

## The Story of the Scythe Tree

Almost every city and village in New York State has a Civil War monument. They serve as silent markers of “the life blood spilt, that a country might live and that a race be freed.”<sup>1</sup> One of the most unusual Civil War monuments, however, is the Scythe Tree. This is not a monument of brass or marble, but of living wood.<sup>2</sup> The Scythe Tree is a living monument to young men going off to war. The Scythe Tree is located at 841 Waterloo-Geneva Road, two miles west of Waterloo, NY on Routes 5 and 20. The tree itself is a Balm of Gilead, a species rarely found in this part of the state, a variety of the poplar tree.

Following the fall of Fort Sumter in April 1861, the nation was swept with war fever. President Abraham Lincoln called for troops and thousands of brave men and boys rushed to arms. Recruiting officers visited this section of the country and held patriotic meetings in the district school houses and churches, to get recruits for the Union Army. One evening in the early fall of 1861, James Wyman Johnson attended one of these meetings, held in the Vail District school house. He was the oldest son of James and Elizabeth Goodhue Johnson. Altogether, there were two daughters and two sons and their parents living on this small farm. James himself had been born at Pennfield, New Hampshire, on January 1, 1835. At this fall 1861 recruiting meeting at the Vail District school house, “many hard-handed farmers and their sons gathered that night and listened with mixed emotions and drawn faces to the appeal of the recruiting agents; it must have been much like an old fashioned revival...”<sup>3</sup> Johnson was particularly impressed by the arguments of the Reverend Samuel H. Gridley, D.D. pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Waterloo. His comments made Johnson feel as if it were his duty to respond and, if need be, give his life for his country. He was torn, however, by his “responsibilities” to his family and the farm. Which was more important—his patriotic duty or his duty to family and the farm?

Still pondering over this question the next morning, Johnson went out into the field to mow. While swinging the scythe, he decided he needed to enlist. Hastening to the house, he told his parents of his intention. He carefully placed the scythe in the crotch of the tree and said, “Leave this scythe in the tree until I return.” It needs to be noted that at time the tree was a young sapling about eight inches in diameter and just a few feet in height. Fighting back the tears streaming down their cheeks, his parents consented to his wishes, and young Johnson prepared to enlist. On October 29, 1861, he enlisted in Company G, 85<sup>th</sup> New York Volunteers, commanded by Captain John Raines of Canandaigua and composed mostly of young men from Seneca County.<sup>4</sup> At the time of his enlistment, he was twenty-six years old and was described as a serious, slim beardless, blue-eyed young man of medium height (believed to be five feet, ten inches tall) with dark hair neatly combed.<sup>5</sup>

After many months of hardship and fighting, Wyman Johnson (he is known as Wyman Johnson in the military records) returned home in 1863 for furlough. His parents were shaken by James’ bearded, melancholy face which made him look twice his age and visibly demonstrated the harsh realities of the war experiences. At the end of his furlough, he returned to battle, leaving behind his heartbroken parents and the scythe—still hanging in the tree.<sup>6</sup>

His military experiences continued to be unpleasant. He was taken prisoner in New Berne, North Carolina and thrown into one of the war prisons. Later he was released, probably in

an exchange of prisoners, and he went back into battle still again. On April 20, 1864, the now Sergeant Johnson was wounded in the upper thigh, at Plymouth, North Carolina, by a blast from a small carbine. Realizing that he was likely to die, Johnson gave his re-enlistment money to his friend Lieutenant Edwin Pierson, asking Edwin to give the money to his parents. (Edwin was very soon forced to march to Andersonville prison and we do not know what happened to Johnson's money). As part of the wounded, Johnson was treated by over-worked Confederate surgeons until about mid-May. Then Wyman and the other wounded were moved out to make room for more Confederate troops. Johnson was taken with the severely wounded soldiers to the Confederate Hospital at Raleigh, North Carolina.<sup>7</sup> He died there on May 22, 1864, from his wounds and was buried in an unknown grave.<sup>8</sup>

News of the whereabouts of Johnson was slow getting back to his family in Waterloo. The scythe remained in the poplar tree near the kitchen door, a constant reminder of the elder son's absence. Rumors spread about the fate of the "Plymouth Pilgrims"—many of those soldiers captured at the Plymouth, North Carolina battle and now being held at Andersonville Prison where a third of the company would die of typhoid, dysentery, smallpox or starvation. In December 1864, Wyman's sister Julia wrote to the surgeon general. Surgeon William T. Comstock wrote back on January 16, 1865, saying Wayman had

“received a several wound of the middle 3<sup>rd</sup> of the right thigh, the ball lodging near the bone and fracturing the same. We remained at Plymouth til May 15<sup>th</sup> when we removed to Raleigh, N.C. The journey was a very severe one, which so exhausted him that at 6 o'clock of the morning of the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May, he breathed his last. He was conscious until within a few minutes of his death. I dressed his wound from the day he received his injury to the day of his death. I never once heard him complain. He was conscious of his danger, and wished me to inform his friends of his fate. This was the only request he made. As he never seemed willing to converse during his sickness, I did not exact anything further from him....The rebel surgeons, I must say, were very kind, and did all they could. The medicines, dressing and diet were good....<sup>9</sup>

Hearing the news of the death of their son, the parents refused to believe it. They prayed that he would some day return to them. They kept their faith of the return of their son up until their death—the father died nine years after their son's death, and the mother died nineteen years after the son's death.<sup>10</sup>

It was not until 1916 that the actual burial place of Wyman Johnson was “found.” Francis Bacon, the patriotic instructor of the Grand Army of the Republic for Seneca County, received word from the Quarter-Master General of the United States Army that the grave of Wyman J. Johnson had been found in the Confederate Cemetery where a tombstone had been erected to his memory.

The national “Memorial Day” observance is credited as starting with an event in Waterloo in 1866. Sometime shortly after that, a private memorial for Wyman James Johnson was being observed by Johnson's neighbor Lucinda Jane (McCurdy) Bodine. She and a friend

Seth Genung would make evergreen wreaths and bouquets of flowers. They would take these to the Johnson farm and place them at the base of the tree.<sup>11</sup>

In those many years following Johnson's death, the tree grew to maturity, measuring 100 feet in height and over five feet in diameter. The scythe became imbedded in the very heart of the tree, with only a few inches of the scythe blade protruding. The wooden handle part of the scythe had decayed and dropped off. In 1916 a bolt of lightning struck the tree, rending the bark from top to bottom, killing three of its limbs, but not injuring the scythe. The tree was then treated and has survived.<sup>12</sup> As Mildred Morgan described it so well, "no memorial can match the living one that breathes on the Johnson farm."<sup>13</sup> For many years, the Women's Relief Corps of Tyler J. Snyder Post No. 72, G.A.R. placed a new flag on this historic scythe tree, with appropriate services to commemorate this event.

The onset of American involvement in World War I led to another major chapter in this story. Two young men living on the Scythe Tree Farm, as it was by then commonly known, enlisted. They were the sons of Mr. C. L. Schaffer, who owned the farm at the time. Raymond L. Schaffer enlisted in the United States Army on January 18, 1918, and was called into service in Company F, 33<sup>rd</sup> Engineers, at Camp Devens, Massachusetts on March 22, 1918. On leaving his home, he placed his scythe in the tree. The Carpenters' Local Union No. 187 of Geneva, NY, of which he was a member, kept an American flag floating over his scythe. On May 28, 1918, his only and younger brother, Lynn E. Schaffer, enlisted in the United States Navy at Geneva, NY, and was called into service on May 29, 1918, at the United States Naval Training Station, Great Lakes, Illinois. He also hung a scythe beside his brother's. The Young Men's Bible Class of the First Presbyterian Church of Waterloo, of which he was a member, kept the American flag flying over his scythe. This meant that a total of three American flags were kept continually waving over the three scythes until the close of World War I—one each in honor of Wyman James Johnson, Raymond Schaffer and Lynn Schaffer.

The two Schaffer boys safely returned home and each removed the handle from his scythe, leaving the blade in the tree.<sup>14</sup> Their two flags were taken down. Sometime after this, the Waterloo Rotary Club erected a modest granite marker near the tree, giving the pertinent facts of this tree's story. Today, one can see only the tips of the blades of all three scythes hanging in the tree. Each blade tip has been painted to make them easier to spot.

Though time has passed and the aged tree continues to deteriorate, its fame continues. In July 1990, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation named the Scythe Tree as one of eleven trees to be of "extraordinary historic significance."<sup>15</sup> The Scythe Tree is listed by The National Arbor Day Foundation as one of the Majestic Trees of America.<sup>16</sup> In September 2002, Faye Sizemore published this poem in tribute to the history and meaning of this tree:

## **THE SCYTHE TREE**

A farmer boy did answer the call to war

He hung his scythe in a cottonwood tree;  
Little did he know he'd not need it any more.  
Around it for years the tree did grow  
It cradled his scythe just so  
A monument to a brave Union soldier  
Who never came home and this is why  
He was captured and so did die  
in South Carolina in a confederate infirmary  
His scythe in New York still remains in the tree  
though only the tip of it you now can see  
a salute to brave James W. Johnson  
who fought for all people to be free  
And this soldier was not to be the last one  
Years later World War One was raging on  
Alongside James's the boys also hung their scythes  
And to fight in a foreign land they were gone  
The tree still stands through the summers and ice  
A living tribute to brave soldiers gone to war;  
May it stand in remembrance forevermore<sup>17</sup>

Recently the condition of the tree has been of extreme concern. The tree suffered some damage in the ice storm of early 2003. The obvious needs for repairs to the tree to restore its visual appearance, as well as the very continued existence of the old tree, prompted Sheila Agrasto, the current owner of the property, to approach the Town of Waterloo for funding the effort. Research into the matter made clear that the Town of Waterloo was not responsible for upkeep of the tree—the deed to the property contains a provision that the G.A.R. (the Grand Army of the Republic—a organization established by Union veterans of the Civil War) had this responsibility. The Town of Waterloo did provide \$300 so that the Quality Tree Service, working with the Caywood Camp chapter of the Sons of Union Veterans, could remove the branches damaged from the ice storm.<sup>15</sup> The Department of new York Sons of Union Veterans chapter has spearheaded the establishment of a \$500 fund for future maintenance of this tree.<sup>16</sup> Given the commitment on the part of the present-day organization replacing the G.A.R. to preserving the well-being of this aging tree, it is hoped that future generations will be able to enjoy the very tree of which there is so much history.

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<sup>15</sup> Telephone conversation with Joyce Fredericks, September 3, 2003.

<sup>16</sup> Telephone conversation with Dale E. Theetgye, September 3, 2003.

The Scythe Tree remains a visual reminder of the sacrifice that many young men have made—to go off to war, and in many cases not returning alive. The spirit of Wyman Johnson and the Scythe tree is well-expressed in the these words of the sixteen-year old Louise Menzer: ‘Thus, we see this great hero of 1861 has not only a marble shaft at his last resting place, but has also a nobler monument...to mark the memory of him who sacrificed his home, his loved ones, and his life for his country.’<sup>18</sup>

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**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> Louise Menzer, “History of the Scythe Tree,” taken from War Records and prepared for the Seneca County Chamber of Commerce, c. 1988

<sup>2</sup> “New York’s Famous and Historic Trees,” *The Conservationist*, March-April 1987, p 32.

<sup>3</sup> Menzer

<sup>4</sup> Menzer

<sup>5</sup> Wayne Mahood, “Until I Return: The legend of the Scythe Tree,” *Civil War Times Illustrated*.

<sup>6</sup> Menzer

<sup>7</sup> Mahood

<sup>8</sup> There is some question as to whether the grave was “unmarked” or “unknown.” Mildred Morgan in her September 2002, story uses the word “unmarked” to refer to the grave. It is not known from what newspaper her articles was actually taken. In that same article she states that when his remains were discovered they were taken to a national cemetery where a tombstone was erected as a memorial.

<sup>9</sup> Mahood

<sup>10</sup> Menzer

<sup>11</sup> Mahood

<sup>12</sup> Menzer

<sup>13</sup> Mildred Morgan, “A Soldier’s Scythe,” September 2002 newspaper article (actual name of newspaper not identified but likely *The Voice* newsletter for the E.C.C Retirement Village in Myerstown, PA.)

<sup>14</sup> “A Soldier’s Scythe Tree,” (Waterloo, NY) Women’s Reading Club story donated by Ella Strong, March 1, 1988.

<sup>15</sup> “Three Local Trees Among the Elite 11,” Rochester *Democrat and Chronicle*, September 9, 1990, p B1.

<sup>16</sup> <http://arborday.org/trees/majTreesTimeline.html>

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.iwvpa.net/sizemoref/the\\_sc.htm](http://www.iwvpa.net/sizemoref/the_sc.htm)

<sup>18</sup> Menzer