

Crazy or Sane?

You have just heard an introduction of me that is totally complete, including the usual required puffery. While enjoyable for me to hear, the problem is that none of it has any bearing on the topic of my talk today. What does have relevance is the country's continuing interest in the Civil War. We have now completed some 20 months of commemoration for the Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War, and the enthusiasm is still evident. All across this nation, there have been seminars, lectures, exhibits of war relics in libraries, historical societies and museums, re-enactor encampments, essay contests for school children, motor coach excursions to battlefields and, certainly ranking right up there in importance, gatherings such as this Second Civil War Symposium held here in Lancaster.

But all this activity and enthusiasm begs the question of *why* this conflict, an event that occurred 1½ centuries ago, continues to capture the imagination and the interest, perhaps you might say fascination, of the public? Folks, 1½ centuries: That's a long time. That's 150 years, or to put it another way, 15 decades ago. Even the words "Sesquicentennial Commemoration" conjure up in some minds thoughts of ancient history.

But is it really ancient history? The answer to that, of course, is *no!* But a century and a half to some people is a long time, so let's place the Civil War in perspective. Over 10 months after WWII ended with the surrender of Japan, the last living Civil War veteran in Fairfield County died, and many of you here today were alive when only 11 days shy of the year 1960, the last surviving Civil War veteran in the country passed away. Locally, just 20 years ago more than a handful of grandchildren of Civil War veterans were still alive, attending church, visiting the stores and banks, and treading the sidewalks and by-ways of this town, the birthplace of William Tecumseh Sherman. Again, that was only a score of years ago.

It may be that a reason for this interest is the fact that a major issue such as the elimination of slavery was established in our Constitution, or the implications from the fact that no longer was our country referred to, both here and abroad, as "The United States *are*" — the plural "are" denoting a loose confederation of states. Rather after the North's victory in 1865, the common usage was to say "The United States *is*," the singular "is" denoting we live under a united federal government.

I'm sure both of those reasons play a part in this continued interest in the Civil War, but in my opinion, there is an additional, much simpler and more pertinent reason. And that is that almost all of us had, or know someone who had, an ancestor who served in that war. So all in all, it certainly seems only fitting that with this Symposium, we revisit the life of one of the most important figures of that war and the latter half of the 19th Century, Lancaster-born William Tecumseh Sherman.

I imagine my family was not unlike some other families in trying to find some reflected fame, for I recall that as a young lad, I often heard the family lore that my Great-Grandma Margaret Ellen Sherman was related to a certain famous Civil War general. When I was about 10 or 11 years old, I remember telling my granddad that our class was studying the Civil War and that William Tecumseh Sherman was my favorite general. After a moment of silent deliberation, he turned to me and said, "He was crazy, you know." That bombshell statement almost destroyed my interest in the conflict and certainly dented the halo I had pictured over my hero's head.

Luckily for me, a continuing general interest in the Civil War over the years has resulted in countless articles and books being written and published. I fear I must have tried to read and collect them all. If you will bear with me, as devil's advocate may I point out that I've been married to my beautiful and patient wife, Patsy, for 59 years, and I'm just starting to figure *her* out. So rightly, you might feel that I have no credibility in analyzing the mental condition of our subject. Yet, without hesitation or fear of consequence, I offer my opinion that "my favorite but crazy general," William Tecumseh

Sherman, a general officer in the United States Army during and after the Civil War, despite my granddad's assertion, was not insane at all.

Many historians today agree that W.T. Sherman was simply a high strung, animated and excitable individual. His assignment to Kentucky was probably one of the worst places for a man of his disposition. The affairs there were confused since the people were badly split over the issue of the war. The Confederate army occupied the cities of Columbus and Bowling Green and threatened attack on the Cumberland Gap. You are all aware of the circumstances that placed Cump there in the Blue Grass State in the late fall of 1861, so let's fast forward and instead spend time analyzing the man himself.

Sherman's failures in civilian life made him cautious and leery of assuming great responsibility for fear he might fail again. Unfortunately for him, this high strung, animated and excitable Ohioan was placed in a position of military command where intelligence indicated he was outnumbered, placed in a command that he had not sought. In fact, he found himself in command contrary to a promise made by the president himself.

That command of which we speak was woefully undermanned, with inadequate, insufficient and obsolete weapons, and yet, despite these negatives, his assignment was to protect a large vital area, all the making of a probable failure. And finally, in addition to all this, but so important, he found himself in a position where he could not feel himself in needed complete control of events. The result was almost predictable.

This worrisome general, with a "passion for order," as a prestigious participant in an earlier Sherman symposium described him, suddenly found himself fighting three wars simultaneously: 1) a war against his own insecurities; 2) a war against the Rebels; and 3) a war against the press. The result was a sometimes confused and tangled web of all three conflicts that ultimately resulted in the representatives of the latter group, a group by the way that openly admitted they looked at Sherman as an enemy of their set, time after time writing him down with printed accusations of his madness or insanity. And I speak of not just during his period in Kentucky, but in instances that continued against him throughout the war at every opportunity that arose.

Although it did not manifest itself until his adult years, Sherman's fear of personal financial ruin must have been an issue with him from the time of his father's death, which placed the family in dire financial straits. To Cump, that was a situation that must be personally avoided or prevented. That insecurity was overtly displayed first in California when his bank's owners, because of the California financial panic, decided to close their operation there and transfer him to their New York bank.

Sherman, dogged with the feeling that his personal failure was the cause of the closing, confided to Ellen, "I feel some doubt of my powers to cope with the acute operations in New York. I fear of further failure." As he saw it, if he were to also fail in New York, that would leave as his only remaining option a return to Ohio, and a position at "the Coal Mines or Salt Wells of Mr. Ewing."

But the zenith of that insecurity was reached when West Point graduate W.T. Sherman rejoined the U.S. Army to help put down the Rebellion and preserve the Union. Within a handful of months he found himself in the Western theater of operations, a part of the Army of the Department of the Cumberland. It was then that worry seemed to descend like a cloud over the man. Of constant concern was that he might suffer personal command failure, the result perhaps bringing disgrace or even worse, removal from command or possible discharge from the service.

Sherman's almost daily pleas to Washington for more men and arms resulted in the well-known visit to his HQ by the Secretary of War, Simon Cameron. It was at this meeting that Cump astonished the Secretary when he expressed his view concern the number of men needed for the task at hand. Later, when a reporter who attended that meeting confided to

another correspondent that Secretary Cameron considered Sherman "as unbalanced," newspapers across the country started reporting that his requests for reinforcements were insane.

Several weeks after he requested that he be relieved from command, the request was granted and he returned home to Lancaster for a 20-day leave with the family. Imagine his and the family's surprise when on December 11, they saw the headline in the Cincinnati Commercial that read GENERAL WILLIAM T. SHERMAN INSANE. Within days Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper in a lead story printed, "General Sherman, who lately commanded in Kentucky, is said to be insane. It is charitable to think so."

So here we have it: a fear his military career would be in jeopardy should he later be bested in battle by the Confederate forces. In the wings was the presence of a hostile press always ready to disclose to all any planned military move or to report any weaknesses of Sherman's position, and all the while, continuously writing him down. This put-down by the press, which heightened his worries of personal financial insecurity, proved to this Lancaster native that newspapers were not honest nor to be trusted.

His reaction was to intensify drastic measures of control – a vicious circle to be repeated again and again. Worries about the Rebel enemy, a press he regarded as subversive, attempts by him to limit or exclude the ability of a reporter to accompany his army, resulting in yet another attack on him personally. It seems Sherman never learned from the old adage that you shouldn't wage war against a foe who buys ink by the barrel.

But, ah, was Sherman insane? Perhaps in the thinking of some who choose to believe it, including various authors who set that idea to print. But allow me to point out that if he was insane, it is truly amazing how quickly this mental-case recovered from his supposed nervous breakdown. He returned to full duty in less than 20 days.

A short three months later, at Shiloh, although he personally suffered a wound and had three horses shot out from under him, he continued to lead his division with such skill and bravery that a promotion in rank resulted. Of more importance, and more telling, were Cump's thoughts at this point. The newly minted major general aptly wrote to his wife, Ellen, that he was now "redeemed from the vile slanders of that Cincinnati paper."

One might wonder if Sherman's belief that newspaper reporters and their editors were just short of treasonous was based on solid ground. He was convinced that in their efforts to bring the latest news of the war to their readers they were, in essence, little better than spies for the Rebels. Was he right? For a view from the South, let's turn to the esteemed Confederate General Robert E. Lee, who often commented that he learned a great deal about his enemy by reading Northern newspapers. It was in those Northern papers during the Maryland/Antietam Campaign that Lee learned that his lost order #191 had been found and was in the possession of Major General George Brinton McClellan, commander of the Union Army of the Potomac. In one remarkable letter to President Jefferson Davis in January 1863, Lee disclosed that he continuously tracked the enemy's plans and movements through the newspapers and drew conclusions about what his own strategy should be in return.

In an attempt to limit this transfer of information, Sherman, along with a few other Union military leaders, requested of reporters in the camps that news of impending military movements be delayed at least until the battle had been joined. The response of the press to this? Two words: First Amendment!

Of course the penmen were correct about their constitutionally guaranteed right of Freedom of the Press. The Bill of Rights is fragile and always, to this very day, remains under attack. The Constitution sets neither guidelines nor constitutional agreements on how press rights in war differ from those in peace. To warrior Sherman it was simple: Nowhere was it maintained that the First Amendment allowed the publication of important, even vital information that would endanger the lives of his men and the safety of the Nation. Nowhere! He refused to accept the role of the press in a

free society. His mind was that of a soldier. Information and secrecy were vital to victory and must be protected, even at the expense of temporarily laying aside the Bill of Rights.

To the general, who was 100 percent focused on winning the conflict and preserving the Union, it was all black and white. To the correspondents and their editors, it was a constitutionally guaranteed right and the general's actions and statements proved that he was their enemy. Now somewhere between Sherman's attitudes and practices, which amounted to little more than censorship, balanced against the needs of the press to find and responsibly publish the news, hopefully lays a solution. The key here is the word "responsibly," and perhaps, with the present practice of "embedding" press representatives with the combat units that solution has now been found. Only time and patience will help us reach that verdict.

Now let's take a closer look at wartime Sherman, the censor. If we start with the overt written and published personal attacks alleging insanity, bungling and incompetence, plus accusations that he cared not for the condition of his wounded men, and then if you place those personal attacks against Sherman alongside his concern for the secrecy of a military movement so as not to jeopardize it, you then can see formation of a conflict between man and the Fourth Estate. That conflict, which continued throughout the war to one degree or another, caused the noted historian and author John Marszalek to aptly label it "Sherman's Other War."

Let's discuss another instance of the three entwined wars of which I speak and of the vicious circle. In this case, in late December of 1862 it was decided to assault the Confederate works at Vicksburg's Chickasaw Bluffs, the front door to the city. This grand plan of General Ulysses Grant was a three-pronged attempt to secure that Confederate bastion on the Mississippi.

Grant himself planned to aggressively move his army south into Mississippi, forcing Vicksburg's defender, General John Pemberton, to move his army north to meet the threat. Sherman, assigned the center thrust, was to boat down the Mississippi, land his forces and attack the city's fortifications. Although it was a dangerous move, Grant felt the odds were favorable for Sherman's success since the majority of the city's defenders would be away, fighting the forces in northern Mississippi.

Although he was not under Grant's direct command, it was requested of and hoped for that General Nathaniel Banks with his army at New Orleans would support the overall plan by moving against Vicksburg from the south. Sherman, in an attempt to ensure secrecy, banned all reporters from accompanying his troops and set off down river for a Civil War rendezvous with destiny.

But fate intervened. General Banks in New Orleans never started northward. Grant's supply base at Holly Springs, Mississippi, was destroyed in a raid by Confederate General Earl VanDorn, which forced Grant to abort his planned movement. This left Sherman's forces, unaware of the situation, beating against the entire Confederate garrison quite alone, beating in vain as it turned out.

Sherman was forced to withdraw, beaten and cowed, and what did the press have to say? Once again they inked-up their anti-Sherman pens and went to work. The St. Louis Missouri Democrat called the attack "a stupid blunder, a shame, and a national calamity." They went on to write, "The blame is on the mismanagement, incompetence, and insanity of the commanding general," meaning Sherman. Another paper wrote "this was a case of the butchering of his men at Chickasaw."

Then a story appeared in the New York Herald containing many of these same claims plus the assertion that Sherman had cared not for the condition of his wounded. Cump was shocked when he found that a reporter for that paper, Thomas W. Knox, had indeed been aboard one of the river boats of the expedition and had written that story upon his return to

Memphis. The loss of the battle left Sherman in no mood to be gracious. He ordered the arrest of Knox and decided to court martial him on the charges that 1) he was a spy, 2) he provided information to the enemy, and 3) he accompanied his army in direct violation of orders. Knox was found guilty of the third charge and was ordered expelled outside the Union lines, to be arrested should he ever return.

Surprisingly, the reaction of the newspapers to this military court verdict was rather muted. The New York Tribune said only that this case indicated that Sherman seemed determined to prove that the allegations of insanity were true. Reporter T.A. Post of that same paper warned his editor that Sherman viewed the Knox trial as a "precedent" and would now try to gag the press by prosecuting any reporter who criticized a military leader. The Tribune, like most papers, apparently feared repercussions and remained silent from that point on, saying nothing further. Apparently the president's lack of support for their cause tempered their ardor for a time.

But those publications and their employees simply awaited a future Sherman defeat or misstep to pounce again. Uncle Billy's military successes in Georgia and the Carolinas continued to deny the press an opportunity to once again attack. Public opinion of the general soared as the events at the front were learned and the approval of the president was evident. But then, just when hostilities ended with the surrender of the largest remaining Rebel army, Cump Sherman stumbled. He offered the defeated force most generous terms, and that act once again placed him at the mercy of the press. *But there was no mercy to be found.*

Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton led the charge with a press release falsely accusing Sherman of treason, maintaining he had inserted a provision into the treaty that allowed the Confederacy to renew the revolution in the future. The New York newspapers – the Times, the Herald and the Tribune – all stated that Sherman's negotiations were simply a "blind" to allow Jefferson Davis to escape. The Washington Star maintained that Sherman was "as ignorant and incompetent at diplomacy as he was accomplished in his chosen field." The Chicago Tribune again revived the old issue – this time by labeling it "stark insanity."

Just at the time one of his enemies, the Confederacy, was beaten, a renewal of the war between the press and Cump occurred. One is reminded of the title of a gospel tune written by A.P. Carter and recorded by Johnny Cash. It is simply, "Will the circle be unbroken? By and by, Lord, by and by."

But even this episode passed and one by one, Sherman's enemies had been bested. His hometown set out to raise \$100,000 to present to him. Thus the fear of personal financial insecurity was now little more than a distant cloud. Armed hostilities were over, the Confederacy was dead, and the states that had seceded were in the process of qualifying once again for statehood. A new generation of reporters was on the scene, and Southern Reconstruction and the settlement of the West were of more interest to the new cadre than rehashing long-ago issues.

In the years of the late '70s and early 70s, Cump often considered retirement from the Army. When Congress displayed their willingness by assuring him a retirement with full pay and privileges for the rest of his life, he temporarily turned over his command to Lieutenant General Philip Sheridan to await his formal retirement date. Then on February 8, of the year 1884, President Chester A. Arthur issued the formal order of retirement, Cump's 64th birthday.

Once he left the service, the old general seldom looked back to his time as commanding general of the Army. Instead, he preferred to visit with the old war veterans and attend their reunions. This was the Army that Sherman wanted to remember – this wartime Army and the three personal wars he had fought and won. It is probably safe to say that he was now more at peace than at any time of his adulthood, his wars now over. His physical appearance also changed. Noticeable was the softening of the lines and creases of his face. Perhaps fitting here would be to apply the descriptive adage of the time: "He was comfortable in his own skin."

In those leisure years of retirement, Sherman continued to read a great deal, a practice from his earliest years. Personally, he admired Grant's memoirs the most, stating on one occasion, "Grant's book will of course survive all time, mine, Sheridan's and a few others will be but auxiliary, but the great mass of books . . . will be swept aside." But his favorite author was William Shakespeare whom he quoted quite often and attended all his plays as they were presented on the New York stage. Fittingly, it was a line from "As You Like It" that Tecumseh Sherman included in one of his last writings.

As Sherman approached what would be the last year of his life, he became ever more aware of his mortality. His love of the theater was well known and was evidenced when he once referred to his own end by writing: "I have done many things I should not have done, and have left undone still more which ought to have been done. I can see where hundreds of opportunities have been neglected, but on the whole I am contented, and as 'all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players,' I claim the privilege to ring down the curtain."

In the words of the Bard, "And a man in his time plays many parts," William Tecumseh Sherman, aka Cump, Uncle Billy or the Great Tecumseh, was also once referred to as a rascal, and on yet other occasions labeled insane. This American warrior was a man of the times, literally a Giant of a Man. And ironically, after he had passed, the press with whom he had endured a love/hate relationship, finally admitted that he was not insane by referring to him in one headline as Sherman the Great and in yet another, as Grand, Noble.

Now, with apologies to that Giant of His Time for usurping his words, I too claim the privilege to now ring down the curtain. Thank you.