

This Henry Tells a Story

Henry A. Truslow

When Frank D. Orcutt (Figure 1) enlisted at the time of the first call for volunteers in April 1861, he went into camp at Camp Yates with Company K of the 7th Illinois infantry confident that his three-month enlistment would be his contribution toward maintaining the Union. Instead, at the end of the three months of service, he reenlisted for three years of service and joined Company A of the 7th Illinois. It was an exciting three years as he took part in the capture of both Fort Henry and Fort Davidson during the Tennessee River campaign and participated in the battles of Shiloh, Corinth, and Allatoona Pass. His regiment served under Gen. G. M. Dodge of the 16th Corps (Figures 2 and 3), then under Gen. A. Thomas Davies (Figures 4 and 5). The 7th Illinois was put into the 15th Corps for the closing months of the war and went with Sherman through Georgia and the Carolinas, up to Washington, D.C., where it participated in the Grand Review of Sherman's Army.

Orcutt survived all of the above, and his letters, pictures, journal, and Henry rifle survived with him. Fortunately for us, Orcutt's family kept most of his belongings together and they remain so today.

How many times have we wondered aloud, "If only this gun could talk!" This Henry rifle (Figure 6), serial number 4140, does in fact speak to us through the man who purchased the repeating rifle with his meager army pay. (We will say more about that later.)

Daniel L. Ambrose states in his detailed "History of the Seventh Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry" that "the regiment is now armed with the Henry repeating rifle (sixteen shooter), which were obtained by the men at their own expense. These examples of self-sacrifice are worthy of loyal commendation." This is noted with the entries for 8 September 1864. The Henrys had been eagerly awaited by the men for some time. In a letter to his mother dated 6 March 1864 from Pulaski, Tennessee, Orcutt states, "The regiment has not got the repeating rifle, and if we do without them now, tis uncertain when we shall get them." In a letter by Robert L. Mountjoy of Company E written from Rome, Georgia, on 29 July 1864, Mountjoy states:

Captain Smith got safely through with our 16 shooters day before yesterday (July 27th). They are the nicest guns I have ever seen and the handiest to load. It can be loaded and fired in a second. All we have to do is jerk a lever forward and back and



it is loaded and cocked. There is not much rigging about them and I don't think they will get out of fix easy. They will shoot to kill half a mile. Tell Pap if he can get 12 dollars for my rifle to sell it.

It appears that the Henry made Mr. Mountjoy a believer. The Henry rifles mentioned in Mountjoy's letter were procured by Capt. John Smith in Chicago on approximately 6 July 1864, as evidenced by a telegram sent from Chicago by Capt. Smith to Lt. Col. R. M. Sawyer:

By special orders no. 81 dated headquarters Military Division Mississippi June 16, 1864 I received a leave of absence to proceed north to purchase the Henry rifle for my regiment. I am here with the rifles. Want you to issue an order on Capt. Bailhoche (quartermaster) Chicago for the transportation of the rifles from here to Kingston, GA.

We know from Mountjoy's letter that the Henry rifles arrived in Georgia on 27 July 1864. Other Henry rifles had been obtained earlier, as is evidenced by a letter from Trueman S. Powell dated 24 June 1864 at Big Shanty, Georgia:

The rifles which you called "minie rifles" (sixteen shooters) are the Henry's repeating rifles and are a breech loader, and a more efficient weapon, as a man can load and fire 16 loads in the same length of time it would take to load and fire one shot with a muzzle loader. They have a metallic cartridge and do not need caps. A part of the regiment are armed with these guns and all of the boys will be if they can be obtained. We have to pay for our own guns and they cost \$41 each. The rest of the regiment have Whitney or Windsor rifles and the Springfield rifle. These latter are good guns but half so good as the Henry rifle.



Figure 1. Frank D. Orcutt—Company A, 7th Illinois Infantry.



Figure 2. General G. M. Dodge.



Figure 3. General G. M. Dodge and staff.



Figure 4. General A. Thomas Davies.



Figure 5. General A. Thomas Davies and staff.



Figure 6. Henry rifle number 4140.

Figure 7. Henry rifle number 4140 identified to "F. D. Orcutt, Co. A, 7th Ill."

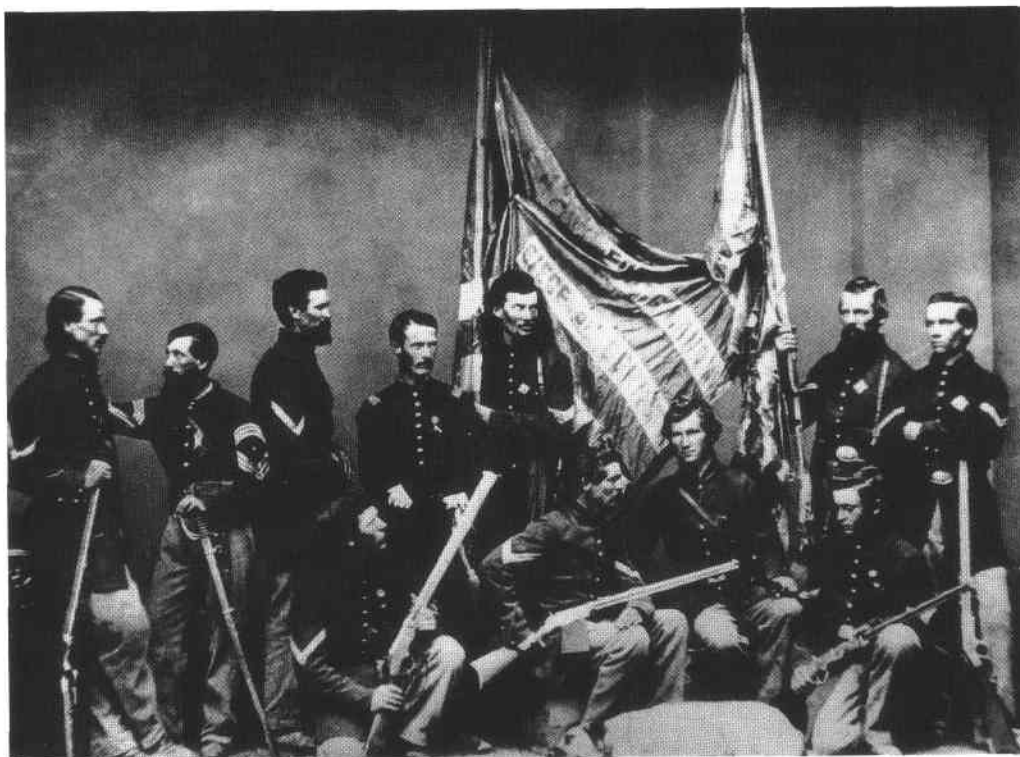


Figure 8. 7th Illinois color guard. Orcutt is seated—facing right—with his Henry.

Another measure of how highly the Henrys were rated by the men was the fact that they purchased them themselves at a cost equal to slightly more than three months' pay.

Frank D. Orcutt purchased his Henry in July or August of 1864. Henry number 4140's story is told by Orcutt in a handwritten account of his service. It goes as follows:

The entire division was massed at Rome under command of General John McCorne for the purpose of protecting the flank and rear of Sherman's army who were then making their way to Atlanta. When Hood got in the rear and was having things his own way on the railroad we were put aboard a freight train for Allatoona. We moved about all night from place to place momentarily expecting an attack. Early in the forenoon of the next day a demand came in for a surrender followed immediately by an impetuous and headlong attack which overwhelmed Company I who were out as skirmishers, killed Capt. Jack Sullivan and captured all who were not killed. The assault partially succeeded. The 7th Regiment and the 39th Force were partly cut off from the fort but those who reached it poured in the severest fire upon the assailing forces that had ever been seen up to that time, with such splendid result that the attacking forces melted away out of sight as though the earth had opened up and swallowed them. The cook of Company A who had coffee made for us in a ravine near us was taken prisoner, but in the confusion and haste of leaving, the Rebels neglected to take him along. He says General French with an entire Division were the assailants. That he saw the General make frantic endeavors to induce his men to storm us out. He saw them make several attempts to rout us each time resulting in a sudden collapse of their line when they would come tumbling back to the starting place to receive the scolding of General French who upbraided them for their failure to dislodge us from the ditch outside the fort. Have occurred the opportunity of an ocular demonstration of the effectiveness of the writer's firing, after fully 400 cartridges had been used without any perceptible result, besides burning his hands and exhausting and depressing him mentally and physically. It was at the close of the battle. The writer had climbed over the top of the fort and was looking over the top of a six pounder cannon where a fellow in gray bending low came up from a ravine and entered the cabin of an artillerist. Soon smoke issued from a knothole on the side toward us. Leveling my sixteen shooter across the wheel of the open carriage I

awaited a second discharge from the hole. As rapidly as his gun could be loaded, for it was an Enfield Rifle (muzzle loading), he proceeded with his second shot. Instantly my rifle cracked for my aim had been fixed upon the hole and no more smoke issued from that place. Almost immediately from behind a tree close to the cabin a glimpse of a hat was had, then it disappeared only to reappear in a moment. My gun was already in position having a good rest over the open carriage and at the second appearance of the head was discharged. I was positive that from my high position none other had observed the hat, and not another shot was fired from the fort that day afterward. Our cook came in and reported the enemy as retreating, and upon going to the spot from curiosity, a body was seen lying in the shanty, and one at the foot of the tree. Both killed by a bullet in the head. There are no grounds for believing that any other of the many shots fired by the writer took effect. Therefore his service to the US government is no longer to be considered non-effectual. With a range inside of 60 yards and no distracting movements to interfere it will readily be seen and recognized as a very skillful performance, yet large numbers of men go into battle and do valiant service without ever knowing if they ever succeeded in producing even a scratch upon their opponents.

This action was at Allatoona Pass, Georgia, on 5 October 1864. Henry rifle number 4140 spoke that day and speaks to us today through the words of its proud owner, Frank D. Orcutt (Figure 7).

Allatoona Pass was an extremely important railroad depot and played an important role in the supply of Sherman's forces. It was fortified by two very strong positions on the high ground above the depot. One was the Star Fort and the other the Eastern Redoubt, both fronted by trenches and rifle pits. The Federal troops were outnumbered by 3 to 2, with about 5,500 soldiers total engaged by both sides. There were over 1,600 killed or wounded at Allatoona Pass, making it the second-highest ratio of casualties to participants of all battles fought in the war (second only to Gettysburg). Although they had superior numbers, the Confederates were held off. The strong fortification held by the Union troops had much to do with this result, but it was also the tremendous advantage of increased firepower provided by the Henry rifles that made a difference. The age of rapid fire shoulder arms had arrived (Figure 8).