

William G. Wehner Letter

Origin of Rifle

Sgt. Gilbert Armstrong Company E

Awarded rifle for bravery at S.R. by friends in regiment

Regimental history of 58th Indiana

Letter

DREW UNIVERSITY

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Madison, New Jersey 07940/201-377-3000

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Mr. C. R. Suydam, Editor

Gun Report

678 South 1st Avenue

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Dear Mr. Suydam:

It has been some time now since I wrote you about my Henry rifle, and thought you may be interested in a progress report concerning my research. As you may remember, this rifle has the inscription, "Presented to Sgt. G. Armstrong of the 58th Indiana Volunteers for Gallant Conduct at Stone's [sic] River, Tennessee." Thanks to your interest and the suggestions you forwarded to me, after the publication of my letter in an issue of Gun Report, I have been very successful in tracking down some of the history of this rifle.

From the National Archives (military and pension records) I learned, among other things, that Gilbert Armstrong was born in 1822 in Shelby County, Kentucky, was five feet tall, had blue eyes and light hair. He was thirty-nine when he enlisted on October 13, 1861.

On September 19, 1863, at the Battle of Chickamauga, Armstrong "...was wounded by a musket ball in the right breast, the ball entering in front about six inches below the throat, and passing through the chest, striking the right lung and coming out through the shoulder breaking the right arm" (Declaration for Invalid Army Pension). Armstrong was

captured by the Confederates in this condition, but was released in about four months. He then returned to his old regiment for further action.

Prior to the Battle of Chickamauga, the Battle of Stone's [sic] River occurred, where Armstrong's valor was cited by his comrades. Between the date of this battle and some nine months later, when he was severely wounded, Armstrong was awarded the rifle. Much to my consternation, I have been unsuccessful in locating any facts surrounding this presentation (the Indiana Archives had nothing; the official record of Stone's [sic] River does not list Armstrong as a recipient of any award for gallantry; others were listed which seems to indicate that Armstrong's award was made by close friends rather than by official regimental action).

I have twice written to the publisher of the Clarion newspaper in Princeton, Indiana (the Press of the Clarion published, in 1895, Hight's History of the 58th....) trying to ascertain the extent of the Clarion's index on the Civil War years (this newspaper was founded in 1843 and Princeton was the site of the formation of this regiment. There is a magnificent monument in the center of this town honoring the 58th Indiana), but after two months, I have not had a response. I was in hopes of uncovering an article concerning the facts about Armstrong's gallantry at Stone's [sic] River.

While unsuccessful in this one area, I have been very successful in other areas. At one time you forwarded to me some correspondence you had received from Mr. Dennis K. McDaniel, Curator, G.A.R. Memorial Hall Museum in Madison, Wisconsin concerning possible sources of information for me. Mr. McDaniel suggested the book Hight's History of the 58th.... which obviously was a "must" reference source for me. His suggestion led me to the New York Public Library and to this book. You can imagine my delight when not only had I found the regimental history of the 58th Indiana, but there on page 337 was a picture of Sgt. Armstrong...and not by his lonesome, but holding the Henry rifle! (The caption under the picture reads in part "...The gun shown in the cut is the Henry rifle, presented to him by some of his friends in the regiment, for bravery shown in the Battle of Stone's [sic] River.")

My joy in finding the picture was surpassed a few pages later when I found a passage explaining that when Armstrong was wounded he gave his rifle to Lieutenant H. J. Barnett of Company F. Still later I found another passage which read, "At the time he (Barnett) was shot he had the Henry rifle belonging to Gilbert Armstrong, who was wounded yesterday. The rebels took the gun and all his clothing and valuables...."

A book finding company in California wrote me last week that they had found me a copy of this rare first edition. I promptly submitted the seventy-five dollar purchase price.

Incidentally, my letter to the Clarion in Princeton also contained a question as to the whereabouts of the original manuscript with pictures. It seems to me that it would be ideal to have a picture made from the original to display with the rifle. Also, I plan to frame the compilation of history of this rifle mentioned very briefly in this letter and inconclusive at this point, which would certainly make interesting reading to antique gun admirers and history buffs. I have also considered loaning, at some point, the rifle, picture, and history to the museum at Stone's [sic] River, if one exists.

At this point I seem to have exhausted all sources of information suggested to me by your readers. I now plan to approach a few Civil War historians to see if they can give me a few minutes of their valuable time by offering some suggestions to get me going again.

Mr. Suydam, I am in your debt for publishing my letter and being of such valuable assistance. When my mission is finally accomplished, I will let you know.

Sincerely,

William G. Wehner