



Care of the wounded started at Field Hospitals, where amputated limbs piled up "like stove wood." Once they could travel, the wounded were sent to receiving hospitals, such as the Exchange Hotel in Gordonsville and then on to Convalescing Hospitals in Richmond and Lynchburg. Accurate records of admittances at Gordonsville immediately after the Battle of the Wilderness were not kept, presumably because they were overwhelmed.



Orange County Historian, Frank Walker points to the spot where General Robert E. Lee attempted to lead his troops into battle at the Widow Tapp Field. The clearing was one of the few places where artillery proved effective.

Photo by Phil Audibert

friendly fire, he was propped up against a tree, where he continued to issue orders despite "spitting and sputtering blood" from a gaping wound in his throat. Later he was put on a stretcher for an ambulance ride to the rear. Someone put his hat over his face. Passing troops assumed he was dead. Much to their amazement Longstreet, with his left hand, lifted his hat off his own face to prove he still lived.

Union General James Wadsworth was a wealthy man. According to Orange County Historian, Frank Walker, "there were people who said his private wealth exceeded that of the Confederate States of America." Close to retirement, he still led his men into "certain death." Wadsworth was felled by a minie ball to the head. Carried back to a Confederate Field Hospital, he lingered under a tent fly. In his hands was a piece of paper bearing his name. Whenever anyone took the scrap from him, he fidgeted. When they put the paper back in his hands, he settled down. He died peacefully two days later. Officers divided up his personal possessions among themselves. A wounded Federal prisoner cut a lock of his hair and returned it to Wadsworth's widow years later.

Colonel J. Warren Keifer took a minie ball to the forearm, breaking both bones. By the time he made it to the field hospital at Ellwood, he had lost his pants.

He had also made good on a promise to not cut his hair or beard until Richmond

fell. Still gripping his sword in his good hand, his shirt bloody, his mangled arm dangling at his side and his hair gone wild, the pantless Keifer created "a most weird appearance." Another observer at the field hospital said the amputated limbs resembled "piles of stove wood, the blood only excepted."

The Montpelier Ball-

Perhaps the most portentous story of all occurred



The famous American watercolorist, Winslow Homer accompanied the Union Army on several occasions, and painted numerous camp and battle scenes. This was his depiction of the Battle of the Wilderness.

Graphic courtesy of the Friends of the Wilderness Battlefield

some days prior to the battle. Orange County Historian, Frank Walker tells it this way. "Staff officers had been squiring the young ladies of Orange County around all winter, having a delightful time,

and it is getting to be the time of the year that they know... it's going to happen. So they decide that they'll have one last big party, and they arrange for Montpelier. They go around in ambulances and collect the ladies and bring them to Montpelier. Somebody's regimental band plays, and they dance the evening away. (Confederate General) Jubal Early was never one to mince his words. And it must have been at this dance, sitting around with the older ladies, the chaperones, he said, 'Now ladies, if any of you have any

messages that you'd like to deliver to the hereafter, I think you can leave them with any of the young men out here dancing."

By a year later, most of those messages had been delivered.

War Stories



At Ellwood, Union re-enactors demonstrate the preferred prone firing style used by infantry in the Battle of the Wilderness. Stonewall Jackson's amputated arm was once buried in the cove of trees at the top of the hill, following the Battle of Chancellorsville, which occurred almost exactly a year earlier. Ironically, both battles featured friendly-fire incidents that claimed two of Lee's best generals.

Photo by Phil Audibert

War halts to watch two guys duke it out in the middle of an Orange County cornfield

Well, that's not exactly true; the entire war did not halt for this, but the raging battle at Saunder's Field did. This oft-repeated story is documented in diaries on both sides. Apparently, in the back-and-forth over the clearing (Route 20 runs right through it) a lone Confederate and a lone Union soldier took cover in the swale that bisected the battleground. Arguing over who was to be whose prisoner they decided to settle the matter with a fist fight, right out in the middle of the road. Firing on both sides stopped as bemused soldiers observed this spectacle, until the Confederate won and escorted the Federal to his lines, at which point the battle resumed with renewed ferocity.

Cannon games-

Somehow, during the first day, the Federals managed to wheel two cannon out into the middle of Saunder's Field, which they used with some effect on Ewell's earthworks. In fact there is a gruesome tale of a Union staffer being



"The Swale" in Saunder's Field adjacent to Route 20 near the Wilderness Battlefield Shelter.

Photo by Phil Audibert

ordered to march on. When they crossed Mine Run, some threw their playing cards down into the middle of the road. It would be interesting to know which cards lay face up...victory or defeat?

And, approaching battle, another Confederate soldier commented as his compatriots emptied their haversacks to lighten the load, "I have never seen so much yellow corn meal thrown away in my life."

Late generals-

"Like a fine lady at a party, Longstreet was often late as he arrived at the ball," wrote one private. But Longstreet wasn't the only late general. Union General Ambrose Burnside was notoriously late for everything. He was even ordered to start marching before everyone else because the staffers all knew he would be late. On May 6th, Burnside showed up for his assignment eight hours late, having

stopped along the way for a leisurely breakfast. When he was confronted about this by Grant's aide, he invited the staffer to share a champagne lunch with him. The aide shrugged and accepted the invitation to explore "the attractive contents of the hamper."

Whiskey-

In the Civil War, whiskey replaced water in many a canteen. Some Federal officers were accused of being drunk while leading a charge into a swamp. One Union general tipped his head back for a slug of booze, when a real slug beat him to it and killed him.

At another point some Federals, sent to re-capture the cannon in Saunder's Field, were taken prisoner by a pocket of Confederates hiding in the swale. The Federals offered whiskey from their canteens and there they spent the rest of the day "as sociable and comfortable as the situation would permit," wrote one of the captors. When night fell, they drunkenly escorted their prisoners to their own lines under cover of darkness.

In yet another instance, a Confederate officer, who had not eaten in three days, was bathing his "sunstruck" head in a stream, when a Union colonel, with a facial wound approached from the other side. The Confederate offered the Union man a sip from his canteens, giving him a choice, water or whiskey. The union man accepted the whiskey, but couldn't swallow it because the alcohol stung his wound so badly.

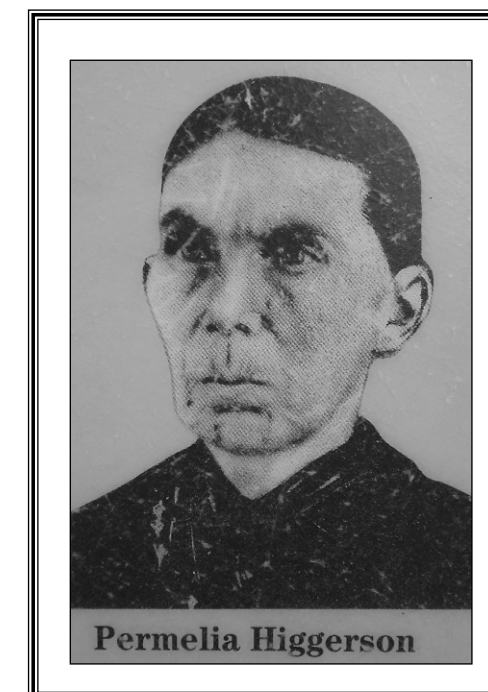
And finally, on Longstreet's ambulance trip back to Orange, Erasmus Taylor brought all the fixings for juleps, which he prepared during a stop in the journey. A doctor in the group became so drunk he fell off his horse to considerable laughter.

Close Calls-

Generals, particularly on the Confederate side had some hair-raising encounters with Union skirmish-

ers. On the first day, Lee, Hill, and Cavalry Commander, Jeb Stuart were conferring at Lee's headquarters in the Widow Tapp Field when Federal skirmishers appeared at the edge of the clearing within pistol range. Surprised, the Federals melted back into the underbrush, missing an opportunity to capture the Confederate leadership and possibly end the Civil War.

On another occasion, Hill was similarly surprised at his own headquarters. A staffer advised, "mount, walk your horses, and don't look back." Later when the Federals were captured, they said they thought the General and his staff were farmers.



Permilia Higgerson

Permilia Higgerson- a backwood Wilderness beauty...not-

Between the Orange Turnpike and Plank roads was another rare clearing, the farm of the gaunt and grim widow Permilia Higgerson. According to Frank Walker, when Union soldiers came through her yard, causing some damage, she stood up to them and told them in no uncertain terms that they would come streaming back with their tails tucked. She was right. Union

diarists tell of her peals of loud cackling taunting laughter as they retreated back through. Frank says she had a change of heart, however, helping Union wounded into her house, where one must have had small pox, for her son contracted the disease later and died from it.

Van Valkenburg's Bluff-

In the same clearing occurred one of the more amusing stories of the Civil War. Lost and confused, an entire Union regiment was stranded there behind enemy lines. Confederate Major James Van Valkenburg came out into the clearing with a handful of Georgia troops and demanded that the Union regiment surrender. He even called back to General John Gordon, who was no where near, to "bring up the brigade." The Federal troops stacked their weapons and surrendered. "He basically bamboozled them," says Frank Walker.

The Firebug-

A Confederate soldier from Orange by the name of Towles Terrill fought in the Battle of the Wilderness with the 13th Virginia, Montpelier Guard. He's also the guy who may have inadvertently started the 1908 fire that burned down much of the town of Orange. What is it about this guy and fire anyway?

Prisoners-

Speaking of taking prisoners, captured Confederates were taken to a compound near Wilderness Tavern, located in what is now the median strip of Route 3, just east of Wilderness Run. At one point, during Gordon's flanking maneuver from the north, they thought they might be liberated, breaking into wild cheering. A Rhode Islander described the Confederate prisoners thus. "The men



Earthworks are plainly visible to this day on the western edge of Saunder's Field in Orange County. Confederate forces extended these defenses through the Wilderness well into Spotsylvania County. They can be seen running down the median strip of the entrance to the gated community of Fawn Lake.

Photo by Phil Audibert

themselves were lank, yellow, long limbed, weather-beaten, rough-haired fellows, but they were terrible (a compliment) soldiers, possessing the hardihood of wild animals. They were tireless on the march as wolves."

In another story, Corps Commander, Major General John Sedgwick narrowly escaped capture when a Union soldier shot and killed a Confederate on a black horse who had the general in his pistol sights, saying "Surrender you S.O.B."

And speaking of that, a fire erupted in the dark the night of May 5th when a Federal accused a Confederate in a nearby trench of having "canine ancestry."

Wounded Generals-

When Longstreet was shot by

"smacked flat" by a severed head that flew through the air as a result of artillery fire.

The Saunder's Field cannon were captured by the Confederates in one of the many back-and-forth exchanges that were described by one southerner as "claw to claw and the devil for us all." The Confederates decorated the cannon with little Confederate flags and bunting. And as if they had nothing better to do, a fight almost erupted between Alabamians and North Carolinians as to who should claim credit for the cannon capture. The capture was finally secured by the Confederates after nightfall.

More swale stories-

Confederates hiding in the swale lay low as retreating Federals "came rushing through and over us without firing a gun or speaking a word." And a Union general who was trapped in Saunder's Field spurred his horse to escape capture. The horse was shot

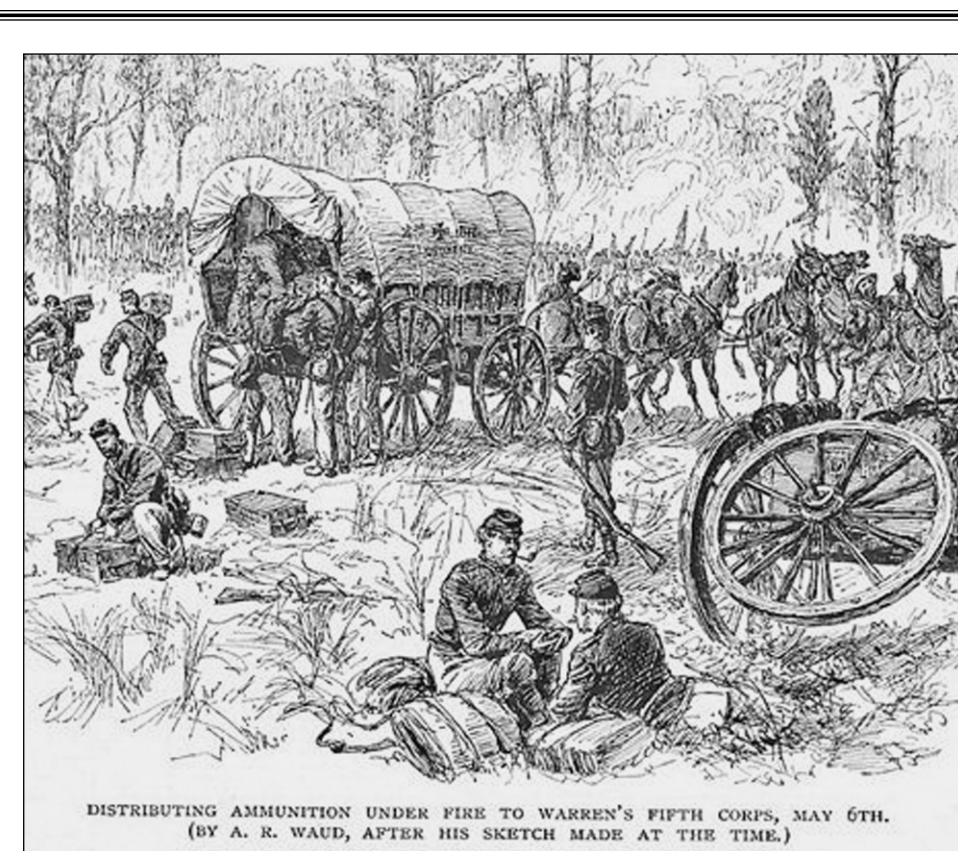
dead in mid air as it jumped the swale, rolling over its rider. Everyone assumed the general was dead, but he walked away from the wreck with scrapes and bruises.

The Rebel Yell-

Stories of the Rebel Yell are legendary, and no one soldier could do it better than Georgian James Ervin Spivey who could scream "like a terrible bull." He was infamous even among the Federals who called him "Gordon's Bull," with a yell "as loud as a steam whistle." Spivey could be heard bellowing deep in the woods of the Wilderness.

Cards and Cornmeal in the road-

Thinking that they would occupy earthworks established during the Mine Run Campaign the previous Thanksgiving, Confederate soldiers were surprised when they were



Infantryman in the Federal Army were issued 50 rounds of ammunition each. Many ran out by nightfall. A Union aide, Robert Monteith attempted to deliver 20,000 rounds to troops in the field in the dark. He almost stumbled into a Confederate encampment.

Graphic courtesy of the Friends of the Wilderness Battlefield.