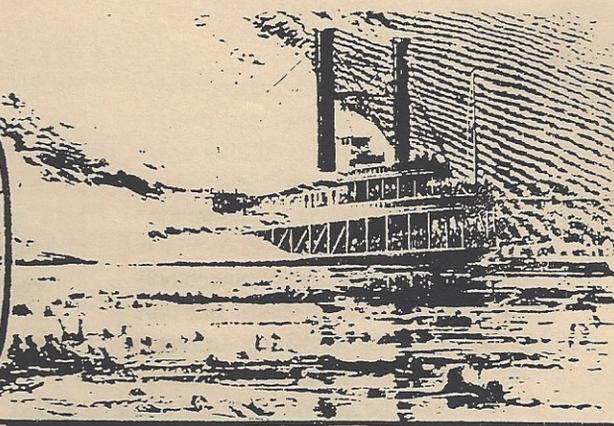


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SULTANA REMEMBERED



Newsletter of the Association of Sultana Descendants and Friends

April 27, 1865

Vol. 5, No. 14, Spring 1997

"...life is uncertain." The story of the 58th Ohio Volunteer Infantry

By Gene Eric Salecker

The 58th Ohio Volunteer Infantry was recruited in the forested hill country of Hocking County, Ohio, about 30 miles southeast of Columbus, in late 1861 and early 1862. Before long the soldiers were moved to Tennessee and helped the Union army capture Fort Donelson, Tennessee. On April 6, the 58th was part of the relief column under General Grant at the Battle of Shiloh. Arriving late, the 58th was involved in only the second day's fighting but suffered their first grim losses - nine men killed and 42 wounded.

Their baptism of fire at Shiloh was summed up by their brigade commander: "The Fifty-Eighth Ohio proved themselves worthy of the confidence reposed in them. They fought with unabated courage during the day, never yielding, but firmly advancing, pressing the enemy before them. They have my highest esteem for their noble conduct in this battle."

After the bloody battle of Shiloh, the 58th were a part of General Grant's Union army that captured Corinth, Mississippi. In June, 1862, the regiment marched to Memphis, Tennessee, to do guard duty and in July moved to Helena, Arkansas. In August the members of the 58th, recognized as sharpshooting lads from the hills, began their career as sharpshooters aboard river gunboats. Issued accurate Sharps rifles, the men boarded a number of gunboats, acting as a Marine guard, and traveled up and down the Mississippi, capturing the Confederate steamboat *Fair Play* and causing other destruction.

In December the regiment went into winter quarters at Helena, Arkansas but the

rest was short lived. On December 22, the 58th joined Gen. William T. Sherman on an advance towards the key rebel city of Vicksburg, Mississippi. On December 29, Sherman's army had reached the northern bluffs on the outskirts of the city and advanced despite destructive fire from the rebels. The 58th and its sister units advanced through a tangle of young cottonwoods which had been cut down and entwined among the stumps followed by a "deep and miry" bayou. At the far end of the muddy bayou was a high bluff, crowned with Confederate rifle pits.

Confederate Gen. John Pemberton stated that the Union line "moved gallantly forward under heavy fire of our artillery." Hit by eight cross-firing cannon and slowed by the mud and fallen trees, the Union line lost all cohesion. Union Gen. George Morgan wrote, "The assaulting forces were jammed together and, with a yell of desper-

"One day every heart is rejoiced...The next, the bitter drip of sorrow is mingled with the joy and makes every drop bitter."

Sgt. Wm. Pontius, 58th Ohio Infantry, upon being told of the explosion of the *Sultana* and the deaths of his comrades.

ate determination, they rushed to the assault and were mowed down by a storm of shells, grape and canister, and minie-balls which swept our front like a hurricane of fire." Charging with the bayonet, the 58th reached the first line of rebel rifle pits but were forced back with heavy losses. Col. Peter Dister, commanding the regiment, was killed and every officer except four were killed or wounded. Thirty-five soldiers were killed and forty-seven percent of the 58th was either killed, wounded or captured at what was soon to be called the battle of Chickasaw Bayou.

Despite their heavy loss at Vicksburg, the 58th accompanied a large force of Union troops on an expedition up the Arkansas River to try and capture Fort Hindman, about 50 miles up river on January 11, 1863. Thirteen gunboats began pounding the rebel fort while about 29,000 Federal soldiers started to advance. Against such heavy odds, the 6,000 rebel defenders quickly surrendered.

One month later, on February 8, the men of the 58th were once again assigned as sharpshooters aboard Gen. Grant's gunboats as he attempted to capture Vicksburg. While acting as a marine unit the 58th was aboard the gunboats during the bombardment of Fort Pemberton (March 13), an expedition up Steele's Bayou (March 16-22) and a deadly run past the rebel guns of Vicksburg (April 15). Once past the rebel city, the gunboats, accompanied by a half dozen transports, attempted a forced landing at Grand Gulf, Mississippi (April 29). For six hours the gunboats went up and down the river, firing over 3,000 shots at the rebel batteries along the bluff. Whenever possible the sharpshooters of the 58th Ohio pitched in. When the smoke

finally cleared, the Confederate soldiers were still there and their gunboats and transports were forced to go further down river and make a landing well below Grand Gulf. During the engagement the 58th Ohio lost seven men killed.

With most of Grant's army landed and moving inland on foot, the 58th Ohio, still assigned as a Marine force, accompanied four gunboats on an expedition up the Wachita River to bombard Fort Beauregard (May 10-12). Returning to the Mississippi River, the gunboats, with the sharpshooters still aboard, continued to support Grant in his siege of Vicksburg. During the next month and a half, the gunboats were involved in the shelling of Yazoo City (May 23), a fire fight at Lake Providence (June 10) and another bombardment of stubborn Grand Gulf (July 16).

With the fall of Vicksburg (July 4) and Port Hudson (July 8) the Mississippi once again flowed unvexed to the sea. With the Mississippi open, the gunboats took on a lesser importance and the 58th Ohio was transferred to provost (guard) duty at Vicksburg. For the rest of the war, from July 1863 until September 1865, the 58th was stationed at Vicksburg. On Christmas Eve, 1864, the original members of the regiment (except veterans) were ordered to Columbus, Ohio and mustered out of the service by reason of expiration of their term of service. With their numbers depleted, the veterans and new recruits were consolidated into a battalion of five companies and kept on provost duty at Vicksburg. On Sunday, April 23, 1865, the commanding officer of the 58th Ohio, Captain William S. Friesner, received an order that would greatly effect a small group of men under his command:

"The commanding general District of Vicksburg will cause to be detailed from his command, one officer, three non-commissioned officers, and eighteen privates, to be sent as a guard, with paroled prisoners to Camp Chase, Ohio...on board the steamer 'Sultana', at 12 o'clock tomorrow."

Captain Friesner, who was behind on some of the regimental reports, was highly aggravated by the order and rode over to the post headquarters to see if he could have the order rescinded. Instead, he was told, "Captain, you will get to Ohio this time."

When Friesner returned to his regiment he found out that "it had been noised about

that we were to go to Columbus, O., and everybody wanted to go." A detail of troops had already been picked and those that were not chosen greeted the captain with "a storm of complaints" for not being picked or "their own righteous claims to be put on the detail." Ignoring the complaints, Friesner readied himself for the trip on the *Sultana*.



CAPT. WILLIAM S. FRIESNER

At seven in the evening of April 24, "the happy detail started for the boat and the disappointed ones [went] to their tents." Arriving at the *Sultana* Friesner was informed that he would not be in charge of the prisoners but instead would have full charge of the government supplies. Friesner wrote, "The instructions surprised me, as I was commander of a regiment and should be with my command [instead of with the guard detail]."

As the captain and his twenty-one men from the 58th stepped onto the *Sultana*, they were surprised to see so many crowded on one boat. Clerk William Gambrell informed Friesner that there were 2,200 people on board but Friesner estimated that there were probably closer to 2,500, all crowded onto a steamboat built to carry only 376 people.

For two days the overcrowded boat traveled up river but Friesner noted that "all was animation, gladness and joyous expectation....for the love that awaits us. Tonight Memphis - in the morning Cairo - tomorrow's sun and we will breathe the air again of a free land in our own beloved home." As the *Sultana* sat at Memphis unloading supplies, Friesner retired to his cabin. At two o'clock in the morning of April 27, 1865, after traveling seven miles up river from Memphis, three of the *Sultana's* four boilers suddenly exploded.

Fast asleep at the time, Friesner heard

the explosion and then the sound of hundreds of men rushing to the safety of the water. Not knowing what had happened, and believing that there was a fight in progress, Friesner called out, "What is the matter out there?" In answer he heard, "I don't know sir, we're all stove in here."

Putting on his captain's coat so that he "might be recognized if orders were necessary," he opened his cabin door and found the center of the steamboat blown to pieces. Thinking of his men first, Friesner rushed to the area where the guards of the 58th had been sleeping but found only a "mass of debris." His men were all gone.

Looking down into the water the captain saw "a great, confused, frantic crowd of men, perhaps 1,000, struggling and drowning." Being a poor swimmer, and fearful of the drowning crowd, Friesner went back to his stateroom to await his fate. But, as he lay on his cot he suddenly "thought of my duty to preserve the life [God] had given me." and determined to "die as I thought a man ought to die."

After taking a stateroom door as a float, he went down to the lower deck and was about to jump overboard, when he noticed a man trapped under a piece of wreckage. For some time he worked to free the man, even asking assistance from an exhausted Captain J. Cass Mason, and finally managed to get the man out. To his amazement it turned out to be one of his own men, Pvt. James Stuller, who quickly went into the water. [Regrettably, Stuller was never seen again.]

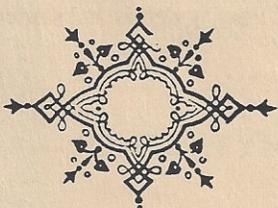
Figuring it was time to get away from the wildly burning boat, Friesner sat down to remove this clothing when another one of his men, Sgt. William H. Elder, climbed out of the water, tore off his clothing and jumped back in [Elder survived the disaster]. Unfortunately, when Elder jumped in, he upset the boards that Friesner was sitting on and toppled him into the water. Clinging tightly to his coat, which contained his orders and papers, but having lost his stateroom door, Friesner gathered in an armful of floating debris and started down river.

He had only gone a short way when the cold of the river took hold and he began to cramp. At the same time the gallant steamboat *Bostona* came into

view and began to rescue many of the victims of the *Sultana*. Friesner tried to make his way towards one of the rescue rowboats but each time, as the boat moved back and forth in the darkness, he was missed. Chilled and cramped, and feeling unable to help himself any longer, the captain cried out, "If you intend to save me, you must do it now. I can't hold out longer." Hearing the cry, the rescue boat came alongside and pulled Friesner aboard. Noticing that Friesner was still clinging to his coat, his rescuer commented, "This is a pretty time to be saving clothes."

Brought back to Memphis, the captain was given two days to rest before being ordered to escort about 300 of the *Sultana* survivors on to Camp Chase. Among the number were six members, including Captain Friesner, of the 58th Ohio, the only members from the regiment to survive the disaster. What had begun as a lark, with the men promised to be the first "to get to Ohio this time," had turned into a terrible disaster. Sixteen soldiers from the 58th Ohio had three officers and 85 enlisted men killed in battle and lost another two officers and 215 men to disease.

Back at Vicksburg, the soldiers of the 58th Ohio, the men that had complained about not being chosen to go on the *Sultana*, heard of the disaster and reacted accordingly. Sgt. William W. Pontious wrote to a friend, "One day every heart is rejoiced. The cup of joy filled ready to run over. The next the bitter drop of sorrow is mingled with the joy and makes every drop bitter." Telling of the *Sultana* and the explosion, Pontious added, There was 1 captain and 2 [sic] non-commissioned officers and 18 privates of our regt. detailed to guard them to [Camp Chase]. From there they was to get a short leave of absence to go home to see their friends....We have learned since that six of our regt. was saved." Commenting about the lost he wrote, "I can sympathize and do deeply feel sorry with [their] afflicted Parents, Brothers, and Sisters. But then life is uncertain. There is no telling when death will claim it." ■



Letters from Subscribers and Descendants

• Virginia Lee English is a descendant of Wesley Lee, 102nd Ohio Infantry, Co. A, and she sent a copy of Lee's *Sultana* account from Chester Berry's 1982 classic, *Loss of the Sultana and Reminiscences of Survivors*. Here is an excerpt of the story in his own words telling how he was the first person to alert Memphis that the *Sultana* had exploded:

"....After I had been in the water a long time, and making poor headway, I became satisfied that the current was running to the other side of the river, but would it do to change my course? I concluded not to, for perhaps the river would soon make a turn and then the current would favor me. I was beginning to feel very cold and put forth every effort to reach the shore, keeping my boards in such a position that the current running against them would draw towards the shore; the voices of those in the river were in the rear and I began to make a little headway and soon the lamps in the city became visible. Then I worked all the harder, but it was necessary for I was getting colder all the time. The thought of home, however, together with the determination of a soldier 'to live as long as he can,' bore me up. When I came in front of the wharf boat, two men came out with a lantern and I called for help. One of them jumped in a skiff and was soon by my side took me in and in a short time I was by a fire in the wharf boat, where I was given some clothing. Then they asked me what the matter was, and when I informed them the *Sultana* had blown up and her crew was in the water, the telegraph operator went to his instrument and in a few minutes a steamer was moving out and picking up men.

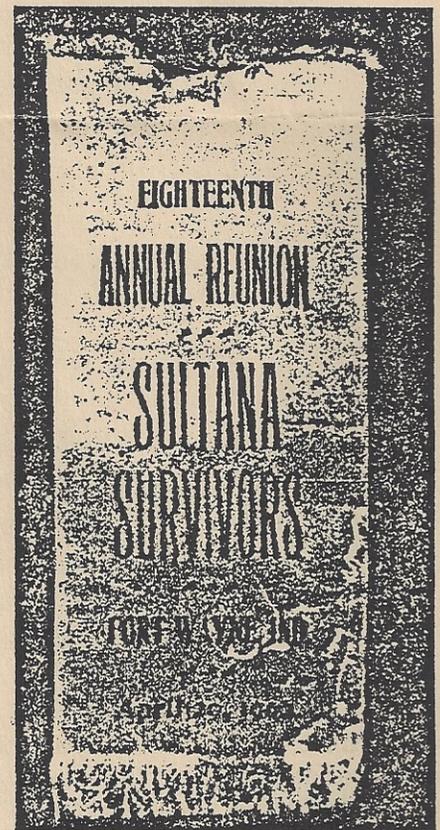
By the time I was well warmed the steamer *General Boynton* came to the wharf boat and put off some men it had just picked up. Then the telegraph operator came to me and asked me if I cared about being mentioned as the person who gave the information of the disaster, as it would do me no good and the river men would get pay for it. I told him it made no difference to me, but I see by some articles in the *National Tribune*, that the steamer *General Boynton*, gave the news, which is not correct."

- Wesley Lee, Winston, MO

DESCENDANTS WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM OTHERS REGARDING THE 58TH OHIO INFANTRY

• David Markland and his uncle, Wayne Markland would like to learn more about an ancestor who was with the 58th Ohio: Cpl. John Hawken. They'd like to find out if anyone has documents regarding this regiment, and are also looking for information on Cpl. Hawken; they're "not sure how many kids he had, or how old he was when he died, or anything else." David would also like to find out if any other descendants are on AOL.

Any help you can give would be appreciated. David's address is 3187 S. Barrington, Apt. F., Los Angeles, CA 90066 and he can be reached by e-mail at CDBeckett@AOL.com. Wayne Markland's address is 2328 Sherwood, Toledo, OH 43614.



Ribbon worn by survivors appeared at a Fort Wayne convention in 1902.

(courtesy of Amy Whitmer)

"We are living very well now...."

Amy Whitmer of Indianapolis, IN sent in quite a packet of information, much of it regarding her ancestor Pvt. Allison West, Co. E. 79th Indiana Infantry. This farmer-turned-soldier is described as 6'3" tall, with blue eyes, light colored hair and fair complexion. He was from Shelbyville, IN and, at age 34 in 1865, had a wife and 8 children- 4 boys and 4 girls. Pvt. West wrote a letter home from Parole Camp (Fisk) at Vicksburg in March of 1865, a month before he boarded the *Sultana* for home:

*Parole Camp Near Vicksburg
March the 21st 1865
Miss*

My dear wife it with pleasur that (illegible) I am still a live and well as (illegible) I was taken prisner near Huntsville Al on the 18 of January and was strip of every thing that I had. I had to march about two hundred miles ove(r) montains and rocks and had to bake the bread that I eat on a board and when we got to the railroad we went to Selma and there we (illegible) some (illegible) and it was covered with charcoal and then we went to cahaba in a stockade and we had to stay with out any fire onley a (illegible) to cook a little mush and meet and when night come we had to lay down on the ground and no cover and the last fore days that we stayed there the water was from 18 inches to fore feet deep we had no place to lay to bed then they taken us out and sent by railroad to Jackson and then we had to ~~make it about for the Sultana~~ this place. we are in exchange camp and we ar living very well now I hav some hope of geting home before long.

From Alison West

Amy Whitmer writes: "We would like this (original) poem to be a gift to the memory of all who lost their lives on the *Sultana's* final voyage":

CAN WE TOUCH THE RAIN

Sometimes I sit and wonder
when the clouds are growing dark,
Their time of living was over
And God would make his mark.
Sprinkles on my forehead,
roll down my face like a stream,
Is this truth or wonder
Am I in a dream?

Mistakes are part of living,
We'll remember who died for fame,
Truth will have it known,
of generations that remain.
They will run for cover,
When the sky grown dark and grey,
Being sure of one thing
Sultana's victims won't fade away.



Thunder in the distance, shiver in the rain,
A cry in the darkness, something about a name
makes me feel closer, makes me feel no pain.
Will it happen all over, will it be the same?
For me.....for you
there will never be no pain
for me, for you, it will always be the same
for me.....for you
Can we touch the rain?

-AMY WHITMER

FROM THE EDITOR

Last newsletter I told you about hearing from the teacher of an eighth grade American History class in Traer, Iowa whose three students were entering a project on the *Sultana* in the National History Day competition. They have received word that their project is going on to the State Finals. They are thrilled, and so am I! I know we all wish them luck. The *Sultana* story is getting around.

Our reunion is fast approaching. We will first meet at the *Sultana* monument in the cemetery next to the Mt. Olive Baptist Church and have a memorial service there. At noon we will go into the church and have something to eat. We are asking everyone to bring some sort finger foods or snack-type food. We will provide beverages. At some point in the afternoon we will "pass the hat" and ask you to put in a few dollars to cover the costs of the beverages and the church cleanup. At 1 PM we will go up to the sanctuary and have a short memorial service, much like the *Sultana* Survivors had when they met in this very church. Afterwards, we will return to the fellowship hall in the basement for our program, introductions of all present, and have a time to share and to visit with each other. There will be tables set up for display of your *Sultana*-related items, so bring them along!

Reunion highlights this year: Knoxville journalist Fred Brown will tell us about and read excerpts from his historical novel based on the *Sultana* disaster. And Carol and John Lundquist of Adena, Minnesota will talk about and show photos of their recent visit to the site of Cahaba Prison in Alabama where so many *Sultana* soldiers spent many miserable days. Gene Salecker and Jerry Potter will be there with updates and copies of their books to sell.

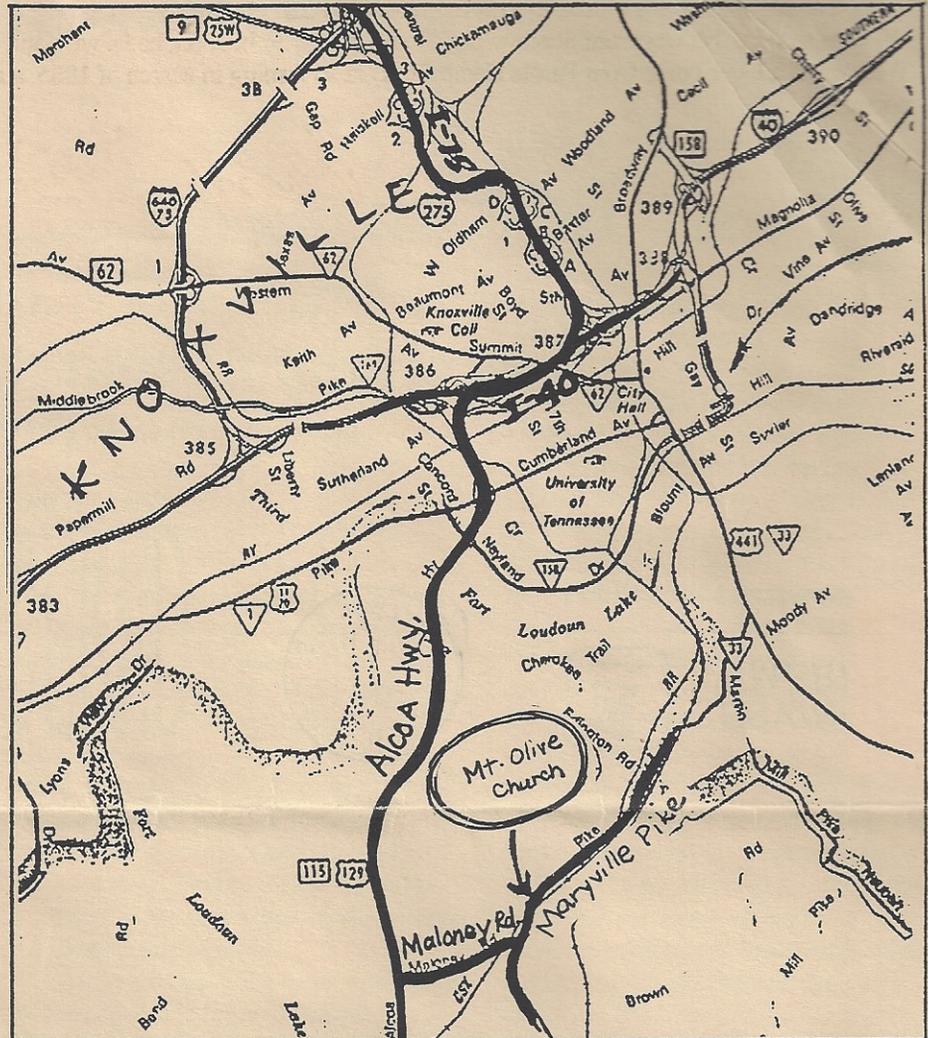
Anyone who would like the name of their Tennessee *Sultana* ancestor chiseled on the Mt. Olive monument to contact Norman Shaw immediately. And he would like to hear from (Union) re-enactors who would like to take part in the 11 AM service at the monument, and anyone who had anything to do with the 1916 dedication ceremony of this same monument. Contact him ASAP at (423)558-0331 (work number).

See you all soon!

-PAM NEWHOUSE, Editor

10th Annual Sultana Reunion

Mt. Olive Baptist Church, Knoxville, Tennessee
Saturday, April 26, 1997 - 11 AM-5 PM



Take I-40 (near downtown Knoxville) to the Alcoa Highway (US 129), the "Airport" exit, 386B); go south on this (crossing over the Tennessee River and passing the University of Tennessee Hospital complex on the left) - about 2 to 3 miles. Turn left on Maloney Rd. (1 1/2 miles after passing the Southgate Shopping Center) and go to Maryville Pike. Straight in front of you, across the Pike, is Mt. Olive Baptist Church. (To go to the cemetery, turn left here onto Maryville Pike and Mt. Olive Cemetery will be about 50 yds. down the Pike on your right. The *Sultana* monument is not hard to find- the cemetery is small. Look for the people gathered there.)

NEW SUBSCRIBERS

- Ken Wrableuski, 622729 Barbara Ave., Cambridge, OH 43725
- Melissa M. Bradley 1509 Mooreland Blvd., Brentwood, TN 37027
- Lesley King, 1801 S. Spruce St., Muncie, IN 47302
- Carolyn E. Schneider, 675 Crosby St., Akron OH
- Virginia Lee English, 2030 216th SE, Issaquah, WA 9802 (desc. of Wesley Lee, Co. A, 102nd OH Inf.)
- Eleanor Greenburg, 3160 Adderly Ct., Silver Spring, MD 20906-1741
- Ken Lee, 2512 Edgewater Dr., Niceville, FL 32578 (desc. of J.R. Collins, Co. F. 3rd Tn Cav.)
- Mrs. Patsy Clark, 3815 Arnold Ave. NW, Canton, OH 44709
- Bob Farmer, 4592 Mardi Gras St., Oceanside, CA 92057-5106 (desc. of James Walker McDaniel, 6th KY Cav., Co. I)