



# THE drum roll

Volume 35

332nd Regular Meeting

Number 1

September 2, 2016

*One of the most celebrated military organizations*

Friday, September 2, 2016, 7:30 p.m.

Arlington Heights Memorial Library  
500 North Dunton Avenue, Arlington Heights, Illinois

## The Iron Brigade of the West

The Iron Brigade of the West is one of the most celebrated military organizations of the American Civil War. It is equaled in reputation — but not in service — only by the Stonewall Brigade of the Confederate Army. It was originally composed of the 2nd, 6th, and 7th Wisconsin, 19th Indiana, and Battery B of the 4th U.S. Artillery. It first attracted attention as the only all-Western infantry organization serving in the East. It was when the men were issued the regular army's felt dress hat that marked them on a battlefield that they became the “Black Hat Brigade.”

It was at South Mountain in 1862 that General George B. McClellan claimed he gave them their famous war name. The Black Hats were reinforced by the 24th Michigan after Antietam and went on to Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville. At Gettysburg the brigade saved the high ground that proved decisive in the Union victory, and it was there that it was almost destroyed.

The used-up 2nd Wisconsin went home and the 19th Indiana was merged into the 20th Indiana



Lance Herdegen

in 1864. The 24th Michigan was sent off to another duty station in 1865. But the 6th and 7th Wisconsin soldiered on in the sharp fighting around Petersburg, Virginia. Only when the war ended, did the Western boys finally go home. It was later determined that they had suffered the highest percentage of casualties of any brigade in the Union Armies.

Our September speaker, Lance Herdegen, will give an overview of how young farm boys, shopkeepers, river men, and piney camp boys became an Iron Brigade and helped save the Union. He is the award-winning author of several books and articles on Civil War topics. His latest book is *The Iron Brigade in Civil War and Memory: The Black Hats from Bull Run to Appomattox and Thereafter*. His previous book, *Those Damned Black Hats: The Iron Brigade in the Gettysburg Campaign*, won the Army Historical Foundation's Distinguished Writing Award for Battle/Operational History.

Herdegen recently served as chair of the Wisconsin Civil War Sesquicentennial. He is also the former director of the Institute for Civil War Studies at Carroll University and worked as historical consultant for the Civil War Museum of the Upper Middle West at Kenosha, WI. He had a long career as a journalist with United Press International news wire service, where he covered civil rights and politics. He was recently inducted into the Milwaukee Press Club Hall of Fame.

If you would like to join the group for dinner with Lance Herdegen at 5:30 p.m. before the meeting on September 2 at Sam's of Arlington restaurant, 1863 West Central Road, Arlington Heights, please contact me at [ccarrs@comcast.net](mailto:ccarrs@comcast.net) or (847) 738-4141 by Wednesday, August 31. —  
*Charles Carr*

**Please send dues checks to Tom DeFranco as soon as possible**

# Assessing Union General George Thomas

By Pat McCormick

**G**eneral George H. Thomas was certainly one of the most effective Union generals of the Civil War. Yet many of his contemporaries regarded him as cumbersome and slow, and it does not seem that he was fully appreciated by his superior officers. Given his accomplishments, why did this seem to be the case?

At the banquet on Friday, June 3, Brian Steele Wills presented an analysis of the Virginia-born Thomas. Thomas seems to have consistently (albeit perhaps not intentionally) avoided the limelight. He served with distinction in the Mexican War, but (unlike fellow artilleryist Braxton Bragg) was not the object of any famous quotations.

Afterward he spent time as an artillery instructor at West Point and was eventually one of the majors in the “all-star” Second Dragoons. An accidental fall suffered when he stepped off a train platform gave him chronic back pain, which only added to his usually reserved manner. (As a result, one of his common nicknames was “Old Slow Trot.”) When the Civil War erupted, Thomas stayed loyal to the old flag. His Southern birth, at least initially, may have held him back; at one point when discussing promotions, even President Abraham Lincoln said, “Let the Virginian wait.”

In January 1862, Thomas won a resounding, if small-scale, victory at Mill Springs in southeastern Kentucky. Wills told how the Confederates slipped back across the Cumberland River in the wake of the fight. Thomas had any number of legitimate reasons why he hadn’t pressed them harder, but when asked by a subordinate why he had not kept the Rebels from crossing, the self-effacing general replied that it just hadn’t occurred to him that they would cross so quickly.

A month later, General U. S. Grant won his spectacular victory at Fort Donelson. Wills suggested that had Thomas pushed the enemy imme-

diately after Mill Springs, perhaps he would have been “Unconditional Surrender” Thomas. Instead, the pattern of George Thomas’s being overshadowed was established.

Thomas’s next major contribution was at Stones River, where he commanded the Union center. His on-field presence was a key to the stubborn fight put up by his command. He then outdid himself at Chickamauga, tenaciously holding on after half the army had been routed. He finally got public recognition for his stand, earning both the famous nickname “Rock of Chickamauga” and the command of the Army of the Cumberland. However, parts of two other armies arrived to assist at Chattanooga, and when the siege was finally broken, the overall commander on the scene was U. S. Grant — although Thomas’s Cumberlanders played the key role. Once again, Thomas was overshadowed by the future president.

Additionally, friction developed between Thomas and Grant. In Wills’s opinion Grant did not dislike Thomas, but they just didn’t seem to mesh well. Nonetheless, Thomas was General William Sherman’s most reliable subordinate during the Atlanta campaign. Although Sherman referred to Thomas as “as true as steel,” he also regularly complained to Grant of Thomas’s supposed slowness. With a nickname like “Old Slow Trot” and with a commander of Sherman’s stature reinforcing the image, the notion of Thomas as slow was entrenched.

After the fall of Atlanta, Thomas was sent to Tennessee when the rest of Sherman’s army marched off to the sea. At Nashville, Thomas’s careful preparations to attack Confederate General John Bell Hood were seen by Grant as, once again, slow, even though much of the delay was weather related. Grant was on his way to Nashville to relieve Thomas when he got word that Hood had been attacked, routed, and almost de-



*General George H. Thomas*

stroyed. "The Sledge of Nashville" was added to Thomas's lexicon of nicknames, but he ended the war in the backwater of Middle Tennessee.

In summary, Wills demonstrated that the "slow" image was undeserved and expressed the opinion that Thomas would rank third in the pantheon of Union generals (this writer would agree.) On behalf of the round table, I would like to thank Brian Wills for a lively and enjoyable presentation.

## September Events

**September 8, Lake County Civil War Round Table.** Frank Crawford will speak on Burnside's Bridge.

**September 9, Second Friday Lectures Series,** Civil War Museum, Kenosha, WI. Dick Zimmermann will discuss the military career of Union General George Thomas, noon. Free program is sponsored by the Milwaukee Civil War Roundtable and the Iron Brigade Association. Information on all Civil War Museum programs is available at (262) 653-4140 or [www.thecivilwarmuseum.org](http://www.thecivilwarmuseum.org).

**September 9, Chicago Civil War Round Table.** Steve Quick will speak on the C.S.S. *Hunley*.

**September 10, Ninth Annual Great Lakes Civil War Forum,** Civil War Museum, Kenosha, WI. Heroes Tried and True: The Iron Brigade is the theme of the forum. Speakers include Tom Clemens on Black Hat Memories of Antietam; Eric Mink on Molding a Legend: The Iron Brigade and the 1862 Occupation of Fredericksburg; Lance Herdegen on Four Long Hours: The Iron Brigade and the Gettysburg Campaign; and James Hibbard on Iron Brigade Chaplain: The Story of Samuel and Catharine Eaton. Registration begins at 8:30 a.m., first lecture at 9:30 a.m.; \$60/\$50 Friends of the Museum, includes lunch.

**September 13, McHenry County Civil War Round Table.** Frank Crawford will speak on Jennie Hodgers.

**September 16, Salt Creek Civil War Round Table.** Jerry Allen will speak on Black Hawk War Veterans in the Civil War.

**September 21 and 28, Civil War Museum,** Kenosha, WI. Dan Nettesheim will speak on The Evolution of Grant's Leadership, 6:30–8:30 p.m., \$25/\$20 Friends of the Museum.

*drum roll*, September 2016

## September Saturday Discussion

All members and guests are invited to participate in the session to be held at the Barrington Area Library, on Saturday, September 17, 2016, from 10:00 a.m. until noon. Civil War movies will be the topic for discussion.

These discussions are generally held on the third Saturday of the month from September through June. They are held to generate and foster a free exchange of ideas on Civil War battles and events.

## Get Involved

All members are encouraged to participate in all activities of the Northern Illinois Civil War Round Table. There are a number of ways for members to serve the organization, for example, as an officer, committee member, or speaker. Anyone who would like to get more involved in these activities may contact President Charles Carr or any other officer or past president.

## Book Discussion Group

The Civil War book discussion group led by Tom DeFranco at the Eisenhower Library, 4613 North Oketo, Harwood Heights, meets on the first Saturday of the month from 10:00 until 11:30 a.m. On September 3 the group will discuss the events at Iuka and Corinth.

## Women's Civil War Book Club

The Civil War book club for women is on hiatus. If you are interested in joining the group, contact Denise Limburg at [dlimburg@prodigy.net](mailto:dlimburg@prodigy.net) or (847) 382-1022 or Mary Banks at (847) 497-3149 or [zeller1@comcast.net](mailto:zeller1@comcast.net).

## To Contribute to the Drum Roll

All members are welcome to contribute items to the newsletter. Appropriate subjects include book reviews, family histories, travel reports, and recent research. If you have information to share, please send it to Sally Smith, 328 Eastern Avenue, Barrington, Illinois 60010; (847) 381-6486; or [drum\\_roll4@juno.com](mailto:drum_roll4@juno.com).



## 2016–17 Officers and Trustees

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### Appointed Positions

Book Raffle	Charles Banks
Newsletter Editor	Sally Smith

## June Silent Auction

The lucky winners at the June silent auction were Mark Ostrand, who won *Mary Todd Lincoln: Her Life and Letters* by Justin G. Turner and Linda Levitt Turner; David Noe, who won *Crossroads of Freedom: Antietam* by James M. McPherson; Mike and Anna Strelka, who won *Make Me A Map of the Valley: The Civil War Journal of Stonewall Jackson's Topographer* by Jedediah Hotchkiss; Don Kenney, who won *Walt Whitman's Civil War*, edited by Walter Lowenfels; and Janet Linhart, who won *The Siege of Petersburg: The Battles for the Weldon Railroad, August 1864* by John Horn.

Congratulations to the winners and sincere thanks to the donors. To donate Civil War-related books or items, please contact Charlie Banks.

## Dues Are Due

Dues forms and checks should be sent to treasurer Tom DeFranco, 9273 Fairway Drive, Apt. 316, Des Plaines, Illinois 60016-1720. Dues are \$55 family, \$45 individual, and \$5 student. A sustaining membership is any payment over the normal rates. Deduct \$5 if you receive the newsletter by e-mail.

## Roster Change

### New address

Tom DeFranco  
9273 Fairway Drive, Apt. 316  
Des Plaines, Illinois 60016-1720  
(708) 953-3847  
e-mail tdefl122@gmail.com

## Speakers 2016–2017

September 2	Lance Herdegen	The Iron Brigade
October 7	Frank Crawford	The Centralia Massacre
November 4	Pat Schroeder	Appomattox Court House
December 2	Tony Ziebol	Richard Kirkland, the Angel of Marye's Heights
January 6	Bruce Allardice	The Conflict at Ezra Church
February 3	Andy Waskie	Major General George Meade
March 3	TBA	
April 7	Steve Fratt	Civil War Battle Tactics
May 5	Daniel Josephs	Illinois 82nd Regiment
June 2	Wayne Motts	The National Civil War Museum in Harrisburg, PA

**To learn more about the Northern Illinois Civil War Round Table**  
visit our website at [www.northernilcwr.org](http://www.northernilcwr.org)