

## Eulogy for Corydon McElvain, 81<sup>st</sup> Illinois Delivered July 12, 1938

*[edits and clarifications added in italics by Richard H. Hunter, great grandson of Corydon]*

Let us pause in our activities and dedicate a few minutes of our time to the memory of someone dear. To Corydon McElvain. Most of you know him well and what I am about to say is already known to you. But for the benefit of those who don't, I think it fitting to give a brief resume of his life.

Born in the family home northwest of DuQuoin on Feb. 12, 1846, to Esther and Joseph McElvain, Corydon lived the rugged and carefree life natural to boyhood on a farm. At the age of 15, he and his brother Ephram *[age 17]* enlisted in the Union Army at the outbreak of the Civil War serving in the 81<sup>st</sup> Illinois Infantry under Gen. John A. Logan. On the morning of May 22, 1863, two years later, in the battle of Vicksburg, he was seriously wounded by cannon fire *[Gen. McClernand's assault under orders of Gen. John A. Logan]*. A slow and painful recovery served only to make him more eager to join his brother and comrades in the fight for his ideals.

Sometime later *[June 10, 1864, in Battle of Bryce's Crossroads, near Guntown, MS his infantry was defeated, and he and his brother were captured by Confederate Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest and sent to Andersonville Prison in Georgia]* he and others of his troop, were captured by the Confederate Army and placed in Andersonville Prison. Many were the tales of fierce brutality and horror he told concerning his eleven months of imprisonment. Thousands of Yankee soldiers died as a result of treatment received there. Many more died of smallpox contacted and activated by the exposure to filth in which they were forced to live. Corydon vaccinated himself against this dreaded disease by placing a smallpox scab over a scratch on his arm making a large sore. He then traded his meager rations of food for fellow prisoner's salt which he bound to his arm. As each prisoner received only one teaspoon of salt a week, it required many weeks of starvation to cure his arm. It was to this vaccination and treatment he attributed his survival. Eleven months after his capture, the North and South exchanged prisoners. Corydon was among those released from Andersonville. They were herded on box cars in winter and after hours of travel, were abandoned, scarcely dressed and without shoes in swampy jungle-like country. Penniless and hungry, they were forced to survive the best they could. Later, they discovered they were in Florida. After an ordeal of vain searching and hiding, from the enemy, Corydon finally stumbled, half dead, into a camp of Northern soldiers who fed and clothed him to the best of their ability sharing what little they had with him. In a short time, he recovered from his experience and was back in active service again until his discharge on June 17, 1865.

After peace was declared, Corydon returned to DuQuoin where he entered the bakery business, but asthmatic conditions aggravated by flour caused him to retire from this trade. *[He owned City Bakery on Main Street in DuQuoin. His lungs were permanently damaged by many months of starvation during his time at Andersonville Prison]* He was street commissioner for three terms in DuQuoin and for several years served as a guard at Menard Penitentiary. When he retired from this position the prisoners presented him with a 17 jeweled gold pocket watch of which he was very proud.

On October 24, 1872, he married Lucinda Reid. Six children were born to them, three of whom died in infancy. One son, Hiley, was killed in a train accident at the age of 19. Only two children are surviving: Mrs. Lola Kirkpatrick of DuQuoin and Mrs. Ruby Hunter of East St. Louis. After 48 years of marriage his wife died, May 15, 1920.

In his later years, he was apt to refer to himself as “living on borrowed time” or waiting to Join Lou.” He had two ambitions he wanted to fulfill before that time came. One was to visit Vicksburg and the other to visit Gettysburg. Both of these were realized.

On May 19, 1938, when 92 years old, he returned to Vicksburg to attend the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Vicksburg on the site where he had been wounded three quarters of a century before. He saw a memorial slab bearing the names of those wounded in the battle and found his name on it. He was told that, of all the names on this slab, he was the only veteran to return and see their name there. It was his unique experience to meet a confederate veteran who had guarded him while a prisoner at Andersonville.

Corydon had received an invitation from the United States Government to attend a farewell reunion of Union and Confederate veterans at Gettysburg as their guest. The invitation also included an escort and for this purpose Corydon asked his grandson Hiley Hunter to accompany him. It was during this ten-day journey that his condition became weakened. Hiley secured a wheelchair for him and pushed him over tours of the battlefield.

When he returned home on Thursday afternoon, his only complaint was that he was tired. He firmly stated that no matter what the results of the trip might be he was glad he had gone, that nothing could have stopped him and that now he had done everything he wanted to in life, and he was ready to join Lou. This he did at 1:15 Saturday afternoon, July 9, 1938, drifting into final rest in his favorite sleeping position.

The following Tuesday afternoon from 2:30 until 4:30 all business ceased in DuQuoin and while the flags along Main Street floated at half mast, several thousand relatives and friends gathered at the First Christian Church to pay their last respects to a grand old man. Rev. Paul Bolman officiated assisted by Rev. W. M. Maxton. A male quartet beautifully sang “In the Upper Garden” and “God Will Make All Things Right.” Full military honors were accorded the aged veteran. At graveside salvos were fired by a squad of Legionnaires followed by taps by Post buglers. Thus, Corydon McElvain exchanged his worldly existence in which we knew and loved him for a spiritual life in the Great Beyond leaving with us many happy memories to cherish.

The memory of someone dear is like a thing of gold,  
That never dulls or tarnishes or grows in the least bit old;  
It is a ray of sunshine bright that fills an empty room,  
And it is like a flower fair that never fails to bloom.  
It offers consolation in the face of strife and stress,  
And adds a certain beauty to each dream of happiness.  
The memory of someone dear, however long apart,  
Is like a soothing melody that lingers in the heart.  
It is a perfect picture of a rainbow in the sky:  
It is the portrait of a past that cannot ever die.

[Corydon McElvain was the father-in-law of Colonel Samuel Nase Hunter, grandfather of George Hiley Hunter, and great grandfather of Richard H. Hunter, Trustee of the Jacob Hunter Trust]

## Civil War Experience of Corydon McElvain and his brother Ephraim

By Richard H. Hunter (Great Grandson of Corydon McElvain)

From: <https://jacobhuntertrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/JHT-Newsletter-26-1-2017.pdf>

Joseph Harvey McElvain (b. 10 Jun 1816, d. 4 Jul 1904) and his wife Esther Lipe (b. 14 Apr 1820, d. 3 Mar 1896) lived in Perry County in the southern part of Illinois. Together they had 15 children. Two sons, Ephraim (b. 15 Apr 1844, d. 28 Jan 1890) and Corydon (b. 12 Feb 1846, d. 9 Jul 1938) fought in the Civil War for the Union.

The brothers, Ephraim (age 17) and Corydon (age 15) joined other Perry County neighbors to enlist in the 81<sup>st</sup> Illinois Volunteer Infantry to fight in the War of the Great Rebellion. This followed President Lincoln's second call in the summer of 1862 for volunteers to serve the United States for three years.

Capt. Cowen arrived with his full company from Perry County to muster in at Anna, IL on August 1, 1862. His was designated Co. A. The full number of companies arrived by August 15 to form the 81<sup>st</sup> Illinois Regiment with James J. Dollins chosen as Colonel. On Sept 6<sup>th</sup> the 81<sup>st</sup> Illinois was sent by train to Cairo, IL to join Grant's Army. On Oct 5, 1862, the Ladies of DuQuoin sent Corydon and Ephraim a small, leather-bound New Testaments they carried through the remainder of the War. The brothers Ephraim and Corydon participated in many skirmishes and battles. Key ones include:

May 1, 1863 Thompson's Hill near Port Gibson, MS

May 3, 1863 Battle of Bayou Pierre

May 12, 1863 Battle of Raymond, MS

May 13, 1863 Battle of Clinton, MS

May 14, 1863 Battle of Jackson, MS

May 16, 1863 Battle of Champion Hill, MS

May 18, 1863 Battle of Vicksburg, MS

May 22, 1863 Corydon McElvain was wounded by enemy fire during a charge on enemy works at Vicksburg (Gen. McClernand's assault under General John A. Logan)

July 4, 1863 Confederates surrender at Vicksburg

Aug 21 - Sept 20, 1863 Expedition to The Washita

Jan 10, 1864 Smallpox epidemic in the 81<sup>st</sup> IL; several died

March 9 - May 24, 1864 Red River Expedition

May 25, begin march towards Guntown, MS

**June 10, 1864 Battle of Bryce's Crossroads**, near Guntown, MS. This battle pitted

Confederate Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest against Union Brigadier General Samuel D. Sturgis. Corydon and Ephraim were captured in this battle that has been described as the worst defeat of a United States infantry in any battle, from any war. The brothers were sent to Andersonville Prison in Georgia until their release on April 20, 1865.

The conditions at Andersonville Prison were horrendous. Horrid living conditions, mass starvation, illness, and death were constants. Smallpox was a major problem for prisoners and many deaths resulted from this disease. During his imprisonment, Corydon vaccinated himself by scratching his arm until it bled then wrapping a smallpox scab from a person who died of smallpox on his arm. Over many days Corydon traded his meager food rations for salt. When rations were available, the prisoners were allocated a teaspoon of salt per week. Corydon saved up a supply of salt to heal his infected arm after the smallpox scab was removed. He credited this vaccination with saving his life.

During November and December of 1864, General Winder and officials at Andersonville were worried that General Sherman, during his Atlanta campaign, would veer south and free the prisoners at Andersonville. They were concerned that



Corydon McElvain, Civil War

if the horror, starvation, and death at Andersonville Prison were made known, the public support for the war would decline in both the North and the South. General Sherman ignored the suffering of the Union prisoners at Andersonville and after taking Atlanta marched eastward toward the sea. Had Sherman (Kilpatrick's cavalry near Macon) marched even a portion of his troops to Andersonville, he would have saved many Union lives.

Winder decided to send the prisoners from Andersonville to Thomasville (near the Florida line) to construct a new stockade further from Sherman's reach. Beginning on December 5 to December 10, prisoners, without adequate clothing or shoes, were transported by train to Thomasville. When they arrived, it became obvious that the

prisoners were too weak from starvation to cut trees and build the new stockade. On December 19 the plans for the Thomasville stockade were abandoned and the weakened Yankees were ordered to begin marching north. The first day they walked 10 miles. The next day the prisoners were required to march 15 miles or more through swamps while being drenched with rain. The fourth day of the trek found the prisoners near the banks of the Flint River just below Albany, Georgia.



This was the day (December 22, 1864) that Sherman's army arrived in Savannah. Corydon, his brother Ephraim, and his fellow Yankee prisoners survived this four-day march through swamps up to a mile wide in partially frozen water with little food, and many without shoes and warm clothing. At Albany they were loaded on a train where they huddled together on boxcars. The train proceeded north and when the train stopped; prisoners were devastated when they saw Commander Henry Wirtz. They had arrived back at Andersonville Prison.

Records obtained from [www.civilwarprisons.com](http://www.civilwarprisons.com) state that Corydon was "exchanged" from Andersonville Prison on April 1, 1865. Corydon and his brother were actually loaded on a train on April 20, 1865, and sent south to a remote location in Florida. The train suddenly stopped in the middle of nowhere and the prisoners told to get off. They did not know where they were, and those who could, began walking to locate much needed food and water. All prisoners were in a state of advanced starvation.

Walking was treacherous for the prisoners since there were still Confederate soldiers who either did not know the war was over or harbored hatred for Union soldiers. The released prisoners walked at night to avoid contact until, after many days, they stumbled half dead into a Union camp. Finding this Union encampment led to the nourishment they so desperately needed.

Corydon recovered and remained on active duty until June 17, 1865, when Corydon (at age 19) and Ephraim (at age 21) were discharged from Union service in Springfield, Illinois.

After the War, Corydon returned to DuQuoin, IL where he entered the bakery business. Asthmatic conditions aggravated by flour caused him to retire from the trade. He was street commissioner for three terms in DuQuoin and for several years served as a guard at Menard Penitentiary at Chester, IL. His experiences at



Andersonville forged a deep understanding of the plight of prisoners, and he was very kind and respectful towards them. When he retired the Menard prisoners collected money to purchase and present him a 17-jeweled gold pocket watch. This was one of his prized possessions.

On May 19, 1938, at 92 years of age, he returned to Vicksburg to attend the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Battle of Vicksburg on the site where he had been wounded three quarters of a century before. He was honored to attend a ceremony at the Vicksburg Battlefield where the Illinois memorial stood. It was reported that Corydon was the only Civil War soldier from Illinois to ever see his name on the Illinois monument. Corydon had the unique experience to meet a Confederate veteran who had guarded him while a prisoner at Andersonville.

Corydon received an invitation from the U.S. Government to attend a farewell reunion of Union and Confederate veterans June 29 to July 6, 1938, at Gettysburg, PA as their guest. The invitation included an escort and Corydon chose his grandson Hiley Hunter to accompany him. It was during this 10-day journey that his condition became

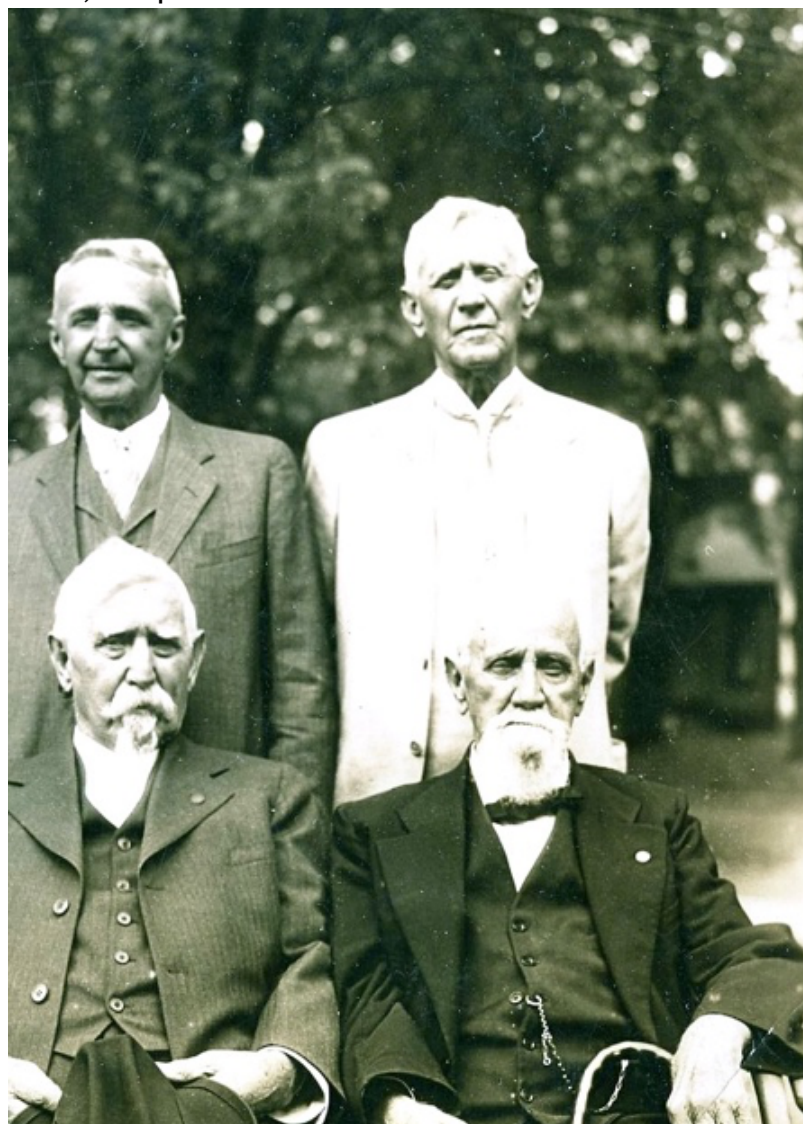
weakened. Hiley secured a wheelchair and pushed him over tours of the battlefield. When he returned home on Thursday afternoon, his only complaint was that he was tired. He firmly stated that no matter what the results of the trip might be he was glad he had gone, that nothing could have stopped him, and now he had done everything he wanted to do in life, and he was ready to join Lou.

Corydon died on the 9<sup>th</sup> of July 1938 at the age of 92 after attending the Civil War Soldiers reunion at Gettysburg, PA. The entire community honored and provided solemn tribute to Comrade Corydon McElvain as he joined the Army of the Great Beyond.

#### REFERENCES

Newsome, Edmund (1880). *Experience in the War of the Great Rebellion*. Reprinted 1984 by Jackson County Printing, Murphysboro, IL.

Marvel, William (1994). *Andersonville: The Last Depot*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill.



Corydon McElvain and his brothers. Standing L to R: Andrew McElvain and Robert McElvain. Sitting L to R: Corydon McElvain and a Confederate soldier, Mr. Revela.



Corydon McElvain and his grandson,  
George Hiley Hunter



Corydon McElvain's Bible he carried  
throughout the Civil War





Main Street, DuQuoin, IL Corydon McElvain's City Bakery on right.

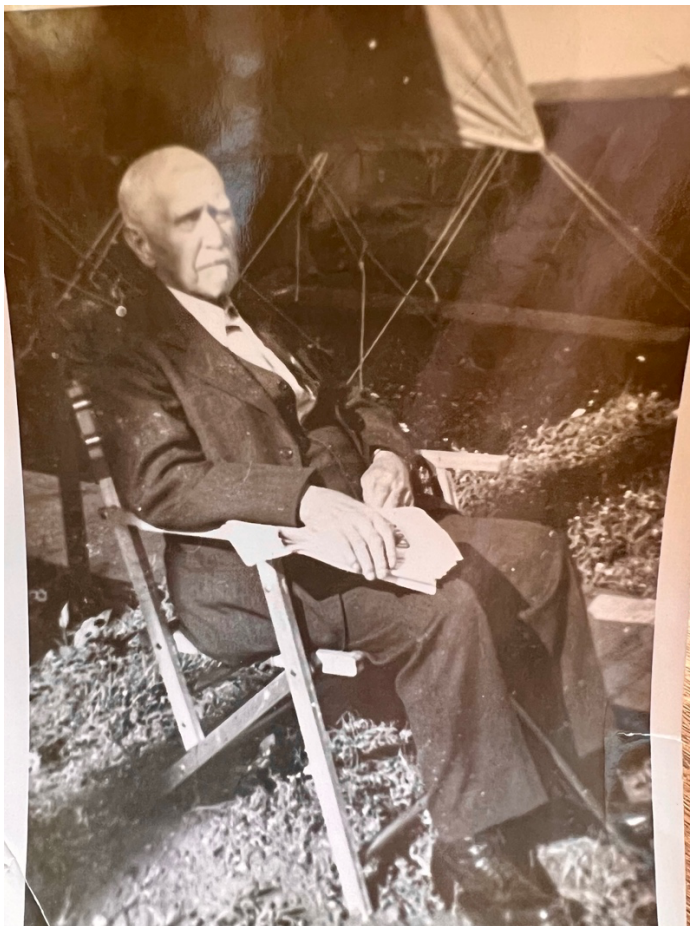


Corydon McElvain at the Vicksburg battlefield where he was wounded on May 22, 1863. Picture taken in May 1938 when Corydon was 92.





Vicksburg Battlefield, May 19, 1938, three days shy of 75 years since Corydon was wounded near this location.



Gettysburg Battlefield Late June and Early July 1938. Last known photograph of Corydon McElvain before his death July 9, 1938