

The Phelps Family and the Civil War

Henry Phelps was born in 1799. As a young man, he moved to Tennessee and in 1828 married Rhoda Lebow of Claiborne County, Tennessee. Henry and Rhoda moved to Blount County, Tennessee sometime in the 1830's. During the Civil War era, their home place was a farm in the Middlesettlements community of Blount County at Lovingood Spring.

Henry and Rhoda had eleven children beginning with Mary Jane in 1828. Then came William Thompson, James Jefferson, Sarah Selina, Martha Malvina, Daniel Richard, John Michael, George Henry, Hiram Thomas, Frances Eliza, and Henry.

Henry the father, died about three years before the Civil War began, leaving Rhoda a widow with seven children still at home.

When war came for certain to the Tennessee Valley in late 1861, Daniel Richard Phelps was 22 years old, unmarried, and the "man of the house" on the family farm. His older brothers Will and Jeff had married and moved out. Younger brothers John and George were 19 and 15, unmarried, and still lived on the farm. These

five Phelps brothers would fight in the Civil War. Hiram and Henry were mere boys and would not.

The family's earliest brush with the Civil War involved James Jefferson Phelps. My grandfather told me the story about his Uncle Jeff more than once, and I have documentation for it. I believe it occurred in the autumn of 1862.

According to my grandfather, Uncle Jeff was building a hog pen near a spring in what is now the Mt. Tabor community when he was approached by two Confederate conscriptors on horseback. The Confederates ordered him to go with them to join the Confederate army. Uncle Jeff refused, turned, and began to walk away. The Confederates shot him in the back and left him for dead in the road. Though badly wounded he was able to get himself off the road and to the nearby spring. When he didn't come home at mealtime, his family went to look for him. They heard his labored breathing before they actually saw him. He was taken home and nursed back to health.

My grandfather told a similar story about my great grandfather, Daniel Richard Phelps. My grandfather said that his father was cutting wood one day near

Miser Station when he was surrounded and taken prisoner by Confederate soldiers. His captors took him to a stockade near Black Oak Ridge in Knox County. Conditions at the stockade were cold and wet. Rich Phelps and some of his comrades persuaded their Confederate guards to let them go outside the stockade walls to gather leaves for bedding. Once outside the walls, they ran into the woods and eluded their captors. My great grandfather returned home by following the Tennessee River, hiding in the day and moving at night, then crossing the river near Louisville. When he got home after his twenty-mile trip through briars and brush, the story goes, “he didn’t have on enough clothes to wad a shotgun”. Soon afterward, probably late December, 1862, he left Blount County to join the Union army.

We don’t know exactly why Rich and Jeff Phelps refused to join the Confederate army as was required by law. We don’t know if they had strong feelings about slavery or class, although I suspect they did. We do know that Union sentiment was strong in Blount County. We know that the Phelps were Methodists and that Methodist minister and newspaper man “Parson” Brownlow was a fiery advocate for the Union. We know that Rich had the primary

responsibility for his widowed mother and his siblings still at home. We know that Jeff and his wife had a young child and another on the way.

Of the five Phelps brothers who went to war, we know the most about is my great grandfather Rich Phelps. Among other documents, we have his discharge papers which say he was mustered into the Union army as a private on January 10, 1863 at Knoxville. Family tradition says he walked to Kentucky. Both could be true. We know for sure he joined Company D, Sixth Tennessee Volunteer Infantry which was at Murphreesboro in late January, 1863. We know that the Sixth had been engaged a few days before in the bloody Battle of Stones River. Remnants of the battle, fresh graves, and the knowing faces of the survivors must have been a rude initiation for a young man from rural Blount County.

Rich Phelps and the Sixth Tennessee spent the rest of the winter of 1863 in Murphreesboro before moving to Carthage in April. Except for occasional skirmishing around Carthage, there was little fighting, but bad weather, poor food, and harsh living conditions took a greater toll than the enemy. My great grandfather fell ill with a fever during that time and had to be

hospitalized. The fever subsided in due course but persistent pain in his face, eyes, and head did not. Entries in his medical records called his condition “neuralgia”. It would plague him for the rest of his life.

From Carthage in the summer of 1863, the Sixth moved south to McMinnville, then to Chattanooga, then to Chickamauga, arriving the day after the horrendous mid-September battle. There was still fighting at Lookout Mountain in which the Sixth was engaged, but the Union army had been soundly defeated and was in retreat toward Chattanooga.

As the post-Chickamauga phase of the war began, Company D of the Sixth was moved up the Tennessee River from Chattanooga to guard the river crossing at Blythe Ferry near Sale Creek. Reports say there was daily skirmishing across the river with Confederate forces but no major engagements. The tempo would quicken in December when the unit was folded into the forces of General William Tecumseh Sherman who was marching north to relieve Burnside at Knoxville. Sherman’s army came through Blount County, foraging as they went. One column came through Louisville within a short distance of the Phelps farm.

Sherman was exasperated when he got to Knoxville and found Burnside's situation less dire than described. He left town within a few days to meet with war leaders in Nashville.

Sherman left the Sixth Tennessee and other units at Knoxville. They spent the bitterly cold winter of 1863-1864 finishing what historians would call the Campaign of East Tennessee. Though within a half-day walk of his home, there is no indication that my great grandfather was able to visit there.

When Spring came in 1864, Sherman had his sights on Atlanta. The Sixth Tennessee, now hardened by two years in the field, was moved to Chattanooga and was to participate in the entire campaign against Atlanta. Moving south in April, they were heavily engaged at Resaca, Georgia and other places down the valley - Rocky Face, Altoona Mountain and Lost Mountain.

After giving ground for weeks, the Confederate leadership chose Kennesaw Mountain north of Atlanta as the place to make a stand.

On June 22, 1864 my great grandfather's unit was positioned near Kennesaw on the western flank of the

Union forces at Kolb Farm. The farm is now part of the Kennesaw National Battlefield Park. Confederate General John Bell Hood, by that time in the campaign, had had his fill of being outflanked by Sherman and impetuously took it upon himself to launch an attack on the Union flank. Unfortunately for Hood, the Union force was substantial and dug in. The Sixth Tennessee was located near the center of the battlefield. Hood suffered 1500 casualties in the short late afternoon battle. The Union forces lost 250. Hood didn't mention his poorly planned attack and defeat in his memoirs.

The Confederates defended Kennesaw Mountain well but could not hold it. They fell back across the Chattahoochee River to Atlanta. Sherman attacked them there and we all know the outcome. On September 1, he reported to Lincoln that, "Atlanta is ours and fairly won". I will let the words of Private Daniel Richard Phelps summarize the battle. We have two thirds of his original letter from Decatur, Georgia dated September 15, 1864. He is writing to his brother Jeff:

"...We have give them the best whipping at Atlanta I guess they have ever had. We have whipped them out of Atlanta at last and run them thirty miles below

Atlanta and tore up the railroad as we went and burnt up every crosstie and bent every rail on the road. We then fell back to Atlanta. Our regiment is six miles east of Atlanta camped at Decatur, Georgia.” (Appendix 1)

In the same letter, Rich Phelps mentions ominous news he has just received. (Brothers John Michael and William Thompson had joined the Third Tennessee Volunteer Cavalry in the summer of 1863 and brother George Henry had joined the Second Tennessee Volunteer Cavalry later that year.) Here is that part of Rich’s letter:

“... Well Jeff, I have just heard some bad news if it is so and I reckon it is for it come pretty straight...near Huntsville (rest of paragraph missing). ...I received a letter from John dated August the 11. Him and Will was well. They are at Decatur, Alabama... (rest of letter missing).” (Appendix 2)

I believe there are two strong possibilities regarding the “bad news” Rich Phelps had received. The news may have been about the escape at Atlanta of a major part of the Confederate army which was then headed north toward Tennessee, or it may have been about the attacks of Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest

on the Union supply lines coming from Nashville. The latter is more likely, I believe, because almost all of the Third Tennessee Volunteer Cavalry, including brothers John Michael and William Thompson, were captured by Forrest near Huntsville, Alabama within two weeks of the date on the letter. They were imprisoned at Cahaba, Alabama for the remainder of the war.

Will Phelps is mentioned in Charles S. McCammon's book "Loyal Mountain Troopers - The Second and Third Tennessee Volunteer Cavalry in the Civil War". McCammon writes in part, "There was a very large... man in the Third, known throughout the regiment and the brigade... as "Dad" Phelps. He was an excellent soldier, kindhearted and brave as a lion". (Appendix 3)

After the battle for Atlanta, Sherman set out on his famous march to the sea and sent General George Thomas to attend to Hood's still-viable Confederate army headed north toward Nashville. The Sixth Tennessee Volunteer Infantry was part of Thomas' force. We have another letter from Rich Phelps dated January 31, 1865 and written at Washington, D. C. It is to his mother and gives an account of his activities during the September 1864 to January 1865 period. Here are excerpts:

“...I believe the last letter I rote (wrote) to you was in Oct. We was at Cedar Bluff, Alabama since that time. ...We have hardly had time to wash our face and hands. We come from there back to resaci (Resaca), Georgia. We got on the (rail) cars there and sailed through to Knashville (Nashville). The cars only stopped there a few minutes and took the northwestern railroad and went to Johnsonville, 75 miles from Knashville on the Tennessee River. We stayed there two weeks and in the time old Hood slipt in around Knashville and told his Rebs that they would take Knashville and recruit up their army there this winter, but we heard of it and did not like the plan. We marched up there on double quick and whipt them every time. We captured 62 pieces of artillery and eighteen thousand prisoners. This is not fer (far) rong (wrong) for I never saw as many dirty Rebels in my life. We followed him (Hood ?) to Clifton, Tennessee. This is on the Tennessee River. We got on steamboats there and down the Tennessee and up the Ohio River to Cinncinatti, Ohio. We got on cars there and never stopped till we got to Washington citty (city)”. Appendix 4.

While in Washington, the soldiers of the Sixth had warm quarters, good food, and a few days to rest. It was during that period, I believe, that Rich Phelps

wrote a poem for his mother. (Appendix 5)

In February, 1865 the Sixth as a part of the 23rd Corp was put on a steamship at Alexandria, Virginia and transported to Fort Anderson, North Carolina. From there they marched to Wilmington and on to Kingston with Schoefield. They joined Sherman at Moseby Hall near Goldsboro.

With the end of the war now in sight, Sherman began to clear the battlefield. The Sixth was relieved of field duty on March 31st and ordered to Morehead City, the first leg of a long trip home. Since being formed in early 1862, they had lost one company commander and forty four enlisted men to enemy fire and another one hundred and fifty-seven to disease, exposure and accidents .

At Morehead City they boarded a battered old steamship that took them to New York City by way of Ft. Monroe, Virginia. It was a harrowing eight-day trip in rough water. At one point a storm blew them sixty miles off course.

In New York the soldiers of the Sixth were quartered on Greenwich Street near the waterfront. The weather was cloudy and cold. One of Rich Phelps' fellow soldiers wrote after the war that "...we did not go far from our

quarters for we had seen so many towns and cities that we cared very little about them. (But) if I had known it would have been the last time I would ever be to New York, I would have gone to Central Park”.

In the Spring of 1865 Rich Phelps wrote a to his younger brother John Michael. We have pieces of that letter. The letter does not indicate whether he knew his brothers John Michael and William Thompson had been captured and were being held in a Confederate prison. The letter talks about the girls back home and about getting out of the army, somewhat lighter topics than in earlier correspondence, indicating that he was aware that the war was winding down. Here are excerpts:

“...you wanted to know whether I have wrote to any of the girls or not. I have never wrote to any of them yet. I have postponed it so long I think I will just hold on about 8 months longer. Our time will be out then. I can go home, if I live, and tell them how to direct their letters.” (Appendix 6)

On April 12, 1865, the Sixth Volunteer Infantry, Rich Phelps among them, left their barracks in lower Manhattan and boarded horse-drawn streetcars that took

them to the railroad station. From there a train carried them west through Buffalo, New York and Columbus, Ohio. Lee had surrendered to Grant on April 9th and a soldier of the Sixth reported that people were still celebrating in the streets of Cincinnati on April 14th, when their train pulled into the station around two o'clock in the afternoon. The celebration, he said, ended abruptly later that evening when reports came that President Lincoln had been shot.

The jubilation that the end of the war brought to Will and John Phelps and the other prisoners at Cahaba is hard to imagine. They were set free within days. Most were transported by steamship and rail to Camp Fisk, Mississippi, but some were so anxious to get away from the misery they had known for months, that they set out walking and walked all the way across Mississippi and half of Alabama. Camp Fisk was near Vicksburg where commercial steamships had been hired to take the former prisoners to Camp Chase, Ohio for mustering out. One of the ships was named Sultana.

April 26, 1865 was a big news day. On that day General Joe Johnston surrendered to General Sherman in North Carolina. On the same day, John Wilkes Booth was cornered and slain in Virginia. Stories about the

President's assassination and funeral were still front-page. These major events overshadowed the story of the steamship Sultana exploding and sinking on the Mississippi River near Memphis near midnight that day. (By comparison, more lives were lost on the Sultana than on the famous Titanic.) William Thompson Phelps was among the 1800 Union soldiers who drowned or were killed by explosions before they hit the water. Many bodies, including that of my uncle, were never found. John Michael Phelps was also aboard but survived.

Rich Phelps mustered out of the United States Army at Nashville on June 30, 1865. He had not slept in a bed in two and a half years, my grandfather told me. While he was away, the war had taken a heavy toll back home. Maryville College had closed. The Blount County Courthouse and most of the town had burned. Many of the community's most able young men were dead. People in the countryside were destitute.

Mother Rhoda and the children left at home during the war suffered greatly but survived. Their house was still standing, and the children, though no doubt emotionally scarred forever, were still alive.

We have Daniel Richard Phelps' discharge papers. Among other things, they authorized him transportation from Nashville to Knoxville. When he got home, he resumed his role as head of the family farm. Mother Rhoda and daughters Martha and Eliza continued to live on the farm as did younger son Hiram and Henry.

Jeff Phelps survived the war but burned with rage at Confederate conscriptors who had shot him. He knew their names and that they lived near Johnson City. He took the train there with the intention of killing them both. Thankfully for all concerned, my grandfather said, he could never locate either of them.

George Henry Phelps survived the war, married Clementine James, and raised a family in Blount County.

John Michael Phelps married Mariah Kidd and settled in south Knox County. They had at least three children. He is listed as a Union Army veteran in an 1890 census of veterans and his name is on the Sultana monument at Mt. Olive Cemetery in south Knoxville. He died in 1900 and his wife in 1916. They and a son are buried at Mt. Olive.

William Thompson Phelps who died on the Sultana is listed among the Civil War dead on the monument in front of the Blount County Court House. His body was never recovered. He was married before the war but had no children.

Henry Phelps, as if the heartbreak brought by the war was not enough, died of a gunshot wound in a love triangle around 1865. He was 16.

Eliza had a short unhappy marriage. She lived afterward with first one relative then another for the rest of her life. All her possessions were kept in a trunk.

Hiram may have been married briefly but was not married in later life. He also lived with relatives. Younger generations remember him as “hard to get along with” and “set in his ways”. It is said that he always slept with an ax under his bed.

In 1880 Rhoda Phelps died. She left the farm to Daniel Richard and Hiram, the two unmarried sons still at home. She left Jeff, John, and George thirty dollars apiece. Married daughters Mary and Martha received five dollars each. Her last wish was for the children who were still single to continue to live on the farm as

one family. She must have been a truly remarkable woman.

James Jefferson left East Tennessee in the 1880's and went west. He settled his family first in Missouri and later in Oklahoma. It seems he did not keep in touch with relatives back home. Some have speculated that he was disappointed with the way his mother's estate had been divided. Only in recent years have Jeff's descendants in Oklahoma learned of their East Tennessee roots.

In 1882 at age 43, Daniel Richard married young and pretty Sarah Jane Lebow age 16. It was a good marriage; one of love, devotion, and respect I am told by more than one family member. They had six healthy children who grew to adulthood and raised families of their own. My grandfather William Esco Phelps was their first-born son. He married Rose Honor Davis and stayed on the family farm. I lived in or near their household until I was eight years old. My mother Geneva Phelps (Sturgeon) was the first-born of Esco and Rose and I was Geneva's first-born. I feel blessed by my Phelps family heritage.

I wish there was a "happily ever after" ending to the life

of Rich Phelps. He had certainly earned a later life of peace and bliss, but the war had not ended for him when he mustered out in 1865. In the late 1880s his health failed. The neuralgia that had first hit him at Carthage in the Spring of 1863 had persisted and grown worse as he had gotten older. He had rheumatism in his breast where he had received a bullet wound somewhere along the way.. He suffered from chronic stomach pains for which he was treated by a Maryville physician. His health became so bad that he could no longer go about his farm and do the work that had to be done, one report said. Community leaders from the Brown and Anderson families made sworn affidavits to that effect. In addition to his physical ailments, I believe it likely that the unspeakable horrors that he saw and experienced wore on him as the years went by. Pictures of him in his fifties show a man old before his time. He bore symptoms of what is today called post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It eras past the condition was called “shell shock” and “battle fatigue”.

Struggling to support his young family, Rich Phelps applied in 1889 to the War Department for a disability pension. Back then, as now, dealing with the federal government was not easy. It had to be verified that he actually had been in the army, that he had been

honorably discharged, that he was not already receiving a pension, and that he had not deserted while serving. Then his doctor in Maryville and several of his neighbors had to attest to his condition both before and after the war. Finally, after twenty years of paperwork, a pension was granted on April 22, 1909. The amount was \$15 a month. He died ten months later on February 12, 1910 and was buried at Middlesettlements Methodist Church Cemetery.

Rich Phelps' wife Sarah Jane was entitled to a pension as the widow of a veteran, but she had to make application. She did so and after another long process received it. When the family notified the War Department in 1927 that she had died, she was receiving \$30 a month. It was not a lot of money by any standard, but it helped her maintain her dignity and independence in later years. She was held in high esteem by the family, a model for what a mother and wife should be.

In preparation for this talk I interviewed my mother who had spent a great deal of time as a teenager in the household of her grandmother Sarah Jane Phelps. Mother was 93 at the time, but her memory of early events in her life was as clear as a bell.

That afternoon, I asked Mother what I should say about the Phelps family and the Civil War. She looked away and thought for a long time, then told me what she remembered most was how sad everybody got when there was talk about the war. My mother said that when sadness came over her beloved grandmother, she felt sad too.

As we continued to talk there in my mother's room, her mood declined and her lively storytelling faded to quiet sadness. Her sadness brought my mood down too. We changed the subject to flowers on the table and the weather outside. After a little while, I said goodbye and excused myself, closing the door gently behind me. As I walked down the hall I was profoundly aware that the tragedy of the American Civil War had just reached across the years and touched our family once again.

Jim Sturgeon

Note:

The foregoing was presented in September 2006 at a monthly meeting of The Blount County Civil War Roundtable. The content is taken from official records, published accounts, family documents, and oral history.

Corrections and additions are solicited.

Appendix 1

and robbing set out of
there. We have give them the best
whipping at Atlanta I guess they have
ever had. We have whipped them out
of Atlanta at last and run them thirty
miles below Atlanta and tore up the rail
road as we went and burnt up every
cross-tie and bent every rail on the road.
We then fell back to Atlanta. Our regiment
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? ? letter (?) ? ? ?

(This third of the letter is missing)

* Brothers John Michael and William
Thompson were members of the 3rd
Tennessee Volunteer Cavalry Regiment
and were captured on September
22, 1864 near Decatur, Alabama.

Appendix 2

Battles Participated in by the Sixth East Tennessee Vol. Infantry.



STONE RIVER,
LOOKOUT MOUNTAIN,
RICHLAND, RESACA,
ALTOONA MOUNTAIN,
LOST MOUNTAIN,
KENNESAW.

HEAD QUARTERS,

Co. G, Sixth Regiment, East Tennessee Volunteer Infantry.

Camp, near Decatur, Ga. Sept. 15, 1864.

Dear brother, it is with pleasure that I take my pen in hand this evening to drop you a few lines to let you know that my health is good at this time. Hoping when these few lines comes to hand they may find you all enjoying the same blessing. Well Jeff, I have just heard some bad news if it is so and I reckon it is for it come pretty straight
? ? ? ... near huntsville

(Transcription)

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Appendix 2

Appendix 3

appendix 3

Royal Mountain
Troops
The Second of Third
Tennessee Volunteer
Cavalry in the Civil
War

Charles S
McCombs

There was a very large corpulent man in the Third, known through the regiment, and the brigade, in fact, as "Dad Phelps." He was an excellent soldier, kindhearted and brave as a lion, but extremely profane. He was so large and heavy that he was supplied with the largest horse in the regiment. He bought a fine Henry rifle, shooting with great accuracy and carrying sixteen loads. In the stampede at Okolona, "Dad" was cut off and had to save himself as best he could. A squad of rebels got after him and was following him up close, calling out, "Halt! halt! you d—d Yankee!" calling him by such names as that. But "Dad," on his big horse, paid no attention, and got away as fast as possible. At length one of them called out, "Halt! you d—d pussy-gutted rascal, you!" Dad couldn't stand this, so he halted his horse, turned deliberately around, and replied, "You called me a d—d pussy-gut. and I'll

blow your d—d brains out!" And with his Henry rifle, went to work and soon taught the rebels it was best to not come too close to him.

Appendix 4

51
The 61

Camps, St

Washington City, January 1865

Dear mother after a long time I have
 met with the opportunity of re-encountering
 you a few lines over now to let
 you see that I am well and
 so by Hoping these few lines aboy
 reach you and find you all enjoying
 the same blessing shall mother I am
 a little ashamed of my self that
 have not wrote here inore then I
 have I believe the last letter I wrote to you
 was in Oct Me was at cedar
 Bluff Alabama since that time
 we have hardly had time to wash
 our face and heads we come from
 there back to rezaei georgia we got
 on the cars there and sailed through
 to knashville the cars only stoped
 there a few minutes and took the north
 Western railroad and went to
 Johnsonville. 75 miles from knashville

On the Tennessee river we stand
 there too weeks and in the time. Col
 hood slipt in around knashville
 he told his Rebs that they should
 take knashville and recruit up
 their army there this winter but
 we heard of it and did not like
 the plan we marcht up there
 on double quick and whipt them
 every time we captured 62
 peaces of artily and eighteen
 thousand prisoners this is not fer
 long far I never saw as many worthy
 Rebels in my life we followd him
 to Clipten Tennessee this is on the
 Tennessee river we got on the
 steam baaty there and down the
 tennessee and up the Ohio
 river to Cincinnati Ohio
 we got on the cars there and
 never stopd till we got to
 Washington city of SC
 take the other sheet

Appendix 4

Appendix 5

ay

Oh Dear old Mother and I did part
When I was very young
Her memory still clings round my heart
as charming visions roam
They tell me of my mother's form
she watched me while I slept
and with her soft and gentle hand
she wiped the tears I wept
and that same hand that held my own
When I began to walk
and the eyes that sparkled in her eyes
When I began to talk
I remember too when I ~~was~~ was ill
she kissed my burning brow
and the tears that fell upon my cheek
I think I feel them now
and then she always kept by me
hurry hurry was that day
she put her hand up to her breast
and taught me how to pray
Oh mother mother in this breast
thy image still shall bear, and I will
love thee to the last and always think of thee

Appendix 6

It was the one that lives above the
Big Spring she is fat and saey
I also saw the one that lives over
at the old sawmill close where
we put up your big high footstool
stick I know you know where
that is then they are getting chattering
spring and some times smothering
a little you wanted to know whether
I have wrote to any of the girls or
not I have never wrote to any
of them yet I have post ponded it
so long I think I will just
hold on about 8 months longer
our time will be out then I
can go home if I live and
tell her how to direct her letters
Tell Bill that uncle Johnny is
well and to give his respects and
also to all of the boys M. M.
Abelure has lost his speech
and was left at Knoxville so
I must bring my letter to a close Bye!

Requesting you to write
As soon as you can direct
your letter to Mrs. C. G. Teare

Voluntary
Co. G
1st Brig. 2nd Div
23rd A. I. C.

So nothing more at present
only remains your Brother
until Death

Daniel R. Helps Jr

John A. Helps