



HARDSCRABBLE

Civil War Round Table of the Mid-Ohio Valley Newsletter

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Story by Scott Britton

The Battle of Van Bergen Farm

A few years ago I discovered some local newspaper reports on a now long forgotten engagement that involved many of the “Who’s Who” of Washington County Civil War veterans. Two battle hardened officers, Generals Benjamin Dana Fearing and Rufus R. Dawes, reported it as a bloody and destructive engagement. This battle also featured a Canadian commander and a Gatling gun.

Although the reports do not give an accurate description of that specific gun, most early Gatling guns consisted of “six to ten rotating gun barrels, each of which has its own firing mechanism...turned by a hand crank...and as cartridges are fed into the gun, each barrel automatically loads, fires, and ejects its cartridge in succession.”¹ Invented by Richard Jordan Gatling, this weapon was not widely supported as a viable weapon by the United States War Department or most members of the military. Chief of Ordnance in the Union Army and 1820 West Point graduate, General James Wolfe Ripley, “was cool to the idea of yet another fanciful weapon that did nothing more than waste his time.” He opined following Gatling’s demonstration of the weapon that “soldiers squander ammunition if given a chance to shoot more than three times a minute.”²

At this point, you the reader may already be a bit confused. First, most people probably believe that although first tested in 1861, the Gatling gun was never used during the Civil War. Although I have not found explicit documentation of specific dates and locations of their use, multiple sources state that one was personally used by General Benjamin Butler at Petersburg against Rebel troops and that he purchased twelve of them. Still other references point to a single Gatling gun being purchased by Union Navy Admiral David Dixon Porter for his Mississippi Squadron.³ However, one definitive use of the weapon occurred on July 13, 1863 when it was set up on the streets of New York City by the staff of the *New York Times* to defend themselves (and their building) from attack during the New York Draft Riots.⁴ Although it was not fired in that case, it was undoubtedly used to influence the mob to find a more opportune, and much less heavily defended, target for their wrath.

Second, for those of you who are familiar with the incredible battle records of Generals Fearing and Dawes, if Dawes described it as a “bloody and desperate action,” why have you never heard of this battle? Among the twenty deadly engagements in which he fought, Dawes miraculously survived the meat grinders of the Cornfield at Antietam, the Railroad Cut at Gettysburg, and the Bloody Angle at Spotsylvania as part of the 6th Wisconsin Infantry of the famed “Iron Brigade.” Additionally, Fearing bravely led the 77th Ohio Volunteer

¹ The American Civil War Story website <http://www.americancivilwarstory.com/gatling-gun.html>.

² Referencing Civil War author, Steven Wilson’s 2005 article on the Gatling Gun’s demonstration to Gen. Ripley in 1862 at <http://www.military.com/forums/0,15240,79614,00.html>.

³ Julia Keller. 2008. Mr. Gatling's Terrible Marvel: The Gun That Changed Everything and the Misunderstood Genius Who Invented It. Viking. ISBN 978-0-670-01894-9

⁴ The New York Draft Riots article <https://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/harp/0801.html>

Infantry (OVI) against very long odds to help save the Union army from complete disaster in defense of the Shiloh Church in Tennessee, was wounded through both legs in command of the 92nd OVI at Chickamauga, and sacrificed part of his right hand leading his brigade (the former “Fighting McCook” brigade) to again save the Union army from destruction at the Battle of Bentonville in North Carolina.

Well, the reason you have probably not heard of the Van Bergen Farm fight that involved over 2,000 men, including many of the most extraordinary Civil War soldiers of Washington County, is because it occurred on a hot, fall day in September...September 5th to be exact...in 1878. The Friday afternoon battle was the high point of four days of festivities surrounding the “grand National Reunion of the Blue and Gray.”⁵ The gathering averaged 10,000 people per day and included dignitaries such as: President Rutherford B. Hayes (Union General & former commander of the 23rd Ohio Infantry), Union General Lew Wallace (most famous for authoring the novel, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*), Union General George Crook (first commander of the locally-raised 36th OVI, but most noted for his capture of Crazy Horse and Geronimo during the Indian Wars and his later outspoken advocacy for Native American rights), and Colonel William Cowan of the 22nd Canadian Battalion who served as one of General Fearing’s staff officers.⁶

The two battle reports, transcribed in their entirety below, were written in the same fashion that the two former commanders were accustomed to writing their after action reports from just over a decade earlier. In one of the very first “sham battles” which involved actual Civil War veterans, this can be considered one of the first “Civil War reenactments,” something that is still popular today.

To set the scene of the battle, two armies of roughly equal size were formed from approximately 2,000 soldiers of Ohio National Guard units, artillery batteries, and other military organizations. “The artillery was divided, and as it reverberated among the hills and the valleys, gave one a fair impression of real war.”⁷ The leadership of these two “sham” armies was quite impressive. Pay particular attention in their reports of the list of staff officers who assisted Commanders Dawes and Fearing, each of whom had very distinguished Civil War records of their own. On one side of the battle, however, was a special “Veterans Reserve” unit of former Civil War soldiers. By placing them in reserve, this undoubtedly allowed the national guard and other military units to perform tactical maneuvers and fight for an extended period of time as a practical training exercise. It is easy to image the very large crowds that must have gathered to get a feel for what a “real” battle must have looked like. The entire affair took place on the farm of Henry and Annie Van Bergen, located where the present day Interstate 77 bridge crosses Greene Street. In the reports below, I have personally added additional information on the known Civil War veterans within parentheses to avoid an extreme number of footnotes to this article.

HEADQUARTERS POST, MARIETTA, September 5th, 1878.⁸

TO JOHN SMYTHE, A. A. G.:

Major—In compliance with circular of yesterday from Headquarters, I have the honor to report the part taken by my command in the bloody and desperate action which is designated as the Battle of Van Bergen’s Farm.

My picket outpost, under command of Capt. Thompson of the Caldwell Guards of Col. Harper’s 18th Regiment, O. N. G., were suddenly attacked by a heavy skirmish line. The affair was a complete surprise. Capt. Thompson’s action to meet the emergency was prompt and efficient. He deployed his reserves and disputed gallantly every inch of the advance of the enemy’s skirmishers, giving time for my troops to be formed. The enemy developing in strong force, and showing a determination in pushing his attack, I threw the entire command in to line of battle for action. Col. Harper’s 18th Ohio Regiment on the right, Col. Miller’s 1st West Va. Regiment on the left. The Putnam Light Artillery, four twelve pound brass howitzers, under Capt.

⁵ *The Marietta Times*, September 12, 1878, page 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *The Marietta Register*, September 12, 1878, Page 2: Friday.

⁸ *The Marietta Register*, September 12, 1878, Page 1: Special Report of the Battle.

D.(aniel) P.(erkins) Bosworth (Union Navy), and a Gattling Gun, under Sergeant Bagley, were placed in position in the center. The Veteran Battalion was placed in reserve in rear of the batteries. Col. Harper sent forward a company, Dawes Light Guards, Capt. Beach, to support the pickets now heavily pressed. Capt. Beach deployed his men forward upon a run and went into action in the most gallant style. Capt. Thompson rallied his picket upon Beach's line, and in a strip of corn they held in check a largely superior force. At this juncture a heavy column of the enemy's infantry appeared coming rapidly down the dirt road from Marietta. I directed Capt. Bosworth to open fire. His battery showed excellent practice, being splendidly served and his accurately thrown shell bursting amid the columns of the enemy, caused great havoc. The enemy pressed their attack along my whole front, driving in my skirmishers and advancing in heavy columns to an assault. Col. Harper and Col. Miller opened with musketry, their men behaving with great steadiness. The Gattling Gun, under Sergeant Bagley, began gallantly grinding out one thousand rounds per minute. Capt. Bosworth fired canister at short range. Notwithstanding this deadly fire poured into their ranks the enemy pressed on against us without faltering or hesitation. Their desperate bravery commanded our admiration. At this critical moment I discovered columns of the enemy moving against both my right and left flanks. Col. Harper, with promptness and good judgment refused his right, changing front under a deadly fire, and throwing two companies, Athenian Guards, Capt. Dana, and Dawes Light Guard, Capt. Beach, before the enemy approaching in the corn, checking his attack on our right flank, after a sharp contest. The left, under Col. Miller, meanwhile was charged upon by a heavy column which came forward on a run upon the flank. The Colonel made a most gallant struggle with his line pressed in front and overwhelmed on the flank. The Goff Guards, Lieut. Myers, Mathews Guards, Capt. Lukens, and Camden Guards, Lieut. McGill, maintained their high reputation for desperate bravery won on Wheeling Island. But it was impossible to withstand the impetuous assault of the charging column on his left, and Col. Miller's line was driven in confusion, the Gattling gun and Capt. Bosworth's battery falling into the hands of the enemy. From one of their dead left on the field we learned that this column of the enemy so gallantly and rapidly handled was the Columbus Cadets. The left gone, Lieut. Colonel True, of the 18th Ohio, still bravely held his line against the swarming hosts. The Salem Guards, Captain Hallet, at this crisis covered the retreat which Colonel True, surrounded and overwhelmed on all sides, was forced to make. At this dark moment when everything was lost and only by the most desperate action could victory be snatched from defeat the veteran battalion under Col. W.(illiam) B.(ion) Mason (18th & 77th OH Infantry, Wounded & Captured on 8 Apr 1862 at Fallen Timbers, Tennessee and was seriously injured on 4 Sep 1863 during the Siege of Little Rock, Arkansas) waving their tattered banners, sprang forward with the battle cheer. No language can describe their glorious charge. They swept forward to the guns driving the enemy like chaff before a whirlwind. They retook the guns. Colonel Harper on the right and Colonel Miller on the left came forward in the charge with the veterans. The whole line now engaged in an impetuous and indiscriminate advance upon the enemy. Nothing could restrain the ardor of both officers and men. Above the din arose the battle cry of the veterans who led the attack. The artillerymen with their sabers in hand joined in the fighting, and after the most desperate hand to hand encounter the enemy was driven from the field and all our ground regained.

The Gattling Gun I regret to say fell into the hands of the enemy. But as it will doubtless use all the ammunition they can command in the first action and thus leave them at our mercy, the loss is perhaps the less to be deplored. When all did so nobly it were unjust and invidious to particularize as to cases of individual merit. I truly regret to be obliged to censure here the conduct of our dead upon the field. As it is sweet and glorious to die for one's country, it would seem correspondingly base for a soldier when killed upon the field not to accept gratefully the situation. Indeed, our killed and wounded having all escaped it is impossible to furnish the lists and data required by you for the Adjutant General's office.

I have Sir the honor to be very respectfully, your most obedient servant,

R.(ufus) R. Dawes (6th Wisconsin Infantry of the "Iron Brigade"), Brig. Gen'l, Com'd

HEAD QUARTERS, POST OF MARIETTA, September 5th, 1878.⁹

Col. Jabez Williams, A. A. G.:

⁹ Ibid.

Colonel: I have the honor to report the part taken by my command in the Battle of Van Bergen's Farm. Having information from a reliable contraband that a heavy force of Infantry with Artillery and Cavalry was approaching Marietta by way of Duck Creek Valley, I directed Col. Baron to attack the force wherever found and, if possible, to surprise it in camp. Col. Baron's command consisted of the 2d Ohio National Guards, Maj. Moore, comprising the following companies: A-Capt. E. Zimmerman; B-Lieut. A. C. Floto; C-Capt. C. B. Doty; D-Capt. Wm. Ault; E-Capt. F. M. Cowan; F-Capt. G. W. Sheppard; H-Capt. E. Heatherington; I-Capt. Joe Patterson; Cadet Battalion, Capt. Gemunder, Co. A-Capt. Geo. Hardy; Co. B-Lieut. C. B. Comstock.

Receiving further information that the enemy were in heavy force and near the city, I determined to supervise the troops in person. The enemy's pickets were discovered on the high hill on the (either the Isaac & Mary or Albert & Abigail) Perkins' farm. I directed the Columbus Cadet Battalion to deploy and drive in the pickets, which was handsomely done.

From the point thus gained the enemy's camps were plainly visible. His troops were rapidly forming line, displaying a much heavier force than the report of the contraband had led us to expect. The only hope of success was to overpower him and capture his artillery by a sudden attack. Col. Baron was directed to send a force under command of the railroad embankment to a point opposite the extreme right of the enemy's line, thence to advance through a heavy thicket of willows upon that flank. This important column was conducted by my Chief of Staff, Gen. H. (iram) F. (osdick) Devol (36th OVI). The Cadet Battalion moved forward in a deployed line and after a stubborn fight dislodged the enemy's pickets, who had been heavily reinforced, from their second position. Col. Baron formed his main column of attack, under a heavy fire of shell, in the field won by the Cadets. The Cadet Battalion was assembled and moved rapidly through a corn field to a point opposite the extreme left of enemy's line, conducted by Major (Ephraim Cutler) Dawes (53rd OVI), my Adjutant General. While these movements were being executed Company E, 2d Ohio National Guards, under Capt. Cowan was thrown forward as skirmishers and engaged the enemy's skirmishers who had rallied in a miry bottom fringed with corn and filled with logs and brush.

All the troops being in position the signal for attack was given. The line in front covered by Col. Baron in person, advanced steadily until it reached the muddy bottom where it was checked for a moment by a murderous fire from a Gatling gun, an awful engine of destruction posted near the enemy's left. At this critical moment the Cadet Battalion sprang forward at a run, with a fierce cry, which sounded clearly above the noise of battle, and pouring in a single well directed volley, rolled up the enemy's left and seized and carried away the Gatling gun. The troops in front now rushed forward, without regard to formation, over logs and trees, through mud and water, heedless of the awful fire of musketry and canister and routing the enemy, who fought with desperate bravery, planted their tattered banners upon the captured line. It is but just to say that even this magnificent assault would have failed had it not been for the flank attack on the right. This attack led by the Steubenville Guards, Co. C, 2d Ohio, commanded by Lieut. Oyeur, though stubbornly resisted by the enemy who changed front to meet it, was completely successful and resulted in capturing the battery. We were now in full possession of the enemy's line of defense. His troops retreated in great confusion under the banks of Duck Creek. Many of them are supposed to have been drowned in endeavoring to escape across that stream. Our troops were hurriedly reformed. The Cadet Battalion was deployed as skirmishers and advanced through the camps. Suddenly an immense force along whose front were displayed a dozen battle flags, appeared moving at a charging pace upon our left. Our line commenced a rapid fire by file when it was discovered that the ammunition was exhausted. An Aid sent to bring forward the reserve supply reported that the mule bearing it refused to cross the railroad track and was so excited that no one dared approach it. Many of the men had no bayonets, having left them camp where they were in use as candlesticks. The line was ordered to retreat. The Cadet Battalion rallied on the right and retired to the cornfield bearing away the Gatling gun. Being unable to drag it through the heavy ground Captain Gemunder with great presence of mind, ordered it to be concealed with cornstalks and spiked with mud. The remainder of the troops were rallied at the point where the column of attack was first formed. The enemy appalled by the stern front they presented, halted and commenced a rapid but in-effectual fire.

All efforts to procure a supply of ammunition having failed and the enemy showing a disposition to advance, I directed the troops to move faced by the rear rank in line of battle over the open field to the ridge on the Perkins farm. This movement was covered by the Cadet Battalion deployed as skirmishers. The

steadiness of the Cadets in this retreat, entitles them to the highest commendation. The enemy were so impressed by it, that after several efforts to break this skirmish line by volley firing they gave up the pursuit. Col. Baron was unhorsed and wounded in the terrible charge on the center, but gallantly continued to command. Mayor (Thomas Watson) Moore (36th & 148th OVI) showed himself a true soldier, cool collected and courageous. Capt. Gemunder and every officer and man of the Cadet Battalion proved himself a hero. No troops anywhere ever behaved better than did the Cadets on this field. My special thanks are especially due to Col. Cowan of the 22d Canadian Battalion who consented to serve on my staff. His assistance in rallying the troops in carrying orders under heavy fire was invaluable.

I desire to return my thanks to the officers of my staff, Gen. H.(iram) F.(osdick) Devol (36th OVI), Gen. W.(illiam) P.(itt) Richardson (25th OVI), Surgeon Bartlett (specific Civil War soldier and service unknown), Col. T.(homas) W.(atson) Moore (36th & 148th OVI), Capt. Sam.(uel) H.(ildreth) Putnam (1st Ohio Cavalry) and Lieut. (William Blackford) Stephenson (53rd OVI). Major (Robert) McEldowney (27th Virginia Infantry of the famous Stonewall Brigade-CSA; Classmate at Marietta College of General Dawes) and Major Ellis (specific Civil War soldier and service unknown), of the Signal Service, rendered timely and valuable assistance. Orderly (Adam) Gasslein (6th Pennsylvania Cavalry), an old soldier, carried my headquarter flag. For his gallant conduct in rallying and encouraging the troops, I recommend him for immediate promotion. The casualties were very large. Full lists will be forwarded as soon as possible. A fire which swept over the field destroyed the bodies of the dead of both armies. A citizen just in reports that the houses in the neighborhood are filled with the enemy's wounded and the waters of Duck Creek are blue with the bodies of the dead.

Respectfully submitted,
B.(enjamin) D.(ana) Fearing (2nd, 77th, 92nd OVI & commander of "McCook's Fighting" Brigade), Brig. Gen. Commanding.

There is a long list of Civil War veterans who participated in the battle listed and will be provided in a follow-up article on the National Reunion. A few, select number of the assembled veterans, are worthy of special notice in this edition as flag bearers in the battle. "The old colors of the following Regiments were borne as follows: 25th OVI, by W.(arren) F. Wires (Sgt, 75th OVI, received bayonet wound though the right lung at Gettysburg & later was captured at Gainesville, FL); 36th OVI, John Block (Pvt, 2nd Ohio Heavy Artillery & 77th OVI); 39th OVI, C.(harles) C.(ole) Barrows (Pvt, 39th OVI); 62nd OVI, Wm. Elliott (Pvt, 62nd OVI, not from Washington Co.); 63rd OVI, Wm. Mason (multiple possibilities just within Washington Co.); 77th OVI, James Hall (multiple possibilities just within Washington Co.); 92nd OVI, C.(hauncey) E. Judd (Pvt, 92nd OVI); 116th OVI, George Wharff (Pvt, 116th OVI, was in 19 battles with his unit, including Appomattox C.H.); 1st OVC (Ohio Volunteer Cavalry), John (Henry) Hoffman (Pvt, 85th OVI & 1st OVC, Co. L-"Gen. George Thomas Bodyguard").¹⁰ All of the above color bearers were Washington County veterans except Mr. Elliott. The "Veterans Reserve" command was handled by Col. W. B. Mason (see above) with Maj. R.(obert) H.(addow) Fleming (Capt, 77th OVI, Wounded at Shiloh & Captured on 25 Apr 1864 at Marks' Mills, AR; Prisoner at Camp Ford Prison, Tyler, TX until end of the war; his brother James was killed at his side at Shiloh) and I.(saac) B.(enton) Kinkead (Lt. Col, 77th & 148th OVI) as company commanders."¹¹ It is interesting to note that all three of the commanders of the Veteran Battalion (Mason, Fleming and Kinkead) served in the 77th OVI at the Battle of Shiloh under their former commander, Major Benjamin D. Fearing. Col. Mason was then Captain of Co. B in charge of the pickets, Capt. Fleming served as the Regimental Clerk, and Lt. Col. Kinkead was an Orderly Sgt. in Co. K before being promoted to Captain of his company when the former Captain was thought to have been killed."

As a final note, the Marietta Register made a special note of the casualties in that "bloody" battle, some real and some imaginary. "...Real wounds were received by J. E. Linscott, veteran, 53d Ohio, who went through 17 battles untouched, and John Harris, of the old 77th. The first powder burnt on the thigh, the second cut in the hand by the sight of his gun. C. L. Boggs, of Sharon, Noble county, and member of the Caldwell Guards,

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ From my own personal Civil War database, created circa 1994.

fractured the bone of his leg above the ankle, in retreating down the hill as his company was driven back...Stewart Harris of the 43d O.V.I. of West Virginia, and J. E. Linscott of the 53d O.V.I., living at Big Run, were actually wounded by the reckless discharge of shots by the 2d O.N.G. Maj. Harris had a piece aimed full in his face, when he caught the gun by the left hand, holding the right up before it as a protection, when it was discharged, wounding his right hand. Several of the 2d Guard boys thought to do a brave thing by capturing a gun, attempted to take the one in the hands of J. E. Linscott, dragging him several rods, and in the foolish attempt discharged a blank load against Mr. Linscott's right hip, burning his clothing considerably and his person so that he had in fact something for our surgeon to do. The commander (Col. William Bion Mason, 77th OVI) was compelled to use his sword rather freely to quiet several foolish hand to hand encounters, in all of which the old veterans proved themselves true soldiers."¹²

Although both reports demonstrate the wonderful writing styles for Generals Fearing and Dawes, and instill some humorous, tongue in cheek references, the reports of the real injuries were somewhat sobering. I doubt the "old veterans," who had lived through many life and death struggles during their service, appreciated the reckless gun play and nonsense exhibited by the youthful and probably over exuberant, guardsmen. Of one thing I am sure of after reading all of the accounts of the skirmish, all of those aging veterans took pride in demonstrating for family and friends some of the things they had learned in their youth while fighting for their country. Although no photographs of this event are known to exist, using both reports from the Battle of Van Bergen Farm, it is easy for us today to imagine the awe inspiring sight witness by the gathered crowd that day of "a dozen" original battle flags as they were carried across one last battlefield, on one last gallant charge, side by side with their comrades dressed in blue and gray. Now that would have been an amazing sight indeed!

¹² *The Marietta Register*, September 12, 1878, Page 2: Friday. Linscott and Harris (listed with conflicting given names and units within the same report) are not known to be Civil War soldiers from Washington County

Books by Bill Teegarden

J.Howard Wert's Gettysburg by Bruce Mowday and G.Craig Cabu

Caught in the Maelstrom: The Indian Nations in the Civil War by Dr. Clint Crowe

Women American Civil War: North-South Counterpoints by Judith Biesberg and Randall M. Mille

Armies of Deliverance: A New history of the Civil War by Elizabeth Varon

A retired high school history teacher, John Michael Priest has been interested in Civil War history since an early age. He is a graduate of Loyola College in Baltimore and Hood College in Frederick, and has written extensively about the Civil War. His many books include "Stand To It And Give Them Hell: Gettysburg As The Soldiers Experienced It from Cemetery Ridge To Little Round Top, July 2, 1863" (2014); "Antietam: The Soldiers' Battle "(1989); "Before Antietam: The Battle for South Mountain" (1992); "Nowhere to Run: The Wilderness, May 4th & 5th, 1864" (1995); "Victory Without Triumph: The Wilderness, May 6th & 7th, 1864" (1996); and "Into the Fight: Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg" (1998).

Entertainment History of the Civil War in Literature, Film and Song by Chris Mackowski

Abe Lincoln, His Last 24 hours by W. Emerson Reck

Harold Holtzer – Lincoln scholar – 24+ books to his credit

Gustao Tafel, The Cincinnati: Germans in the Civil War by Don Heinrich Tolzmann

Douglas Egerton has published numerous works on the topic, including “Years of Meteors: Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, and the Election that Brought on the Civil War” and “Thunder at the Gates: The Black Civil War Regiments that Redeemed America,” which was awarded the Gilder-Lehrman Lincoln Prize in 2017.

Anaconda’s Tail: the Civil War on the Potomac Frontier by Donald Shomette

Rebel Yell, the Violence, Passion and Redemption of Stonewall Jackson by Sam Gwyne

No Flinching From Fire: the 65th New York Volunteer Infantry in the American Civil War by Chris Barry

In God We Trust: The American Civil War Money, Banking and Religion by William Bierly

The film “Harriet,” released November 1, 2019, is a biopic of former slave and abolitionist Harriet Tubman. Tubman is best known for her role in rescuing slaves with the Underground Railroad, a network of secret routes and safe spaces that led slaves to freedom in the North during the Civil War.

The Fire of Freedom by Dr. David Cecelski

The Three Cornered War by Megan Kate Nelson

Bodies in Blue: Disability in the Civil War North by Sara Handley-Cousins

American Radicals: How Nineteenth – Century Protest Shaped the Nation by Holly Jackson

Slavery’s Reach: Southern Slaveholders and the North Star State by Christopher Lehman

The Growth and Collapse of One American Nation by Donald J. Fraser

The Smallest Tadpole’s Ware in the Land of Mysterious Waters by Diane Swearingen

Civil War quilts by Pamela Weeks and Dan Beld
