

2009?

Good evening. My name is Harrison Parker. I would like to tell you a story about something that I saw when I was a young boy. I think you might be interested because it took place in Kentucky and, to this very day, affects each of us. Since I was born in 1852, this is going to require some work on your part. I would like for each of you to imagine that, first, you are a member of a very elite, very intellectual society and, second, that the year is 1912. I realize that both requirements represent a stretch, but I know many of you can do this.

A lot of what I am going to tell you is about events that I actually saw. As you will realize in a few minutes, it would have been impossible for me to see everything that I will tell you. I will also rely on firsthand accounts, books, secondhand accounts, and urban legends. You probably should not place much credence in the order of that list.

In 1862, I was living on a small farm near Logan's Cross Roads, Kentucky, with my mother and father and three year old brother. My mother had grown up just a couple of miles from our current house. My father was from Pennsylvania and was the most educated man in the area. When there was school, he was our teacher. Our school was about a mile from our house, and he and I always walked together. Education around there was not exactly K through 12. It was more like one through whenever your family needed you to go to work full-time. Because our farm was so small (mostly a vegetable garden, a little corn, hay, chickens, a couple of hogs, two cows and a horse), it seemed like my father always had time for his teaching and reading without being bogged down by work on the farm. The size of the farm was not all that afforded my father all this time. My mother liked tending to the stock and working in the fields, and my father was happy to indulge her.

My father and I were spending a lot more time at home now. There was a war on, and rumor had it that we were soon going to be right in the middle of it. No one wanted to send their children to school if there was danger. Most didn't want to send their children to school because of my father anyway. He was a staunch Federalist. Even before Edmund Ruffin fired the first Confederate shot at Sumter, my father was telling anyone who would listen that the Southern plan for secession was ill-conceived and that anyone who took part in the action was a traitor. He also talked about what a mistake it would be for Kentucky to leave the Union and said Kentucky men should be fighting for the North. He said these things not so much to indicate his intent to fight for anyone, but more because he thought people were interested in his views. They were interested. Many agreed with him, but many did not. He was threatened, but would not modify his position and refused to stop talking.

At this point, Kentucky had chosen neutrality. It was clear, however, that that decision would not keep the war away from our state. Both sides considered Kentucky a key for victory. President Lincoln said that he hoped to have God on his side, but that he must have Kentucky. If Lincoln needed Kentucky to stage his attack on the South, the Confederacy needed Kentucky to defend itself.

The task of securing the state from the Cumberland Gap to Lake Cumberland fell in the hands of Brigadier General Felix Zollicoffer. On September 7, 1861, one day after General Grant took Paducah, Zollicoffer received orders from Confederate Headquarters at Richmond, saying: "The neutrality of Kentucky has been broken by the occupation of Paducah. Take the arms." On September 17th, Zollicoffer joined his men at Cumberland Ford (presently Pineville, Kentucky). After small skirmishes with Union troops,

Zollicoffer attacked a more formidable force near London, Kentucky. He then put his efforts into preventing movement of Union troops from Kentucky into Tennessee. He tried to eliminate the Cumberland Gap route by fortifying that pass to prevent any unwanted penetration. He felt he could complete his blockage by holding a position between Monticello and Somerset, Kentucky. Zollicoffer decided to set his winter headquarters up at Mill Springs and arrived there on November 29 and proceeded to fortify the position. The same day, Union Brigadier General George H. Thomas arrived at Lebanon, Kentucky, and set up his headquarters. Thomas was a Union – loyal Virginian who had served in the 2nd Cavalry before the war.

These actions put the people in my area right in the middle of two opposing forces (each numbering around 10,000 troops). It was not an enviable position. It was not a position, however, that would convince Ivel Dodson that he should skip a chance to celebrate Christmas with friends at a village drinking establishment. It was some time during the first week of December (Ivel was a very religious man and liked to start his Christmas celebrating early). The rebel forces had been able to cross the Cumberland River and now occupied a small post just north of Mill Springs at Beech Grove. Ivel left services just after midnight and was obviously filled with religious fervor because he headed his horse and wagon south although his house was north of town. That sent him directly to Beech Grove. Rebel sentries heard and later saw the wagon and thought they heard singing, but could not see a driver. After ordering the wagon to halt (an order which I am pretty certain Ivel did not hear), the sentries opened fire. When this still did not stop the wagon, they concluded that this was the first wave of an attack by the Union force encamped at Lebanon. The sentries continued to fire at Ivel as they fell back

toward the force at Beech Grove. The firing and shouts of warning awakened the sleeping troops who started to fire in the direction of the flashes from the weapons of the sentries. The sentries now assumed that they had been surrounded and shouted the order to abandon camp. With the presumed massive force to their north, the only direction to abandon camp was by rushing into the cold waters of the Cumberland River. Several of the men did just that. Eventually, Ivel was captured, although no one was able to awaken him for several hours. After holding him in their main camp at Mill Springs for several days and investigating the situation, the rebels decided to let Ivel go. They were not anxious to report their misdeeds of the evening; the experience taught them that sentries needed to be deployed in a different manner, and the only real losses were one small bore cannon and the mule that dragged it into the river during Ivel's attack.

Later in December, Confederate President Jefferson Davis decided that since this campaign was becoming much larger than they had originally expected, the command would be too large for a brigadier. Davis ordered Major General George B. Crittenden, who had been in command at Knoxville, to take over all of Zollicoffer's troops. Many believe that this move was purely political. Crittenden's father was John J. Crittenden, a U.S. Senator and former governor of Kentucky. His name might induce Kentuckians to join the Rebel ranks.

Crittenden arrived on January 3rd, and on January 7th, the stern-wheel steamer the Noble Ellis arrived from Nashville. Because the river was very low, this was the first boat to make it all the way from Nashville to Mill Springs. This was important not only because of the supplies it brought from Nashville, but it was also needed to haul forage up and down the river.

When I spoke about Ivel's attack, I explained that Zollicoffer had moved his men across to the northern shore of the Cumberland at Beech Grove. That meant that they faced possible attack by the sizable Union forces to their north with a wide, unfordable river to their back. When Crittenden took over, he immediately recognized the danger of the situation. Even before he reached Mill Springs, he sent word to Zollicoffer to start moving back to the south shore. When he arrived on January 3rd, he found that Zollicoffer had not complied with the order. Zollicoffer defended this (the first of his two gigantic mistakes) by saying that Beech Grove was a better campsite. He hoped that he could talk the situation over with Crittenden when he arrived. He also said that going back across the river seemed cowardly. I think we can all imagine how Major General Crittenden might have responded. Though Crittenden sought the safety of the southern bank, he knew that crossing now would be foolhardy. If his forces were attacked during the difficult cross, they would have no chance to defend themselves, and General Thomas's Northern forces at Lebanon were on the move. Thomas led his men south through pelting rain that made creeks almost impassable and turned roads into what he referred to as "a continuous quagmire." Finally, on January 17th, Thomas was within nine miles of the Rebel camp. He went into camp less than three miles from my home. His plan was to rest his men, dry out their equipment, and plan the assault on Beech Grove.

The next day, Saturday, January 18th, Thomas had assembled virtually his entire force that would take part in the attack on Beech Grove. Rain was still a problem since he wanted his final approach leading to the battle to be rapid and as easy as possible, and the roads were still virtually impassable. Also, the rising waters of Fishing Creek had

made crossing with regimental wagons and artillery impossible. Nevertheless, Thomas, with reinforcements, now had available nearly 14,000 men, and his equipment from cannons to each soldier's individual fire arm was superior to that of the Confederate forces. Thomas was also anxious to press his advantage while the Cumberland still could not be crossed. Attack was imminent. Thomas was going after the Rebs.

At the same time, in the Rebel camp, the Confederates were aware of Thomas' presence. On the 18th, General Crittenden sent a message to General Albert Sidney Johnston in Bowling Green, Kentucky. "Sir, I am threatened by a superior force of the enemy in front and finding it impossible to cross the river. I will have to make the fight on the ground I now occupy. If you can do so, I would ask that a diversion be made in my favor." I believe in this particular instance, the term "diversion be made in my favor" can be translated, "Do whatever you have to do. Just get me out of here!"

Just as the two armies were aware of each other's presence, so were the people at Logan's Cross Roads. We had talked for days about when the battle would take place and who would win and if we were in danger. My mother wasn't letting me off of our farm very much. My dad was staying gone a lot, talking with neighbors and coming home with news each night. When I could get away at all, I spent time with my friend Will Peeler. Will was ten, almost a full year older than I, and seeing the soldiers was all he talked about. On Saturday, the 18th, Will spent most of the day at our farm. He had concocted a very detailed plan which was in complete violation of everything my parents had told me. What nine-year-old boy can turn his back on such a plan? We both knew that Union forces would be moving south, perhaps as early as tomorrow. Will figured that if he and I made out way to Mill Springs Road early Sunday morning, we could

watch the whole army pass by. Well, that certainly trumped what my parents had in store for me, which would be sitting in church for two hours, listening to the preacher condemn me for sins I wasn't even big enough to commit yet. I would sneak out of my house and meet Will outside his house before dawn. From there we would walk to the road and hope something was happening. The whole trip was just about a mile for me.

On Sunday morning, waking up was no problem. I really wasn't able to sleep much anyway. It was cold and rainy as I headed for Will's. The sun still wasn't up as he and I left his house. It was probably around 5:30 when we reached the road and maybe ten minutes later when we heard a commotion. We had only begun to congratulate ourselves on being there when the Union soldiers passed by when we realized that the noise was coming from the south, not the north. The wrong army was on the move. I found out later that sometime Saturday night, General Crittenden had reconsidered staying at Beech Grove and defending his camp with his back to the river. He decided that it would be best to attack the enemy before the additional reinforcements could arrive from Somerset. He was still outmanned, but hoped the element of surprise would carry the day. His army headed north shortly before midnight Saturday.

This was great for Will and me. We didn't care which army we saw. We just wanted to see an army. Some of the men and wagons and cannons passed us, and we noticed how tired the men seemed. The road was muddy, and it was hard to walk and harder still to push the cannons and wagons through the mire.

We had been watching the men go by for about fifteen minutes when we heard musket fire somewhere near the Union camp. The soldiers who had been walking in front of us started running in the direction of the shots. We decided that we would move

a little closer to the shooting to get a look at the action. What could go wrong? No one was shooting at us.

The first firing that we heard was the Rebel forces encountering Union pickets. Soon after that, both sides were formed in battle lines. Will and I came running up behind the Confederate troops and moved to our left and climbed a hill in the northwest corner of a large field. We were both familiar with the area and knew that there were large rocks that we could sit on.

About twenty minutes later, a Union soldier on horseback rode up the hill toward us. When he got close enough to be heard, he told us to get out of here because we were going to be hurt. I was immediately struck by how young he seemed and by the fact that he really cared about us being hurt. He could have been my uncle or brother. I answered first and told him we would leave. Will answered next and told him to mind his own business, that we were staying. He said to suit ourselves and rode back down the hill. I watched him for the next few minutes until he was shot while he and his cavalry unit attacked a Confederate line.

Zollicoffer's brigade was formed in line and advanced. They were met by the 10th Indiana Regiment. Soon the 19th Tennessee joined the battle. Within moments, the 4th Kentucky joined the line to assist the 10th Indiana. The Indiana and Kentucky regiments suffered terrible losses, and it looked for a while like they were going to be overrun. However, they reformed their line along a rail fence with timber and thick undergrowth for cover. They continued their firefight with the Confederates who were concealed in a deep ravine at the foot of the hill. Union Colonel Speed S. Fry became so frustrated with

the hard to spot Rebel troops that he mounted the fence and defied them to stand up and fight like men.

Will and I saw all of this from the rocks. Of course, we didn't know which regiments were which, but we could see who was wearing blue and who was wearing gray. We also witnessed the second big mistake on the part of General Zollicoffer. It was still raining, and the battlefield was smoking from the cannon and musket fire. Colonel Frey rode a short distance to his right to make sure that he knew where all of his men were and that they were not firing on each other. As he returned, he met a confused General Zollicoffer who was mounted and wearing a waterproof coat without insignia. Zollicoffer had calmly approached the enemy, thinking that it was his own brigade. He commanded Fry to order his men to cease firing and Fry, believing Zollicoffer to be a Union officer, obeyed without hesitation. Zollicoffer was about to ride away when his aide realized what was happening. He fired at Fry and warned the general. Fry then shot and killed Zollicoffer.

News spread through both armies quickly, and for a time, affected the flow of the battle. Maddened by the death of their commander, Zollicoffer's regiments now attacked Colonel Frey's position. The combatants were so close to one another that they used bayonets and large cane knives.

Frey's units, who were now running out of ammunition, were replaced by the 2nd Minnesota. Those well-rested and well-supplied troops pushed toward the main Confederate line. More hand-to-hand fighting followed.

Both sides attempted flanking movements by sending regiments through fields on one side of the road or the other. These attempts were repelled, and the main battle continued to play out in front of us.

Cannons were fired by both sides. They were loud and smoky and always brought a temporary stop in the action as everyone looked around to see what damage the most recent shot had caused. Of course, there were two problems. The adversaries were very close to one another, so it was extremely hard to hit the enemy without injuring your own men, and the artillery was just not very accurate. Early in the day, when the Union troops were still in close order and there were no Confederate troops nearby, Southern artillery was not able to get close. In fact, shot after shot landed in the woods well behind the soldiers.

Gradually, as General Crittenden had feared, the superior firepower of General Thomas's army began to rule the field and the Confederate line began to waiver. Most of the Confederates were armed with obsolete flintlock muskets. In the rain, the flintlocks just would not fire. It was later estimated that eighty percent of these weapons were useless. The Federals had percussion muskets and rifles which fired virtually every time. The Rebels began to retreat. The fallback was gradual at first and then declined into an attempt by each man to save his own life. The defeated troops headed for Beech Grove, leaving many of their dead and wounded on the field of battle. After a six hours march, they reached the camp that they had abandoned just sixteen hours before. Crittenden still faced all the same problems that he did then. He was still trapped with General Thomas in front of him and an impassable river behind. Now, however, he was even more

desperate. His army had been defeated, and nothing was left but surrender or total annihilation.

General Thomas had removed his dead and wounded from the battlefield and then gone after Crittenden. Arriving outside the camp late in the day, he set his battle lines in preparation to take the Rebels the next morning.

Meanwhile, General Crittenden made another late night decision. He would do the impossible. He decided to lead his men across the uncrossable Cumberland. They left everything behind (mules, wagons, artillery and horses). Using the little stern-wheel steamer the Noble Ellis, that had made it from Nashville, all of his men were transporting during the night. After the last trip of the evening, the steamboat was burned before Crittenden and his men retreated. As Crittenden headed South, the power in the state was swinging to the North. The victory placed eastern Kentucky firmly in Union hands and opened east Tennessee up to the North. The defeat, coupled with losses the following month at Forts Henry and Donelson, forced the Confederates out of Kentucky and eventually cost them much of central Tennessee. They also lost Kentucky as a potential source of manpower and support.

None of that mattered to me as Will and I walked home. I didn't care about the politics or the power or the North or the South. The battle had lasted three hours. Over two hundred men were killed, and over five hundred were wounded, and Will and I had seen it all. A northern newspaper carried this account of the scene following the battle:

In the woods and along the roads, the scene was dreadful. One body was placed in a sitting posture with his back leaning against a tree, the hands crossed in his lap and his lips slightly parted. The ball had entered his left

breast just above the region of his heart. Another laid on his side with his head and arms thrown back: the ball had cut away part of his skull over his left eye. Another man had a ball through his right hand. He had done it up himself with a wet bandage, and with his other hand, he was carrying one corner of a stretcher. Carrying another corner of the stretcher was a man with his face covered in blood.

The account was correct. It was dreadful. Will talked all the way back to his house, highlighting one part of our day or another. I couldn't talk and didn't want to think. I had seen stuff I just shouldn't have seen. I just wanted to get back home. When I did arrive, there were lots of hugs and tears. I knew the hugs wouldn't last. There would have to be punishment, but that wouldn't last either. I had been gone almost seven hours. I had seen men fight and kill and die. I saw the power base in our state start to shift, and I got a very early glimpse of the rebirth of our nation.

During the fifty years following that day, I have graduated from college and taught history for nearly 35 years. Only now do I feel comfortable enough to discuss what I have just told you. I still keep up with Will. We write monthly and see each other every couple of years. When I saw him last Christmas, he said he had briefly considered retiring but thinks we will be involved in a war in Europe very soon, and General Will Peeler doesn't want to miss it.