OPINION

PORTAGE PATHWAYS

John Grate was living link to Civil War

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As a young man, John Henry Grate was an eyewitness to history.

A lifetime later, as a very old man, he was himself a part of history, a living link to a distant past.

John Henry Grate spent virtually all of his 104 years in Portage County, where he was born on Aug. 1, 1845, in Edinburg.

For roughly two years, however, he was stationed with the Union Army during the Civil War, serving with the Sixth Ohio Cavalry Regiment and later with the Army of the Potomac.

He was 19 years old when he witnessed Robert E. Lee's surrender of the Confederacy at Appomattox Court House, Va., on April 9, 1865. Eighty years later, as the nation fought its second world war, he was able to share tales of his experiences in the Civil War as one of the last surviving veterans of that terrible ordeal.

Grate was among 1,800 Portage County men who marched off to defend the Union, enlisting in October 1863 from Newton Falls. Modest about his experiences in the war, according to one account, he experienced his only "close call" when a bullet came uncomfortably close to his cap.

Returning from the war, he became a buggy maker, pursuing a trade he had learned during his youth. A skilled woodworker, he was employed for many years by the Heiser buggy works in Yale, the community located at the crossroads of Atwater, Edinburg, Deerfield and Palmyra. He worked there until it closed because of the advent of the automobile.

He later farmed on his property in Atwater's northeastern corner, marketing dried corn through an evaporator works on his property. After the evaporator works burned, he retired and moved to Atwater Center in 1918, spending the rest of his long life there.

He was proud of his Civil War service and was active in the Ohio Department of the Grand Army of the Republic, a veterans' organization that, with the passing of time, inevitably dwindled in size. He attended national encampments of the G.A.R. and faithfully turned out for Memorial Day observances in Atwater.

When he was nearly 100 years old, he was elected commander of the Ohio G.A.R. unit and, in 1946, was named national commander of the G.A.R. By that time, however, only a dozen veterans were able to travel to the annual encampment.

Hundreds of Commander Grate's neighbors, however, turned out to salute their community's celebrated resident when Atwater observed "John Grate Day" on Jan. 31, 1947.

"The gentlemanly commander took the celebration in stride, wisecracking his pressure upon being the central figure in 'all the fuss,'" Evening Record reporter Doris Troyer wrote in an article headlined, "It Was a 'Grate' Day for Atwater."

Representatives of the Spanish-American War and both world wars paid tribute to the Civil War veteran, who related some of his wartime experiences from eight decades earlier.

Later, seated in a rocking chair, he greeted scores of well-wishers. Among them was 88-year-old Homer Hillyard of Atwater, who told Commander Grate, "I saw you march off to war," recalling a vivid memory he had experienced as a 3-year-old.

Grate, who drove his car well into his 90s, was reported to be in excellent health except for failing hearing. When he was 100 years old, he was summoned for jury duty in Ravenna but excused because of his age.

Portage County's last surviving Civil War veteran was two months short of his 104th birthday when he died on June 7, 1949, a week after missing Memorial Day rites in Atwater for the first time in decades. He had made plans to dissolve the Ohio G.A.R. unit later that month.

"Taps sounded today throughout Heaven's camps as John Henry Grate of Atwater, one of three remaining Ohioans who fought for the Union Army in the Civil War, reported for final orders to the first-ranking Commanding General," Evening Record reporter Kaye Birkner wrote in Grate's obituary.

He was buried in Atwater Cemetery, with military rites conducted by Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War.

A year after his death, Atwater dedicated a marble monument honoring the 49,000 Ohioans who fought for the Union — including John Grate and 71 other men from Atwater — on a site on S.R. 183 near the cemetery.

John Henry Grate of Atwater, Portage County's last surviving Civil War veteran, was 101 years old when he was elected national commander of the Grand Army of the Republic in 1946.

The monument stood proudly for nearly 60 years until it was toppled last week after being struck by an errant driver. It is hoped that this reminder of the service of Commander Grate and his comrades in the nation's bloodiest conflict will be rebuilt.