargo, over seventy mules and a hundred pigs were jammed into the aft hold.

Just after midnight on April 27, 1865, the Sultana pulled away from the landing at Memphis and headed upstream in a cold drizzling rain. Lightning in the distance provided occasional bits of illumination; otherwise, the night was pitch-black. The river was up and out of its banks from the spring rains, making the water swifter and wider than usual.

To make up for the added resistance from the current and the load, the Sultana's engineers poured on the coal, putting enormous pressure on the ship's four boilers. As they rounded the first big bend seven miles north of Memphis, disaster struck. Three of the boilers exploded with the roar of an earthquake. The ship was ripped apart. What was left afloat was on fire. Men and animals were hurled skyward, landing, dead or alive, in the cold brown water. Those left on the burning ship were forced to jump. There were no life boats or life jackets worthy of mention. The horror of the ensuing chaos and desperation is unspeakable.

Fortunately, John Michael Phelps survived. Regrettable, William Thompson Phelps did not. It is unlikely that his body was recovered. If it was, he is buried as an "Unknown". Either way, he never made it back to his beloved East Tennessee.

III

If somehow, some way, we could speak with you this morning, Will Phelps, here are some of the things we would want to say:

Please know that we are proud of you. We grieve your loss. Our family would have been even stronger if we had you in our midst and you descendants among us. We recognize that you fought to preserve *our United States* of America. We are grateful to you for that. In the 146 years since you left us, we have made much progress toward the goals of freedom, equality, and justice for all, but we are not there yet. Much work remains to be done. As you and a long line of patriots have so well demonstrated, whether or not we endure as a nation and reach our potential is all up to us. May we, with God's help, dedicate ourselves *this day* to pulling together, offering up our best as citizens, and being worthy of your sacrifice.

We honor you. We salute you. We embrace you.

Welcome home!

James M. Sturgeon