

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

"The Taneytown Militia"

Carroll County Times Article for 4 September 1994

by Jay A. Graybeal

During the first half of the nineteenth century, local militia units were active throughout the county. These units ranged from amateurish "corn stalk regiments" to finely drilled uniformed companies. Dr. Clotworthy Birnie wrote a lengthy, and sometimes humorous, description of militia activities in his history of Taneytown published in the Carroll Record in 1894.

Soon after the Revolutionary War, Congress passed laws organizing all the male citizens of the United States, between the ages of 18 and 45 into militia. They were all placed under the command of the President of the United States as commander in chief, and provision was made for filling up every branch of the service. These laws, with some modifications are still in force. For many years there was a general muster once a year, but soon after 1840 this was discontinued, except in time of war, when every one of legal age is liable to be drafted. The only organized militia is the volunteer companies who are furnished with arms by the United States Government, and are, unless called out by the President, under the control of the Governors of the different states.

In common with the other states Maryland had its annual muster day. Before the formation of Carroll county, the general muster ground was up at the Monocacy, at Bridgeport I believe; all the male citizens between the ages of 18 and 45 were obliged to be there. They came armed with all sorts of inoffensive weapons, some with sticks, some with small fence stakes, the majority with corn stalks; it was this latter weapon that gave them the name of "Corn stalk Brigade," by which they were generally known. The company officers were, I believe, elected by the men, and the regimental officers appointed by the Governor. Most of the military titles before the war of the rebellion came from rank in the militia. Cols. Knox, Galt, Longwell and Boyle, and the various captains that bore those titles in the old days in Taneytown, won their first military honors from their position in the militia. Dr. Samuel Swope was, I believe, a colonel when the annual muster days were discontinued.

The mere mention of the old muster days brings a smile to the faces of most of those who took part in them; indeed it was because they had at last gotten to be a time for fun and jokes, instead of for serious military work, that they were finally stopped. The officers were generally in uniform but the men came in their ordinary dress. Of course it was a time for a general gathering of the people; cakes and small beer were to be had for a small sum, whiskey was only 3 cents a drink and when you remember that the temperance cause was only in its infancy, and that a large majority of the people thought it no harm to drink it, you can easily imagine that the fun was sometimes fast and furious among those who were inclined to drink more than they should.

One rather grim joke is still told with a great deal of gusto: a man who had spent all his money but one cent, and had gotten more than was good for him, was stretched out on a bench in the bar room apparently asleep. Some of his companions coming in said, "He's dead boys, let's put cents on his eyes." He lay still for a few minutes than reaching up, took the cents off his eyes and said, "now I have enough to get a drink," and suiting the action to the word, went up to the bar, and got it.

In addition to the county drill they used to have drills in Taneytown. The parade ground was up where the Reformed parsonage now stands which was then in commons enclosed on two sides by a fence. On one occasion while the militia were drilling, the officers of the company being in gorgeous uniform and

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the men trying how ridiculous they could make it, they finally got all the men faced into the fence corner, and their military education not being very complete, they did not know how to get them out; there they stood the men laughing, the crowd enjoying the situation and the small boy thinking it the best fun he ever saw. The commanding officer got red in the face and scratched his head, but could not remember the command, - it is said to be characteristic of great commanders, that they are not bound down to technical rules, and do not hesitate to change their plans even in the midst of a battle when it is necessary,--accordingly after a good deal of hesitation the officer of the day gave the order,"----- it, boys, turn around and march out of the corner." Squire Fisher and Captain William Burke were, I believe, the two last captains of militia in Taneytown.

Besides the corn stalk regiments, there have been volunteer military companies in Taneytown at various times; either there was more of a military spirit among the people, or the fact that they were obliged to drill at any rate, and preferred to do it in all the pomp and glory of uniform, U. S. Army guns with bayonets, music and flags rather than in the somewhat ridiculous corn stalk regiments. I have been able to learn of several military companies that were formed here; the light-horse company, spoken of by Mr. Luckenbach, which was formed during the Revolution, an artillery company raised by Captain Snyder, a company raised upwards of fifty years ago by Dr. Samuel Swope and afterwards commanded by Mr. Tobias Rudisel, and a company commanded by Mr. Wm. Guthrie, soon after the war. The latter had but a short life; they never had any uniform or muskets, using their own shot guns and rifles for drill, and soon disbanded. Of the light-horse company there is nothing but the tradition of its existence.

The company raised by Dr. Samuel Swope was, I believe, the best drilled, and most notable that ever graced our town. Their uniform was blue coat, with white trimming and white shoulder knots, brass buttons, blue pantaloons in winter and white in summer, high stiff caps with a shield and a tail feather. For some time they were obliged to get their music, (fife and drum) from Littlestown, a man named Keefer and the Lansingers furnishing it; later however the Messrs. Fogle, Joseph, David and Michael played the fife and drums. I have not been able to learn the names of all the officers. Dr. Samuel Swope was first captain; after the resignation of Dr. Annan he was appointed Lieutenant Colonel of Militia and Mr. Tobias Rudisel was elected captain. Messrs. John B. Boyle and Wm. Otter were lieutenants and Mr. Israel Hiteshue orderly sergeant. The company was generally formed on Frederick st., opposite the stone tavern, and then marched to the parade ground where the Reformed parsonage now stands. On two occasions at least, they took part in imposing military demonstrations; one was when they took part with the Pennsylvania militia in an encampment at Hanover. Col. Eichelberger, of Hanover, and Col. Small, of York, were in command of the York county militia. A great many of our older citizens still speak of what a fine appearance Dr. Samuel Swope made when it came his turn to act as officer of the day. In full uniform and riding a fine horse he was said to be the finest looking officer in the encampment. The Taneytown company had some very hilarious members, who played many merry pranks, but always succeeded in putting the blame on their Pennsylvania comrades.

When the corner stone of the court house in Westminster was laid there was another grand civic and military demonstration, in which our citizens took part, some of them rather grudgingly as they had hoped to have the county seat here.

During the Mexican War some of the members of the company, in order to tease the captain and have a good joke on him, proposed to offer their services to the government for the war. The proposition was carried, I believe, against the remonstrance of the captain, (Tobias Rudisel,) by an informal vote; he however turned the joke on them by calling a regular meeting of the company at which he assured them

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that while he did not care to go, still if they voted for it, every man of them would go whether they were in earnest or in fun. The proposition was unanimously defeated and the company staid at home. The only surviving members of the company so far as I can discover are, Dr. Swope, Messrs Jas. Davidson, Samuel Slick and Jas. Rogers. The boys also had a company with their own officers and a uniform of their own; they were armed with wooden gun, and drilled along with the men.

In writing these articles I have to depend mainly on tradition and the memory of those who took part in the scenes described, as every one knows people differ very much in their recollection of past events, even when they have happened but a short time ago, and this is much more apt to be the case when relating events that occurred a long time ago. I hope therefore, that when there is a misstatement of facts, any one who knows the correct version will tell me of it. I shall always be glad to state it correctly. I am told by a member of Captain Guthrie's military company that the company was gotten up by Mr. Piper, who lived at Antrim and Mr. Guthrie was afterwards elected captain. They had a uniform, blue jacket trimmed with yellow, white pantaloons with red stripe and military cap; Also that the company was raised just before the war in 1860. I think, and that the main cause of its disbanding was that a good many of its members enlisted in the Union Army.

So far as I can learn the only surviving member of Captain Snyder's artillery company is Dr. Samuel Swope. They had, I am told, two cannons; one was lent to the citizens of a neighboring community and no one seems to know what became of it; the other was burst at a celebration of the 4th of July, 40 years ago.

The 4th of July was then celebrated more generally than it is now; in a great many places there was a parade and patriotic speeches, and although a good deal of it was spread eagle oratory, it was better than to let the day go by unnoticed. An excess of patriotism is always better than a deficiency. On this occasion, while the celebration was at its height, Mr. Alexander Frazer being gunner, the cannon burst and the pieces flew in every direction, fortunately without injuring any one.

Dr. Birnie's complete history of Taneytown will appear in the Historical Society's new publication The Carroll Record Histories of Northwestern Carroll County Communities due out this fall.

Photo caption: Brass cap plate probably worn by a member of Capt. Samuel Swope's militia company, the Taneytown Guards, organized in 1838. A small tin shaft, made to hold the "tail feather" described by Dr. Birnie, is soldered on the back of the plate. Gift of Mrs. Arleigh Burke, from the estate of H. P. Gorsuch, 1953.