

III — Squirrel Hunters to the Rescue

By David E. Roth

After the defeat of Major General William "Bull" Nelson's 7,000-man force of largely inexperienced troops at Richmond, Kentucky on August 30, 1862, fears of invasion became very real in Ohio. Kirby Smith's victorious army, it was said, intended to continue its victory march northward and bring the harshness of civil war to the very hearthstones of Buckeye Staters. Indeed a detachment under Brigadier General Henry Heth was soon ordered to threaten the Ohio River line.

From the state capital at Columbus - a city less than one-tenth the size of Cincinnati at the time - Governor David Tod issued on September 2nd a proclamation to the people of Ohio:

Our southern border is threatened with invasion. I have therefore to recommend that all the loyal men of your counties at once form themselves into military companies and regiments to beat back the enemy at any and all points he may attempt to invade our State. Gather up all the arms in the country, and furnish yourselves with ammunition for the same. The service will be but a few days. The soil of Ohio must not be invaded by the enemies of our glorious government.

Governor Tod then notified Major General Horatio G. Wright, commanding the Department of the Ohio headquartered at Cincinnati, that he had called upon "all the armed Minutemen of the State" to come to the Union's defense, and had requested that each volunteer "take two days' cooked rations and a blanket."

"They will pour in upon you by thousands," Tod noted proudly, adding that some ten "incomplete regiments" would be coming as well. "They will number about 8,000 men," he wrote, "and will be armed, but of course green, both officers and men."

Wright's reaction to the dispatch is not recorded. He had indeed requested in an urgent late-night message that the governor make such a proclamation, but any jubilation over the prospects of additional manpower was no doubt tempered with a certain apprehension about just what sort of manpower would soon "pour in" upon him.



Ohio Governor David Tod. Originally entering politics as a Democrat he was a compromise advocate during the turbulent political climate of 1860, and was elected governor by the Republicans, succeeding William Dennison, for whom Camp Dennison near Cincinnati was named. Tod served his post from 1862-1864, a term which included two Confederate threats to the state, the first being the Siege of Cincinnati, the second, Morgan's Ohio Raid in 1863. Tod was succeeded by John Brough in 1864.

Meanwhile, with all eyes turned fearfully to the state's southern boundary, it seems initially to have gone unnoticed, or at least regarded with less fearful consideration, when Confederates slipped across the river along the state's eastern boundary with western Virginia. This invasion force was 500 cavalymen under the Harvard lawyer, Brigadier General Albert Gallatin Jenkins. They crossed the Ohio at Buffington Island and galloped south along the river, commandeering an estimated twenty-five horses and allegedly shooting a deaf and dumb man who was unable to heed their warnings.

Jenkins's command remained on Ohio soil only a day, recrossing back to Virginia twenty-five miles downstream at Gallipolis. However, throughout the ensuing weeks of panic in Ohio, the Confederates, growing in number in the Kanawha Valley of Virginia, posed an additional threat to Ohio's security, this one, ironically enough, from the war's eastern theater.

Records of the "Minute-men" who turned out to defend Cincinnati at Governor Tod's call to arms show that the state's eastern and southeastern counties contributed few, if any volunteers. Men in those counties apparently were far more concerned about Confederates in Virginia than any threat from Kentucky. They would be denied the distinction and privileges of being "Squirrel Hunters."

Cincinnati, a city of some 250,000 in 1862, had reason to fear for its safety, from within as well as the Confederate threat from outside its metropolitan perimeter. Unionism was strong, but Southern leanings were not weak. Being a river town of considerable wealth and industry, the "Queen City" had for a long time enjoyed a very lucrative trade with the South. Another philosophical tie with Dixie involved Cincinnati's feelings toward its large Negro population; in fact, Hamilton County had the largest Negro population in the state. Even though the Underground Railroad operated successfully in southern Ohio, free blacks were far less welcome in that part of the state than they might have been in the staunch abolitionist centers in the northern counties.

Within a few days of Governor Tod's proclamation, Cincinnati's population and history were enriched by the influx of an estimated 16,000 colorful "Minute-men" spoiling for a fight with the Rebel invaders. They came at their own expense from the backwoods, the Great Lake region, and farms and small towns all over Ohio, and some even came from neighboring Indiana. Some were family men, others were drifters. Age was of no consequence. They toted every manner of weapon, including old flintlocks, fowling pieces, squirrel guns and, as one contemporary put it, "all the arms usual to the unwarlike citizen-we". Attire was of a homespun nature with buckskin very evident, and not a few coonskin caps.

The man recognized as giving these backwoods volunteers their nickname is Major Malcolm McDowell, an army paymaster. The name stuck and word of it spread fast. Within days of their arrival even Governor Tod was calling them "Squirrel Hunters" in official correspondence with Secretary of War Stanton.

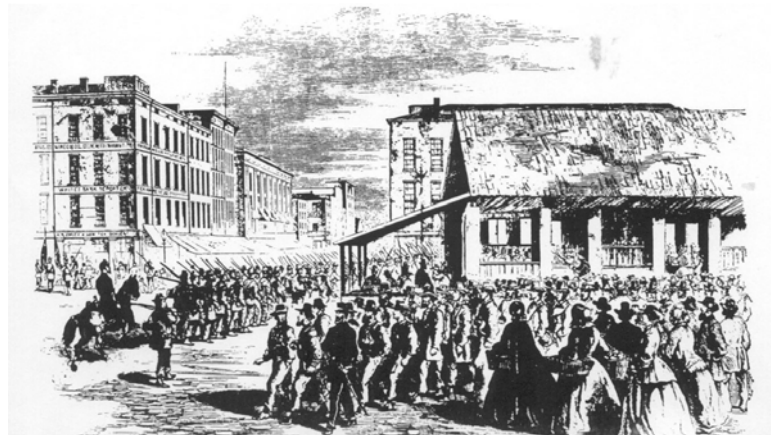
At Cincinnati's 5th Street Market the backwoodsmen were welcomed. The patriotic ladies of the city turned out with baskets of food and a "river of coffee" which, in the words of Major General Lew Wallace, under whose command they fell, "did not cease flowing day nor night." The *Gazette* responded with an editorial:

The Patriotism of the Rural Districts has been fanned to a flame. In the villages merchants closed their stores; in the fields farmers deserted their plows and grasping their rifles, sprang forward to aid in the defense of Cincinnati.

It was reported that in the small town of Eaton alone, 150 volunteers with their own rifles were on their way to Cincinnati within a few hours of the governor's plea. The 200 arrivals from Springfield were heralded as, "Most of these men are sharpshooters-dead shots...."

They evidently were not as adept with pick and shovel. Most accounts tend to imply an unwillingness on their part to "knuckle down" to the task of digging trenches, a task best left for those inclined to strenuous physical labor, such as the Negro Brigade. The out-of-towners had come to fight, not dig. They sang "John Brown's Body" with great enthusiasm as they marched over the Ohio River pontoon bridge on September 6th.

Confederate scouts reported to General Heth that some 70,000 men stood in their way, occupying over ten miles of fortifications spread across the hills of northern Kentucky. The thoroughness of the reconnaissance, as well as the validity of claims that the Cincinnati press was publicizing too much about military operations around the city (for which it received a slap on the wrist from Federal authorities),



This odd assortment of volunteers is the famous Squirrel Hunters, being fed and entertained at the 5th Street Market before departure to the fortifications across the river.

was established when the scouts were asked the identity of the 70,000 defenders. The reply: "They call them 'Squirrel Shooters'; farm boys that never have to shoot at the same squirrel twice."

But the fighting ability of the Squirrel Hunters was never seriously tested. A skirmish at Fort Mitchel (southwest of Covington) on September 10th was the closest any Confederates came to forcing one of the defenders to prove his mettle. By the 17th, Brigadier General A.J. Smith could report that the enemy was in "full retreat," and the focus of concern then turned to Louisville. At 7 P.M. on the 17th General Wright notified Louisville, "Cincinnati is safe, probably."

On the 17th too the Squirrel Hunters earned their second of only two specific references by name in the *Official Records*, this one by a high-ranking officer. (The first was Governor Tod's correspondence with Secretary Stanton.) Because their brush with officialdom was so brief, the mention deserves to be recorded here in its entirety. General Smith at Fort Mitchel wrote to General Lew Wallace in Cincinnati:

Reports from the front state that the enemy are in full retreat I ordered all the cavalry I have in front to follow up and ascertain the road and direction they were taking. Cannot I get rid of the Squirrel Hunters? They are under no control

After the grand victory parade back to Cincinnati on September 12th, when the crisis had passed, the Squirrel Hunters had been most graciously thanked and told to return home. But Smith's report of the 17th evidences that some were still around - in enough number to cause the general concern.

Indeed, the Squirrel Hunters were in a festive mood. Many lingered on, taking advantage of



This document issued to James M. Copen of Highland County, Ohio is but one of several different versions of a Squirrel Hunter discharge; they seem as varied and irregular as the Hunters themselves. Some are in color. Some have our Southern Border in place of Cincinnati in the first line. Some have the squirrel facing the opposite direction, even though the sketch in all other respects is identical, right down to tree limbs and blades of grass. All of this type have Governor Tod's image at top right, General Wallace at top left, and a typical Squirrel Hunter at right and all have a uniformly incorrect state seal compared to the one then in use on government documents. Out of the nine Squirrel Hunter discharges examined at the Cincinnati Historical Society, four different versions were found. The discharge authorized by the Ohio General Assembly on March 4, 1863 is altogether different from any of the foregoing. It has the proper seal, uniformity of design — as far as could be determined, is headed The State of Ohio/Executive Department, is signed by only Governor Tod, quotes the resolution authorizing the discharge document, and is very formal in its appearance. The C.H.S. has on file both the sketch version and official version for Squirrel Hunter James M. Copen, so it seems likely that most of the Hunters — at least those who could be tracked down — were dual-discharged.

the government's meal ticket and the fine fare doled out by the ladies of the area. No official date of final disbandment is known. It is safe to assume that some of the Hunters, inspired by their brief stint in the "Siege of Cincinnati," joined the incomplete regiments Governor Tod had forwarded posthaste to the scene of impending danger. But for most of them, they simply disappeared back into the woods from whence they came, or back to the untended plow left in a hurry when panic reigned along the Ohio. They undoubtedly departed with plenty tall tales and many very real experiences for respinning around firesides and cracker barrels for years to come.

Governor Tod, in his correspondence with Stanton, had urged the secretary to acknowledge publicly the gallant conduct of the Squirrel Hunters in causing the Confederate retreat from the gates of Cincinnati, an acknowledgment that was not forthcoming. However, on March 4, 1863 the Ohio General Assembly officially adopted the name Squirrel Hunters with the following resolution:

Resolved by the Senate and the House of Representatives of the State of Ohio, That the Governor is hereby authorized and directed to appropriate out of his contingent fund, a sufficient sum to pay for printing and lithographing discharges to the patriotic men of the State, who responded to the call of the Governor, and went to the southern border to repel the invader, and who will be known in history as the SQUIRREL HUNTERS.

According to records at the Ohio Historical Society, 15,766 Squirrel Hunters were issued official discharges. And in 1908 the Ohio General Assembly passed a resolution to pay each bonafide Squirrel Hunter \$13, equal to one month's pay for a Ohio militiaman in 1862.