The Battle of Womelsdorf

The Pennsylvania militia companies reached their high point in the social life of our rural communities in the middle decades of the last century. At a period when there were few stage plays and little distraction of any sort aside from taverns, the militia companies with their parades, their encampments, periodic reviews and balls served to break the humdrum monotonity of a workaday life.

They have a picturesque appeal, these paladins of a day long gone, as they look out to us from the colorful pages of Huddy and Duval’s Military Magazine. In particular, the uniforms which were in vogue in the upland counties of Pennsylvania just before the Mexican War (costumes very similar to the garb of the West Point cadets of our time) have a grace and charm lacking in the more drab uniforms of a later era. They stare out appealingly from the windows of print shops. For a few dollars one can purchase the effigies of the Washington Guard of Reading or the Codorus Troop of York in all their martial frippery—high shako, crimson sash, well-furbished bandolier.

Perhaps in no county of Pennsylvania were the militia companies more active and popular than in Berks, which boasted a notable array of battalions: the Washington Greys of Reading, the Oley Troop, the Hamburg Fencibles. The maidens who fluttered their handkerchiefs in the Penn Square of Reading at the passing of the martial array and who danced afterward at the military hops were convinced that each of their heroes could whip his weight in wildcats. Just whom the commandos were to fight, however, was what puzzled these admirers. The Pennsylvania militiamen were ready to take on France or Albion, Mexico or John C. Calhoun, but it seemed that no enemy dared present itself. There were plenty of ardent cavaliers on prancing steeds, but whither should they ride? From the day when Pakenham’s grenadiers reeled back from the cotton-bale ramparts below New Orleans until Zachary Taylor crossed the Rio Grande, there had been a period of peace most distasteful to rural warriors.
For what, after all, is the use of a rifle and a fine uniform when there is no occasion to use them except in tedious maneuver?

The Mexican adventure, to be sure, furnished an interlude grim enough for anyone. Pennsylvania battalions charged against Santa Anna’s entrenchment at Monterrey, helped to invest Veracruz, stormed the ramparts of Chapultepec—crowded hours of glorious life. But then, after the triumphant entry into Mexico City there ensued again an irksome interlude of peace. How this halcyon interval was rudely broken for the Berks militia is set forth in this account of the campaign of Womelsdorf.

The ancient and dignified village of Womelsdorf still straggles along the highway leading from Reading to Harrisburg, very much as it did when the stagecoaches stopped before Stouch’s Hotel. The hamlet had its hour of glory on that autumn day in 1793 when President Washington came out upon the piazza of this same hostelry to greet the Revolutionary veterans and stand the boys to a drink, a story well told by fifer Sammy Dewees. But no memorial plaque recalls the Presidential visit and largesse, just as no shaft commemorates the forgotten battle of Womelsdorf fought in the early summer of 1855.

The East Penn Railroad was being constructed through Berks County in the 1850’s with cheap Irish labor fresh from the immigrant ships. It was a time of commercial depression, when shovel men could be employed at a rate of fifty cents a day with an allowance for food and grog. This was no great wage, but to the half-starved cottier, newly arrived from Connemara and accustomed to eke out a precarious existence on eight pence a day, it seemed adequate. In came the rollicking Irishman of caricature, with his high hat and knee breeches, pick in his hand and bundle on his shoulder, who has passed from memory as completely as the Great Famine which drove him to our shores.

Wid my bundle on my shoulder
Faith there’s no man could be boulder
I’m lavin dear old Ireland without warnin’
For I lately took the notion
For to cross the briney ocean
And I shtart for Philadelphy in the morning.

1 John Smith Hanna, A History of the Life and Services of Captain Samuel Dewees . . . (Baltimore, Md., 1844), 288-291.
In the German counties these "Wild Irish" of alien stock and religion were not popular. The Berks farmer might grudgingly admit that without the Irish workman his roads and bridges could hardly be built, but he could not suppress a vague hereditary animosity. As the Irish were quick to sense this hostility and were always ready for a ruction, many quarrels ensued between the two groups. In all the Irish labor camps there were likely to be brawls with the neighboring farmers, particularly during the inevitable jollification after payday.

The section of the new railway line just south of Womelsdorf was let to Tarrant and Company, with Osborne Brothers as subcontractors. The Tarrants had a good name with the Irish laborers. Their barracks were comfortable, their food good; they paid the fair rate of twenty dollars a month for labor. At Womelsdorf, however, the contractors made a fatal mistake. They raised the price of the whiskey in their commissary (good old Monongahela) from twenty-five cents to thirty-five cents a quart. The announcement of the Stamp Act a century before could not have engendered more of a commotion. The infuriated Paddies sprang to arms, or rather to shillelaghs. They organized an impromptu union, stopped all work, demanded the old price for whiskey, and staggered their employees with an ultimatum of one dollar a day minimum pay.

In a matter of hours Womelsdorf was taken over by a host of Celts armed with paving stones and clubs. Fists flew and heads were broken. Over the western horizon, near Newmanstown, came the glow of a burning mule barn belonging to the contractors (the animals had first been removed). The Womelsdorf constable was ineffective, so the distracted burgess sent a call for help to High Sheriff John Manderbach at Reading.

The ponderous sheriff (he weighed three hundred pounds by the grain scale at Keim's store) listened in some perplexity to the tale of the agitated messenger. He was not without a martial background since he had marched to the Rio Grande with the Washington Greys of Reading—or rather had lolled happily in the sunshine on the deck of the flatboat which bore that heroic detachment down the Mississippi. However, the sheriff's girth had so increased since the Mexican adventure that he felt unable to take the field in person. In his quandary he decided, before taking any drastic course, to appeal first to Father Kunzer of St. Peter's Church on South Fifth Street. The Father, in his turn, was doubtful as to his efficacy in the crisis.
The strikers were of his flock; that is to say, most of them walked all the way from Wernersville to stand in the back of his church at Sunday Mass. They were generous, too, according to their means, and weighed down his collection plates with the broad copper pennies then in circulation. However, he was German, as was most of the congregation. In the confessional he had difficulty in understanding the brogue of the Irish immigrants. Altogether, he was not inclined to accept the role either of mediator or martyr. Sheriff Manderbach sighed again and crossed over the broad, muddy Penn Square to the office of Captain Jim McKnight of the Ringgold Artillery. The die was cast; sterner measures must prevail.²

We now turn to contemporary accounts of the crisis. In the course of history most great campaigns have inspired illustrious commentators, from Homer thrilling us with his account of the sable smoke eddying over the beleaguered towers of Ilium down to Napier recording the Peninsular War. So, too, this expedition to Womelsdorf is reported by competent scribes in prose and verse. Editor Jakie Knabb of the Berks and Schuylkill Journal and editor John Ritter of the Readinger Adler collated the bulletins from the seat of war and interpreted them according to their own inclinations and personal feuds. Knabb, for instance, had been a political opponent of militia General Daniel Hunter, who was unaccountably absent from his post in the hour of greatest need, and seized the occasion to comment slyly upon the general's absence: “It is unfortunate for Brigadier Hunter that he is not in town to take command of the army to be sent against the refractory Irish. When our soldiers return with their brows bound with victorious wreaths the General will never forgive himself.”³ Editor John Ritter, seriously impressed with the reports of the agitated messengers, painted a doleful picture in the columns of the Readinger Adler: “Even before noon, it was learned that the Irish had burned houses and barns and had killed a number of people.”⁴

While the bells in the steeple of Trinity Church clanged in wild alarm, and while the militia battalions were assembling in the Square, appeals for help poured in from the beleaguered village of Womels-

² Archives of St. Peter's Church, Reading, Pa.
³ Berks and Schuylkill Journal, May 5, 1855.
In the crowd at Reading stood lawyer John S. Richards, a noted wag with an aptitude for poetry. His lines were shortly to appear in the Journal:

> From the town with hasty dash
> Had come a rider with mustache.
> The message which soon raised a fuss—
> The Irish all are in a muss.
> Six hundred armed with pick and spade
> Have sworn the railroad shan’t be made.
> We want the posse comitatus
> Or Womelsdorf’ll be laid in ashes.
> Don’t let these bloody Papists smash us.

Jakie Knabb in more stately periods described the mobilization:

> Very soon the drums beat, the bugles sounded, the companies mustered in the square and at two o’clock the force took up the line of battle march in battle array. First in order was a detachment of the Ringgold Artillery, Captain McKnight with two field pieces (one six pounder, one eight pounder) and two caissons with ammunition drawn by four horses and presenting an appearance sufficiently inspiring to scatter a regiment of Irish without firing a shot.

> Detachments of the Reading Artillery, Captain Clous, and Reading Rifles, Captain Boas followed. The entire force of 200 to 300 men under the direction of Major W. H. Keim. We apprehend the Milesians will surrender at discretion.

> The attacking force had one signal advantage—“Bully” Lyons marched in their ranks. This same constable, William Y. Lyons, who was now flesching his maiden sword, was destined to be a terror to evildoers down through the decades to a “time within the memory of men still living.” A cheer went up as he took his place behind Captain Jim McKnight. His presence was to count as much in the impending campaign as that of Hector in the Trojan forces or Marshal Murat for the army of Italy. The citizenry took comfort in the thought that victory must perch upon the banners of any host in which “Bully” Lyons was enrolled.

> Meanwhile, the entrenched sons of Brian Boru at Womelsdorf watched and waited. They had elected as their captain a certain

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5 Berks and Schuylkill Journal, May 8, 1855.
6 Ibid.
Jamie Stewart, a broth of a boy from the Curragh of Kildare. Jamie must have been a man of some education, for afterward in his weeks of imprisonment at Reading he occupied himself in reading a dog-eared copy of the *Lives of the Saints*. Also, he anticipated the “Ballad of Reading Gaol” by some doggerel lines which were chanted as late as the beginning of the present century in Tom Hannanhoie’s saloon on Cotton Street. Stewart could boast a degree of military experience, for he had enlisted in the British army for the Crimean campaign. However, not liking the idea of going out to fight the Russians, he had climbed over the wall of the barracks of the garrison town of Fermoy in the south of Ireland and “sloped off” to America.

The defending force had the advantage of holding the heights of Womelsdorf which in the impending battle were to have an importance similar to that of the Château of Hougoumont at Waterloo or Little Round Top at Gettysburg. The Irish had food and plenty of whiskey (gleefully looted from the contractor’s stores), but they were sadly lacking in weapons. Other than their pyramids of paving stones and their shillelaghs, they had only two old horse pistols, “one of which did not always make contact.”

Picture now the militia hosts advancing up the turnpike with banners waving and muskets primed.

\[
\text{T’were worth ten years of peaceful life} \\
\text{One glance at their array.}
\]

They paused only in their avenging march to take needed refreshment in the various taverns, Krick’s and Livingood’s in Sinking Springs and Binckley’s at Wernersville. To continue with Mr. Richards’ inspired recital,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Fourteen miles, fourteen miles,} \\
\text{Fourteen miles onward.} \\
\text{All on the turnpike road} \\
\text{Marched the One Hundred.} \\
\text{Cannon in front of them.} \\
\text{Stragglers in rear of them.} \\
\text{Krick’s surrendered with a look.} \\
\text{Fort Livingood next they took.} \\
\text{Fort Binckley’s bar-room shook.} \\
\text{Then into Womelsdorf.}
\end{align*}
\]
As to the battle itself, contemporary accounts are conflicting and rather vague. All agree that the assailing force rushed into the fray with unparalleled gallantry and that the six-pounder cannon was fired twice, both times in the air. One thing is certain—the signal victory of the invaders and the unconditional surrender of the Milesian army. Balaklava in the Crimea had been fought only a few months before, and Mr. Tennyson's stirring lines were then much quoted. If there is a touch of plagiarism in Mr. Richards' ode, he must be pardoned in the enthusiasm of the moment.

Now see the Irish men
Safely locked in the pen,
Shillelaghs all grounded then.
Thirty-six they numbered.

The avengers, flushed with victory, surged over recaptured Womelsdorf and advanced to take a rear post of the Celtic force farther up the turnpike toward Lebanon.

Meanwhile the Sheriff then
(Bully Lyons counted ten)
Onward marched up the glen.

That night in all the taverns of Womelsdorf there was rejoicing and libation. It was proposed to chant a Te Deum in the Reformed Church, but no one was sure about the ritual. In the midst of the revelry, some of the militia guard (they were only human) joined in the frolic and two of the prisoners escaped.

But when the morning broke
And the night guard awoke
Two of the Pats had sloped.

The convoy of the dejected Irishmen to Reading jail and their subsequent trial are a part of the judicial records of Berks County. The courtroom was crowded to the doors. Judge J. Pringle Jones and his two lay associate judges frowned down upon the accused until the lay judges dozed off. The Irish cowered behind their counsel, young

7 Records of Court of Quarter Sessions of Berks County, September term, 1855.
Jake McKenty, later congressman from Berks. The impassioned arraignment was delivered by District Attorney Jeremiah Hagenman, destined to be the presiding judge over this same tribunal. There was much pother with heated debate. And then the culprits were sent back to the railway line where their labor was badly needed, a disappointing anticlimax for a Homeric narrative.

There remained only the proper reward for the militia heroes who responded so nobly to the call of duty. There was talk of pensions and land grants, but, unfortunately, the claims arising from the late Mexican conflict were as yet unsettled; no time to talk of reparations in the Irish war. John S. Richards summed up the argument in the columns of the *Journal* and there we leave it.

Great was the charge they made
Now charge—the county
Well-earned the Sheriff’s aid
Pensions and Land Bounty.

*Reading*  

J. Bennett Nolan