

THE WAY IT WAS

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On Monday evening, April 17th, the Historical Society hosted a program presented by Al and Dave Eicher of Program Source on “Michigan And The Civil War”. Although there were no battles fought in Michigan our state played a vital role by our Michigan soldiers. A good audience came to see and hear the presentation including several members from our own VFW organization. A question and answer session followed and several war relics including two muskets were displayed by collectors.

A Faithful Warrior

Lafayette Alonzo DeWitt was born in 1838 in Steuben County, New York. He was the first of five brothers born to Calvin and Mary DeWitt. The other boys had the more common names of John, William, Perry and Aaron. Dewitt is a Dutch name, but no family ancestry could be traced. It is assumed that Lafayette was named after Lafayette, the French General, Marquis de Lafayette, who fought with George Washington in the Revolutionary War. The name, Lafayette, means faith or faithful. People more commonly knew Lafayette Dewitt by his shortened middle name, Al.

The DeWitts were farmers, but after his traditional schooling Al trained to be a carpenter. At the age of 22 he enlisted in the Steuben Rangers which were a part of Company B of the 86th New York Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War. Steuben was the name of another foreign general, Friedrich Wilhelm Von Steuben, who trained American soldiers for General George Washington at Valley Forge during the Revolutionary War. At first the Rangers were assigned to protect Washington, D.C., but they soon were

reassigned to serious fighting in Northern Virginia.

The first battle was at Fredericksburg in December of 1962. It was a very bloody battle and the Northern Forces got the brunt of it, losing many more lives than the South. This was followed by a foiled maneuver by the North to cut off the South forces that became infamously known as “The Mud March”.

An unending rain in the cold winter time made moving artillery across a ford in a Northern Ranger river almost impossible.

The Battle of Chancellorsville followed where over 30,000 lives were lost with the North again getting the worst of it. This time Al was seriously wounded with wounds in his left arm and his abdomen. This ended the fighting career for him. He survived with his life, but many of his fellow soldiers did not.

After the war and his recovery he returned back home to New

York and married a lady named Mary Schenck. Mary had two brothers, Warren and Travis, who were moving to Michigan and she and Al decided to go also. They bought land East and North of the present village of Cass City. After farming for a short time Al purchased a share of a planing mill in town operated by the Wickware brothers. It was a good business for the time as farmers were clearing their lands providing a supply of lumber needing planing for all the building going on.



Steam Powered Planing Mill

Al later purchased the rest of the business, but as the business district grew the planing mill powered by a steam engine became an environmental problem with all the noise, belching smoke, and flying

sparks that he either had to shut it down or move it.

He then turned to his carpentry trade by making window sashes and frames as well as door frames and doors.

He had purchased some land on what is now North Leach Street where he built their own home. When a later owner of that home decided to install a new window in a room expecting to find hollow spaces between studded walls he discovered the house was built with solid planks, probably from the planing mill.

In 1875 The Dewitts lost their only child in child birth. And ten years later tragedy struck again when Mary passed away from pneumonia.

Al eventually married again to Miranda Comstock from Pennsylvania. They had one daughter, Lura.

Al tried his hand in the furniture business which is believed to have located where the new Main Event arcade is now. It was a wooden building that was later moved and the present cement block building built in it's place.

In his carpenter trade he was probably asked to build a casket or two which put him into that business. Along with that line he built a fine horse drawn funeral carriage and entered into the funeral director business himself for a while. He eventually sold it.

In addition to earning a living Al was very active in civic affairs. He served as the village president, the treasurer, the justice if the peace, a school board member and on the board of the Methodist Church working on the building of the church and the parsonage. He was also a member of fraternal organizations.

He was very active in the founding and naming of the Cass City Chapter of The GAR - The Grand Army of the Republic, a VFW type organization of veterans of the Civil War. It was named the

Milo Warner Chapter after a Cass City veteran who had been imprisoned and survived in the infamous Jacksonville Prison in Georgia. Many men died of squaller conditions they experienced while imprisoned in that camp.

There was also a Ladies Auxiliary formed and named after Al's first wife Mary Dewitt and chaired by his second wife, Miranda Dewitt.

The GAR was responsible for initiating the Memorial Day March to the Cemetery to honor the men and women who had served in the country's armed forces.

The GAR was also responsible for promoting the upkeep of the cemetery. Until that time the maintenance was minimal and it was difficult to find the gravestones amidst the brush and unnown grass.

This story is chronicled in the Cass City Historical Society's publication "Passing Thoughts" available for purchase at the library.

Today we can be proud of the



Lafayette Alonzo Dewitt



GAR Insignia

excellent maintenance our cemeteries receive.

One day in 1896 when Al was visiting in Joe Wallace's Harness Shop he had a stroke which paralyzed him, and he never recovered. It is not known if it was a result from his war injuries that he contended with through out his adult life. Shortly before his death he was heard to say about his war experience, "If his country needed him he would do it again". He was 58 years old.

During the Civil War our country was fortunate that there weren't any foreign adversaries in our weakened condition from the war.

President Abraham Lincoln said at Gettysburg:

"The world will little note or long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated to the unfinished task remaining before us-that from these honored men that we take increased devotion to the cause which they gave their last full measure of devotion-that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain."

Today in this election year with all the renewed inner fighting between our political parties, and while we now have foreign adversaries looking on, it seems that it would be wiser for each of us to be reminded of Lincoln's words about our still unfinished task.

You probably have an handy



reminder in your pocket or purse.