

## Lieutenant Peter H. Orr

1837 - 1863

**Peter H. Orr was one of the early pioneers of Lewis County, Missouri  
and one of the unsung heroes of the Civil War.**



**Peter H. Orr 1837 - 1863**

Pete was born in New York on April 4, 1837 to parents who had recently migrated from Scotland. His family moved west to northeastern Illinois where Pete and his brothers and sisters grew up. After the death of their parents (possibly because of a typhoid epidemic) most of the Orr family moved to Lewis County. Pete bought 80 acres of land near Deer Ridge in 1858 with the sincere desire to settle down and become a Missouri farmer. Unfortunately the political dissension that was soon to erupt into the Civil War interfered with Pete's plans. The Orr family were devout members of the Presbyterian faith. They were firmly opposed to the institution of slavery but not to an extent that would label them abolitionists. By 1861 there were bands of armed men roving through northeast Missouri.

Some were anti-slavery gangs who went around bullying Secessionists. There were also Confederate Sympathizers who beat up any Union Loyalists they encountered. The Lewis county countryside was no place to be a peaceful farmer and would not be until one side defeated the other.

In February of 1862, Peter and his brother William decided to leave their farms in the hands of their younger siblings and join the army. There was an intense patriotic passion in many of the towns along the Mississippi river and thousands of young men were being recruited to save the Union. The two traveled to Canton where they signed on with the 21st Missouri Infantry. With very little time for training or even to become acquainted with his fellow soldiers, Pete found himself elected Sergeant of Company F, under the leadership of Captain Joseph T. Farris. The 21st Regiment became a part of the 1st Brigade, which was a part of the 6th Division of the Army of the Tennessee. In less than two months the 40,000 soldiers of this army were herded onto paddle wheel steam boats and sent up the Tennessee River to a place called Pittsburg Landing. On April 5, 1862 the 21st Regiment was in the most advanced position about three miles southeast of the steamboat landing.

It was the intention of General U.S. Grant to gather his troops on this "beach head" and march them over the muddy road to take over the rail facilities at Corinth, Mississippi. Albert Sidney Johnston the Commander of the Confederate Army had no intention of waiting until Grant was ready to fight. He marched his army to the river and encountered the advanced pickets of the 21st and 25th Missouri Regiments. Pete Orr happened to be in the forefront of what would become known as the Battle of Shiloh. Although many of the members of the Union Army were routed in the

first day of the battle, the four regiments of the 1st Brigade held on with stubborn determination. This unit of soldiers dug in at a place they called the “Hornet’s Nest” and held off the advancing Confederates. Grant freely admitted afterwards that their actions not only prevented a humiliating defeat but was a turning point of the battle.

Many of the soldiers of the 21<sup>st</sup> Regiment were killed, wounded or captured but Pete survived to make the 22-mile march to Corinth where on May 30, the Union Army finally occupied the town. Pete Orr’s Regiment was a part of the force that pursued the fleeing Rebel Army in a running battle that lasted until June 12. Pete and the rest of the contingent from Missouri remained on duty throughout the summer, then fought and won the Battle of Iuka on September 19, 1862. His regiment was ordered to return to Corinth where they defended that city against a Confederate attempt to recapture it.

There are no reports of individual deeds done by Pete Orr, but there is every reason to believe he was an exemplary soldier. On March 6, 1863 he was given a promotion to the rank of 2nd Lieutenant. Shortly thereafter Pete had a Daguerreotype photo made, which he sent home. In the spring and summer of 1863 the 21st Regiment was assigned to duty in western Kentucky and Tennessee. The army was ordered to interrupt the traffic of contraband material (mostly baled cotton) which was being smuggled northward for conversion into hard currency. Ulysses S. Grant was well aware that this money was being used by determined Southerners to buy guns, ammunition and vital supplies for the Armies of the Confederacy. The effects of the Union blockade and the successes of the U.S. Army to cut off the flow of material was having a profound effect on the ability of South to continue the fight. The occupation was also creating a considerable and

growing feeling of resentment in that part of the country. The soldiers of the 21st Missouri Regiment were deep inside hostile enemy territory and they knew it. In the fall of 1863 they were camped near Union City, Tennessee. Pete left camp late in the afternoon to get a better look at the area that his regiment was operating in. He returned to camp shortly after dusk and was challenged by one of the soldiers on guard duty. Pete either did not respond with the proper password or perhaps responded too slowly and was shot by the sentry.

Lieutenant Peter Orr died a few hours later that night, October 27, 1863. H.M. Woodyard, the Commander of the 1st Brigade, who had been with Pete throughout the many battles of the previous 20 months, immediately initiated plans for a funeral that would be suitable for the fallen hero. A special gravesite was secured and the participation of the military band from the 119th Illinois Regiment was promised. But Pete’s close friends petitioned the army brass to have his remains returned to his family in Lewis County. It was rare for a Civil War soldier to be returned home for burial but because of Pete’s reputation, and because his death occurred during cool weather, the request was granted.

Pete’s body was sent to his two sisters who had been forced to move to town for their safety. They provided the best funeral possible but because of their own displacement and because of the social disruptions caused by the war, the service for a true local hero must have been limited. A battle flag and the officer’s sword were sent home along with Pete’s body. The sword and flag were passed on to Pete’s brother John, who was the only one of the four Orr brothers to return from the war alive. John bestowed them along with stories of his brother to his daughter Abigail and to his granddaughter Ivah, both of who lived in LaBelle. The sword and flag remained in the family for over ninety years



**Gravesite of Peter H. Orr  
in the LaBelle Cemetery**

but were lost in a home burglary in the 1950's. Fortunately the old tin-type photo and the stories endured and were told to me by Ivah Morriss who was my grandmother. The stone that marks the spot where Pete Orr was buried remains one of the oldest in the LaBelle Cemetery. It is just one tangible record of the existence of a simple farm boy who came from Lewis County, Missouri. He joined with a like-minded group of friends and neighbors who participated in the greatest struggle of our country's history. He performed bravely in several battles. Pete Orr has been at rest for nearly 140 years. Like many who served in the Civil War, he may never receive the praise he deserves, but he has been and will be remembered.



**This is the exact spot on the Tennessee River where Pete Orr debarked, 140 years previously, to play a pivotal role in the Battle of Shiloh**

*Jim Morriss – Sept. 2002*

Sources:

Jim Morriss' interviews with Ivah Morton Morriss and Elsie Spidle Ledbetter, granddaughters of John Orr.

Probate records of Lewis Co. Mo: Final Settlement of Peter H. Orr, November 23, 1868.

"A Compendium of the War of Rebellion" by Frederick H. Dyer, 1908. Vol. 3, Page 1330

"The Twenty-First Missouri" by Leslie Anders, Greenwood Press, 1975. Pages 120 & 150

"Grant Moves South" by Bruce Catton, Castle Books, 2000. Pages 210 - 264

"Hearts in Conflict" by Curt Anders, Barnes & Noble Books, 1994. Pages 96 - 102

"The Roster of Union Soldiers, 1861 – 1865" edited by Janet B. Hewett, Broadfoot Publishing Co. 1996

Federal Census Records:

1850 Cook Co. Ill, Bloom Twp. Roll T6-78, P19, Dwg#244

1850 Cook Co. Ill, Bloom Twp. Roll T6-78, P20, Dwg#249

1860 Lewis C. Mo, Reddish Twp. Roll M653-629, P 129, Dwg#192, Line 37

1860 Lewis C. Mo, Reddish Twp. Roll M653-629, P 130, Dwg#193, Line 3

Army Official Records, Series 1 - Volume X/1, S#10, Battle of Pittsburg Landing:

No. 78: Report of Brig. Gen. B.M. Prentiss, 6th Division, Army of the Tennessee, Nov. 17, 1862

No. 79: Report of Col. F. Quinn, 12th Michigan Infantry, April 9, 1862

No. 80: Report of Col. D. Moore, 21st Missouri Volunteers, April 11, 1862

No. 81: Report of Lt. Col. H.M. Woodyard, 21st Missouri Volunteers, April 12, 1862

Army Official Records, Series 1 - Volume XVII/1, S#24, Battle Corinth, Mississippi

No. 91: Report of Col. H.M. Woodyard, 21st Missouri Volunteers, Oct. 3-12, 1862

Army Official Records, Series 1 - Volume XXIII/2, S#35, Battle of Pittsburg Landing:

No. 13: Report of Brig. Gen. Asboth, Commanding Officer, May 11, 1863

Internet Links:

<http://members.tripod.com/~greatamericanhistory/gr02008.htm>

<http://www2.cr.nps.gov/abpp/battles/tn003.htm>

<http://www2.cr.nps.gov/abpp/battles/ms016.htm>

<http://www2.cr.nps.gov/abpp/battles/ms001.htm>

<http://www2.cr.nps.gov/abpp/battles/ms002.htm>