

Who Really Gave General Sherman His Famous Name?

There is an adage, known to the Civil War generation, that a lie can race around the world before the truth can put its boots on. The adage seems to fit a very widely disseminated story about how General Sherman acquired the names “William” and “Tecumseh.” This summary attempts to set the record straight.

The original Tecumseh was a widely admired Shawnee leader who allied with the British during the War of 1812 and was killed by American forces in 1813. Since the 1932 publication of the biography *Sherman: Fighting Prophet*, by Lloyd Lewis, many writers have reported that, upon his birth in 1820, Sherman’s parents named him simply Tecumseh. Supposedly, the future general only acquired the additional name William at age nine or ten, during a Catholic baptism in the home of Thomas and Maria Ewing, who took young Sherman in after his father’s 1829 death.

These Tecumseh-at-birth reports overlook or dispute Sherman’s own statement, in the 1886 edition of his memoirs, that it was his father, Judge Charles Sherman, who “named me William *Tecumseh*” when “I came along on the 8th of February, 1820.” Sherman’s italics seem to mean that he always had a double-barreled name but that his parents intended him to be called by his second, Shawnee name. Family and friends always did call him “Cump.”

Who’s telling the truth about Sherman’s naming—the general himself or Lloyd Lewis and other modern-day historians? The evidence on this subject is not conclusive, but the working presumption should be that Sherman’s memoirs are accurate and that Lloyd Lewis erred in giving the world the more colorful Tecumseh-at-birth story. Three key considerations support Sherman and undercut Lewis and other Tecumseh-at-birth accounts.

First, common sense suggests that, in the absence of compelling evidence to the contrary, we should accept Sherman's word about his own naming. During Lincoln's lifetime, for example, there were reports that the sixteenth president's first name was Abram, rather than Abraham. However, in 1860, as noted by Doris Kearns Goodwin, the *New York Herald* reported that Lincoln identified himself as Abraham and that it "is but fair to presume that a man knows his own name."

Second, it appears that there were no Tecumseh-at-birth accounts published during Sherman's lifetime. This is significant, as illustrated by the case of Ulysses S. Grant. During Grant's lifetime, it was widely (and correctly) reported that his parents initially named him Hiram Ulysses Grant. However, the authorities at West Point required him to register there as Ulysses S. Grant, the name submitted by the congressman who had nominated him to the academy. Surely, as with Grant, the world would have learned before Lewis published in 1932 if there had been a similar evolution in Sherman's name.

Third, there is much corroborating evidence for Sherman's testimony that he always had the name William Tecumseh. The most important such evidence comes from a statement by Judge John Wright, a life-long friend of Sherman's and the son of Reverend John Wright, who was the Sherman family's Presbyterian minister in Lancaster, Ohio. According to the younger Wright, his father baptized the future general under the name William as an infant. One of Sherman's brothers-in-law, William Reese, who knew the family in Sherman's youth, also reported that the general was named William Tecumseh at birth.

One modern Sherman biographer who recounts the Tecumseh-at-birth story, Lee Kennett, further states that the name William was an "unused appendage" throughout Sherman's life. Actually, the mature Sherman almost invariably signed his name as "W.T. Sherman," giving

exactly equal weight to his two names. Also, during the Civil War, in a lengthy justification of Northern war policies to a pre-war acquaintance, Sherman wrote that “I am the same William Tecumseh Sherman you knew in 1844.” Thus, it seems that, when standing at attention, Sherman did not think of himself as Cump Sherman or even Tecumseh Sherman.

Full details about Sherman’s naming can be found in the article “My Father . . . Named Me William *Tecumseh*: Rebutting the Charge That General Sherman Lied About His Name,” by Carl R. Schenker, Jr., in *Ohio History*, vol. 115, 55 (2008). Sherman biographer John Marszalek has written that this article makes a “convincing case” for accepting Sherman’s account that he always had the name William Tecumseh.

(Note: This summary originated as a letter to the editor published in the February 2009 issue of *Civil War News*.)