McLean Regiment saw first action at Battle of Prairie Grove

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Bloomington cigar maker, John McNulta seen here circa 1863, directed the 94th Illinois during the Battle of Prairie Grove.

This upcoming Friday, December 7, will mark the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Prairie Grove. Although a stalemate, Confederate forces retreated after the clash and thus abandoned northwest Arkansas and Missouri to the Union Army for the rest of the war.

In the summer of 1862, President Abraham Lincoln called for the enlistment of 600,000 more men. In response, local leaders set about organizing an infantry regiment solely comprised of Mclean County residents. The result was the 94th Illinois Volunteer Infantry, known as the McLean County Regiment or “Old McLean,” commanded by 30-year-old Bloomington attorney William Ward Orme. The Board of Supervisors (now the McLean County Board) provided a $50 bounty to each enlisted man.

Orme’s father-in-law 4th Illinois Cavalry Lt. Col. William McCullough was killed two days earlier in a skirmish in Coffeyville, Mississippi. On New Year’s Day 1863, Orme’s brother Joseph of the 94th was accidently killed when a fellow soldier’s rifle accidently discharged during the march from Prairie Grove.
In early December, a Confederate force under the command of Maj. Gen. Thomas C. Hindman marched into the Boston Mountains to the hopes of engaging Brig. Gen. James G. Blunt bluecoats. Anticipating an attack, Hindman called for two divisions under the command of Brig. Gen. Francis J. Herron, whose men were camped some 120 away in Springfield, MO. The 94th was part of this group that completed a 120-miles forced march in three-and-a-half days.

The aggressive Hindman decided to bypass Blunt’s force and engage Herron’s reinforcements about ten miles southwest of Fayetteville, Ark. Hindman’s hope was to destroy Herron’s force, turn back and accomplish the same against Blunt and then embark on an invasion of Missouri.

Orme found himself in command of a 1,600 troops that included not only the 94th, but also regiments of Missouri cavalry and artillery and Iowa infantry. The Union Army of the Frontier had some 9,200 men at its disposal to face about 11,000 southerners from the First Corps, Trans-Mississippi Army.

Hindman’s force established defensive positions along a line of hills just north of the crossroads hamlet of Prairie Grove. As acting brigadier general, Orme rode up and down the line “regardless of the balls that were dropping around him like hail,” all the while smoking his pipe.

Occupying the far left flank of the Union line, the 94th remained in a fixed position for much of the battle. Behind the regiment was a river, and before them an open field and the bluffs. The right flank was the scene of a series of charges and countercharges, with the heaviest casualties suffered by those regiments, such as the 20th Wisconsin and the 10th Missouri Confederate Infantry.

“From two o’clock until dark, the two lines were maintained about as they were when first established,” noted assistant regimental surgeon Archibald E. Stewart in a history of the 94th. “It was simply a pounding match. The enemy, lying in the edge of a piece of brown woods that crowned the brow of the hill, kept up an incessant fire of artillery and musketry.”

“It was the first time they were ever under fire, in fact it was the first time they had ever heard the booming of cannon, and the sharp rattling of musketry,” noted John K. Moore, Co. K wagoner of his fellow 94th infantrymen. Moor’s open letter of December 14 detailing the 94th’s at Prairie Grove appeared in the January 7, 1863 Weekly Pantagraph. He was brother of Pantagraph editor Thomas Moore.

McLean County farmer William H. Horine of Co. K described the battle in a January 8, 1863 letter to his brother Woodson. He called the engagement “a scrape … with the mean lowlife outrageous ridiculous scandalous ignominious heaven-defying hell-deserving gray-backed … yellow-backed greasy-backed rebels.”
He described the sound of Confederate fire over the heads of the 94th as “whiz whiz” and “zig zig zig,” as well as the Union response—“... we stopped fell on our knees cocked our ... Enfield rifles, and such a shower of fire and bullets we poured into the rebel ranks has never been heard or read of since the days of Adam.”

Even the 94th’s regimental chaplain Robert E. Guthrie of Bloomington got into the act. “The Chaplain, forgetting his peaceful calling, could be heard as he reloaded his piece, exhorting his brethren to ‘trust in God and fire low,’” recalled Stewart.

Despite the repeated fusillades, the 94th escaped relatively unscathed, with only 1 killed and 26 wounded. Co. D’s Henry C. Greenman of Old Town Township east of Bloomington was killed instantly when struck in the head by a Confederate Minie ball. David Burns of Co. E and George W. Crary of Co. D would die of wounds sustained in the engagement.

Several weeks later, he returned to the battle. “The first round or two I felt like dodging,” he admitted, “but after firing several times I didn’t think anything more about it. I loaded and fired as deliberately as if I was shooting hogs.”

An estimated 2,700 men were killed, wounded or missing. Blunt had men in reserve to shore up his lines. His counterpart had no such luxury. Hindman had also lost much of his artillery and was running low on ammunition and supplies. Given these exigencies he was forced to withdraw.

The day after the battle, Horine somehow found himself five yards away from Confederate Commander John S. Marmaduke. “If he hadn’t had a flag of truce with him I would have blew hell out of him in no time that’s certain,” he bragged. “I had a notion to do it anyhow. He is a d-d [damned] mean looking cuss. He was as dirty and ragged as an old Irish man that just chucked out of a swill barrel.”

Orme, later promoted to brigadier general, contracted tuberculosis, likely sometime during the siege of Vicksburg. He spent the remainder of the war convalescing back home or desk bound with several high-profile appointments, such as a U.S. Treasury agent in Memphis, Tenn. He died in September 1866 at the age of 34.

The Prairie Grove Battlefield State Park is considered one of the best preserved Civil War sites.

“Our greatest want just now is to hear from home, we get no mail, and we don’t know what is going on in the world,” wrote John Moore. “If the army in the East will push things along as fast as the army of the frontier, the rebellion will soon be crushed, and we will be sent home to see our friends.”

The regiment would see action in Missouri, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas and Alabama participated in the Battle of Prairie Grove (Arkansas) and the sieges of Vicksburg, Miss. And Mobile, Ala.; and when it was all over, had traveled 600-plus
miles by railroad, 1,200 miles on foot, and 6,000 by steamer, mostly up and down the Gulf of Mexico. The regiment participated in nine battles, sieges and smaller engagements, “having never been repulsed or defeated, and having in all cases ‘quitted ourselves like men,’” noted Stewart, in a nod to the First Book of Samuel.