

Book Review: *Treasured Memories of a Civil War Widow*. Lois J. Lambert. Milford OH: Little Miami Publishing Company, 2011. 224 pages, paper. \$18.50. <http://www.littlemiamibooks.com>. Reviewed by Dan Reigle.

Treasured Memories of a Civil War Widow is a valuable contribution to the Civil War literature of both Ohio and Illinois. It is based on an extensive collection of letters carefully preserved through four generations and enhanced with additional family history research during that period. The central people in the collection are Sergeant McLain **Montgomery** and his wife, Mary Ann, to whom we owe our gratitude for her care in passing this collection down in her own family. To our good fortune, the current generation of **Montgomery** descendants has made this collection and more of their family history research available to us through the research and writing of author Lois Lambert.

Author Lambert is the perfect person to create a valuable narrative from this collection. With her deep knowledge of the 33rd Ohio Volunteer Infantry as the author of *Heroes of the Western Theater: 33rd Ohio Veteran Volunteer Infantry*, her narratives “fill in the blanks” between letters and documents, and provide perspective on the who, what, where, when, and why questions that so many letter collections lack. Further, her intent is to draw inferences and interpretations about what Mary Ann was experiencing during the three long years of McLain’s absence. She is quite clear where the boundaries are between the actual statements made by the participants and her own interpretations, and I find her assertions to be compelling and logical, as well as often tied directly to statements made in the letters.

The **Montgomery** family had two closely connected branches in Scioto County OH and Bureau County IL. The author builds upon the family’s documents with her own research to provide a brief description of the larger family, both the branch that stayed in Ohio and the branch that moved to Illinois. This is very necessary background for understanding the communications among the family members in the Civil War era. In addition to McLain and Mary Ann, this book focuses on six men from the Ohio branch who served in the 33rd, 39th, and 140th OVI, and two from the Illinois branch on active duty in the 64th and 31st Illinois Infantry regiments. Although McLain enlisted in and served from Ohio, he had lived in Illinois for several years and the two men in Illinois units were his brothers.

For readers interested in the military history of the 33rd, Mc (as he signed his letters) **Montgomery**, participated in Perryville, Stones River, Chickamauga, Chattanooga, and the battles of the Atlanta Campaign up to 14 Aug 1864, all described in his letters. There are many items of interest to general readers or to researchers: the constant worry about money; women in military units including a specific example in the 33rd; the extreme cold of January 1864; Mc’s decision not to reenlist as a Veteran Volunteer; the execution of a murderer; the death of a deserter; the first voting in the field by military personnel in October 1863; the ties of the **Montgomery** family in both Ohio and Illinois; Mc’s report that a colleague (by name, known to both Mc and Mary Ann) had contracted venereal disease during a visit to Nashville; and even, in a letter from a friend in Portsmouth written to Mc, a description and newspaper clipping of several major fires in downtown Portsmouth. Mc’s long segment of one letter that he described as a “short chapter of a soldier’s life” is in the best tradition of Bell Irvin Wiley’s *Billy Yank*.

There are several “themes” that, to me, seem to be clearly illustrated in this book:

- The vast amount of time that passed for people such as Mc and Mary Ann during the war. Mc visited home only once during his three years of service (February 1864), and that was only due to recovery from his Chattanooga wound. These letters give the 21st-century reader a glimpse of just how agonizingly long those time periods were.
- The gaps in letters sent and received, and the inevitable second-guessing on whether letters were being sent but lost in the process, or whether they were not being written at all. Mc and Mary Ann seemed to have kept their perspective on this problem better than many, but the tensions are still evident.
- The changes in “mood” at various points during the war. Mc moved from “I think the day is not far distant when we will come” [home], written in March 1862, to “Now I will tell you confidentially that I do not intend doing much duty this summer for this reason. We have no commissioned officer with us that cares any thing about the company and I don’t care whether I stay with the company or not. I intend to put in the remainder of my time as easy as possible” in late March 1864.
- The communication networks used to pass information among the soldiers in units with their families and friends at home. There are references to people from home visiting the units, to soldiers carrying letters and money home to their friends’ families and then returning letters and packages, to soldiers visiting their brothers, cousins, and friends in nearby units and passing information. The news may not have always “traveled fast,” but it always traveled in some manner.

- The wide variety of wartime and post-war experiences of soldiers and their families are illustrated in the nine **Montgomery** men most closely described in this book, and are concisely described in the chapter “War’s Deadly Toll.” One (McLain) died of gangrene after amputation of an arm; one died in 1910 of cancer probably caused by complications of a wound at Corinth; one died of typhoid fever; one, whose identity is not clearly established, died of chronic diarrhea in 1865 after three and a half years of service; one died of consumption seven months after being discharged for disability; one collapsed of heatstroke during a 2 PM dress parade on 14 June 1864 in Alabama after a 14-hour all-night march ending at 11 AM, was paralyzed on one side, was divorced by his wife, and was never able to function effectively for the rest of his life; one lost the use of his hand after gangrene infected a wound suffered at Resaca; one served four full years; and one served in a 100-days unit. (Editor’s note: the heatstroke incident occurred in the 31st Illinois Infantry, and suggests that there may have been some type of group punishment involved. We will welcome any information that readers might have on this incident.)

Even knowing ahead of time that Mary Ann was the widow in the title of the book, it came as a shock to this reader when Mary Ann’s status changed from wife to widow, an indication of how effectively this book engages the reader. This book is of clear value to anyone interested in the Civil War era, whether the researcher interested in details such as how long it took to get from Louisville to Nashville by rail, or the “just starting out” reader interested in “what was it like,” as best we can tell from 150 years later.

