The Civil War Reborn

By Sharon Carlson, Director, University Archives and Regional History Collections

In the 140 years since the American Civil War (1860-65) ended, this uniquely momentous conflict continues to attract more public interest than perhaps any other event in our history. Well over 50,000 books have been written about the War since its conclusion in 1865. A quick search of Books in Print highlights another 140 forthcoming titles. The War had enormous impact on the fledgling country in many ways. Beyond basic questions of secession and the morality of the institution of slavery, communities experienced upheaval as families were separated and the work force depleted. The South also experienced the physical destruction of farms and cities that took decades to rebuild.

For the nearly three million men that served, war could mean death or permanent disability as both were real possibilities. An estimated 620,000 died, with at least two-thirds succumbing to disease, and the total mortality of the war represented a loss of more than two percent of the entire population of the United States at that time. Among those who survived the war, hundreds of thousands suffered from permanent illnesses and disabilities for the rest of their lives. In Mississippi alone, the 1866 State expended one-fifth of its budget on artificial limbs. Of all the "wars" in which the U.S. has fought, this one brought the highest number of deaths.

More than 90,000 men from Michigan served in thirty regiments of infantry and eleven regiments of cavalry. Of these men, 85,000 were volunteers. Because of the importance of this period in our history, and the issue of preservation as well as access to primary accounts of the era, Western Michigan University Libraries submitted a proposal to digitize eight Civil War diaries held in the Regional History Collections for inclusion in the Michigan Electronic Library (MeL). The diaries include a diverse range of military experiences with connections to Michigan.

As artifacts, the eight diaries had serious preservation issues relative to faded handwriting and physical deterioration. The majority of the diaries are pre-printed pocket diaries of various sizes that provide space for a daily entry. Several of the diaries were written in pencil, which has faded over the years. Additional challenges included glued inserts and failing bindings. Given the importance of the manuscripts, digitization was an obvious solution to preservation issues since it will provide easier to read files that are more accessible while preserving the original artifacts.

Researchers ranging from Civil War historians to high school and college students currently use these diaries. Even before digitization was undertaken, a couple of the most fragile diaries had been photocopied for examination. But the quality of the photocopied was poor, and the original diary was still needed to decipher faded handwriting. Even if an enhanced photocopy were possible, simply handling the 140-year-old documents threatened more damage. The development of a Digitization Center and a cross-departmental team in the University Libraries means that a better answer to access and preservation is available: the MeL grant is making the digitization of the diaries happen.

Color scans with complete cataloging and searchable full text solve many of the problems associated with preservation and access. When completed, patrons will be able to view images of the original handwritten diaries as well as transcriptions with notes. It is anticipated that this ease of access through MeL will be used, in particular, by students from the middle school level, as well as public historians, re-enactors, and scholarly researchers worldwide. To our knowledge, there are few diaries, with full searchable text coupled with images of the handwritten page, available on the Internet.

The diaries for this project were selected because they represented a broad range of experiences. We also sought to lend insight into an important national event from the Michigan perspective. The diarists describe experiences ranging from the mundane to the extraordinary. Many men serving in the war had probably never traveled great distances from their homes. They took time to record the novel things they viewed for the first time. On March 27, 1862, Cyrus Thomas noted in his diary, "Passed through some delightful country Large plantations & splendid mansions could be seen." Thomas entered service on August 12, 1861, serving with Company 3 of the 49th Ohio Infantry. He also references a battle at Dog Walk, Kentucky, and has observations about rations and military life.

Other diarists mention battles and key events. George Harrington remarks about the Battle of Gettysburg on July 2 and 3, 1863. Alonzo C. Ide, a native of Battle Creek, created copious lists of the men killed and wounded at the Battle of Campbell’s Station and the Battle of Spotsylvania Courthouse. He listed the men who fell in East Tennessee who are buried in a circular cemetery at Knoxville. After the war, he resided at Yorkville, near Gull Lake.

One of the most engaging diaries in the project was written by Eugene Sly. Sly was born in 1841 at Galen, New York, eventually moving to Illinois. He was attending school in Chicago when the Civil War began. He left school and enlisted on August 7, 1862. He engaged in battles at Stone River and Chickamauga. At the battle of Chickamauga, he volunteered to remain and care for wounded and, as a result, was taken a prisoner of war. Eugene Sly's diary includes observations about his experiences as a prisoner. The diary was written in 1864, during which time he was imprisoned in several Confederate prisons. His entries begin with his experiences in Danville Prison, a holding center, located in Richmond, Virginia, which led to a move to Libby Prison, also in Richmond. He was transferred to the infamous Andersonville (Georgia) prison on May 20 and a few months later, September 15, 1864, to South Carolina, to the Florence Military Stockade, described later as a "death camp." All together he survived seventeen months in prisons at Libby, Andersonville, and Florence before his release. After the war, he settled in Petoskey and later at Benton Harbor.

Specific and vague illusions to sickness appear in several of the diaries. Perhaps Eli Page may have had one of the most physically demanding jobs as part of the Quartermaster Unit supplying the field. Among his entries, he frequently notes work projects, with numerous references to "boxes" and "carts." He also mentions "sore eyes" and "weak eyes" in several entries. Page was originally from Ohio and settled in Allegan County after the war.

Milton Sawyer of Portland, Michigan, wrote about recurring fevers and other health problems. At age 46, he was the oldest diarist and had enlisted in Company G of the Michigan 27th Infantry, serving as the principal musician. There are references to musicians, instruments, and names of musicians. Included is a list of fifers in the 27th regiment. Given his age and his health, this diary also makes observations about the war and to hospital conditions. Sawyer often writes about his wife and his longing to be back home. Not surprisingly, he was eventually discharged for disability at Oak Ridge, Mississippi, on the
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July 4, 1863.

The diaries also contain information about the recreational activities of the men. George Harrington noted on December 24, 1863, “Officers planning a dance.” Other diarists mention fishing and some included original verse or inserted newsprint containing songs and verse into their diaries.

The actual digitization project has required a team approach bringing together a variety of skills and expertise. Bettina Meyer, Assistant Dean for Resources, is administering the grant and personnel. Dr. Sharon Carlson is working with student transcribers and content. Paul Howell is overseeing all technological aspects. Lou Ann Morgan is coordinating scanning and student training. Sheila Bair has prepared catalog records and metadata at the collection and item level. Libby Catt has been involved in scanning. Several undergraduate interns and students have been involved in the transcription and proofreading phase. Dr. Ralph Gordon, WMU Department of History and Michigan State University Kalamazoo Center for Medical Studies, has examined the diaries for content.

The digitized and enhanced versions of these diaries will become part of the Michigan Electronic Library (MeL). The goal of the Michigan Electronic Library’s digitization initiative was best stated by Dr. William Anderson, Director of the Michigan Department of History, Arts and Libraries [http://www.michigan.gov/hal/0,1607,7-107-160--121750--00.html]:

“Learning about and understanding our past is essential to achieving a well-rounded education. Today’s grants are not only about preserving some very unique pieces of our collective history, but also about making sure that the students of tomorrow won’t be deprived of these resources.”

American Library Association’s Booklist magazine indicates that well over 50,000 books have been written about the conflict. See volume 97, page 1006, (2000-2001)


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