



Tales of Texas

NEWSLETTER



April 2024

This issue of Tales of Texas details a true American hero. He was not a Texan, but he fought Texans in the Civil War.

It's the story of Private Ira S. Pettit, Co. F. 1st Battalion, 11th U.S. Infantry, 2nd Brigade, 2nd Division, 5th Corps, Army of the Potomac.

The two photos, by the author, in the masthead are the first Republic of Texas flag and my grandson, Lincoln, surveying the battlefield at Gettysburg. Other photos in this edition are from the public domain and/or taken by the author.

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Who Was Ira Pettit?

Ira Pettit was a twenty-one-year-old farm boy from Wilson, Niagara County, New York. He lived with his parents and sister on the family farm which was walking distance from Lake Ontario or about twenty miles north of Niagara Falls. He was a fourth generation American, with the progenitor of the Pettit Family American line being a sea captain who was lost at sea.

Never Left Home

When Ira turned twenty-one, like many young men of the time, he joined the United States Army. He signed a three-year enlistment in the regular army and did not want his unit to be confused with the volunteer regiments which bore their home state's name. He was in the 11th United States Infantry – not the 11th New York Volunteers. Ira turned twenty-one on May 12, 1862, the second year of the Civil War. He stood 5'6" tall, weighed 142 lbs., with blonde hair, and blue eyes.

Ira marched to Lockport, NY and boarded a railroad car which took him to Canandaigua, NY, about 95 miles from his hometown. When Ira reached Canandaigua, he wrote his folks announcing he was now the furthest he had ever been from home. It excited him to no end because he had relatives living in the area. It disappointed him when the army denied him leave to visit family members. His unit was in transit to Boston for what we would now call "Boot Camp." He looked forward to visiting Boston as he studied the American Revolution in schoolbooks and longed to see where General Washington surrounded the city and exacted the British surrender from General Howe.



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*Private Ira S. Pettit
Army of the Potomac*



**Abraham Lincoln
President of the U.S.**

Ira was literate. He could read and write. When one peruses his diary, one can view words with peculiar spellings and punctuation. However, when we read such materials, we must remember that standardized spelling and punctuation did not yet exist. People generally believed that if the meaning and sounds could be made out, then it was good. I suppose our society is heading back 'round to those days. Ira's diary revealed he was, above all, a farmer's son. He was familiar with corn and wheat and marveled how the crops differed in other places.

When Ira arrived at Fort Independence, Massachusetts, he drew a diagram of the place for his father. The big guns guarding the harbor were impressive. The lad had never seen such things. He was mystified when other recruits would run away or argue with the sergeants. Those unfortunate men were assigned to "Company Q" as Ira called it for disciplinary reasons. Ira was happy to take his turn at guard duty and told his father that "Uncle Sam" was taking good care of him. His clothing was factory made and Ira had never seen the likes of it.

Ira would soon experience life on the march. Walking through mud and sleeping on the cold damp ground would soon take a toll on the federal troops. In April 1863, many soldiers developed a cough they attributed to the conditions. In all likelihood, Tuberculosis was spreading through the camps. In those days, germ theory and virus identification were still a long way off. Nevertheless, Ira was excited. President Abraham Lincoln arrived in Virginia and reviewed his army. In fact, Ira got to see the president two days in a row. He couldn't have been happier. He wrote home to his parents to advise them of the sight. He was particularly excited because the president was within view of the Confederate army across the river in Fredericksburg.

Ira was a popular young man among his peers. He noted that he could write home for fellows who could not read and write. He gladly helped the illiterate so their families could get news in their loved ones' own words. We take such abilities for granted here and now, but in those days, it was like a fantastic magic trick that allowed a person's words to fly across the country in the U.S. Mail. It took a letter about three days to get from the front to Upstate New York.

Soon, the Battle of Chancellorsville broke out and Ira was front and center in the Yankee debacle. The federal army was defeated, but the Rebels lost their best field officer, Stonewall Jackson.



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Author & Grandson
Chancellorsville



Devil's Den
Gettysburg

As the summer came to 1863, Ira walked north. His unit had a date with destiny in Pennsylvania. As Ira tramped north through Maryland, he noticed the dead and dying on the sides of the roads. Horses and mules were among the roadside casualties. Ira, being a private, was not in a position to know what was happening to his unit on the march. He noted the unusual sights in letters home, but he did not realize General JEB Stuart, the Confederate cavalry commander, was picking off federal resources piecemeal as they marched north.

Ira and his mates marched on, blissfully unaware the entire Army of Northern Virginia, including Hood's Texas Brigade, was waiting for them at the small town of Gettysburg.

Ira, of course, was too busy to write much about the battle itself, but he was overcome with how many dead and wounded lay about the fields. When the rain started after the battle, he thought it was a godsend for the wounded.

The officers and sergeants who trained him back in Boston were among the wounded and dead men.

Ira's unit suffered grievous casualties. Ira stood guard all night, ready for a General Lee counterattack that never came.

Then his march south trailing the Confederate army began. Ira knew he was headed back to the ruined woods and forests of Virginia. It was hot and his trusted officers now bivouaced with the dead.

He kept marching, fighting, and writing.

In May 1864, the two armies squared off again in the Battle of the Wilderness. The thick woods were ablaze due to the ferocity of the artillery and rifled musketry fire. It was most truly a "Hell on Earth" situation. At the battle's conclusion, thirty thousand men lay dead. It was General Grant's push to Richmond which featured attrition as his strategy. Grant had innumerable personnel resources he would trade for Confederate deaths. His belief was it would save Union lives in the long run and end the war faster. He also stopped prisoner transfers which he thought benefitted the South disproportionately.



Tales of Texas



Camp Sumter
Andersonville
Americus, GA

Ira survived the fiery Battle of the Wilderness. By now, he had seen it all. Man's inhumanity to man exploded on his previously innocent worldview. A world dominated by pitiless viruses and contagion now had man's modern weapons to conjoin Death's bloody calculus.

As he sat in camp reading his just-arrived precious letters from home, a Confederate force broke through the Union picket lines and captured the Yankees as they ate hot camp chow and read treasured mail.

Ira and forty-two others found themselves marching to Richmond's Libby Prison. Later, the unfortunate federal troops were placed on a train heading toward a rail stop named Camp Sumter, near Americus, Georgia.

Ira kept his diary and continued to write to his father. The letters were addressed to his father in care of a Flag of Truce to Washington, D.C. He told his father not to despair as he was determined to keep a positive outlook and survive the ordeal with dignity.

Ira kept his dignity. He continued to keep track of the prisoners who died in custody for their families. He wrote letters for the infirm and illiterate. He did all this until he could no longer put pencil to paper. Poor Ira. He contracted Scorbutus (Scurvy). The disease is caused from an extreme lack of Vitamin C. He quite probably had Dysentery as well. He suffered from enflamed bowels and ultimately succumbed to terminal diarrhea. Like 12,900 of his comrades, Ira died in the man-made squalor and filthy pestilence of Camp Sumter, also known as Andersonville.

Who was Ira Pettit? He was a young man who noted in his diary when he finished reading certain books of his Bible. He respected the authorities over him, and he loved his country. He loved his family and his hometown. He tried to survive for his father's sake. He signed his letters, "Your dutiful boy, Ira."

You may visit Ira's final resting place at Andersonville National Cemetery. The scale of interments there boggles the mind. It's a sobering experience.

Many thanks to Mr. J.P. Ray who decades ago came across the letters and published them. His work allowed Ira to be remembered.



Private Ira S. Pettit
Section H, Grave #11170
Andersonville