

# The Sentinel

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## The Case of Bob Willey v. "Popular" Civil War History

Civil War historian and aficionado Bob Willey used the occasion of the March Roundtable meeting to "bring suit" against a very popular and entrenched modern era interpretation of one of the most famous Civil War photographs ever taken.

It is a picture of a dead Confederate soldier in the Devil's Den area on the Gettysburg battlefield taken by Alexander Gardner a few days after the battle in July, 1863. It is reproduced below and was published by Gardner after the battle as "Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter, Gettysburg, July, 1863." It created quite a reaction in 1863, and did so again a hundred years later with the publication of a book by Civil War photographic historian William Frassanito called "Gettysburg: A Journey in Time". In that book, Frassanito maintained that the dead "sharpshooter" was, in reality, a common soldier whose body was dragged from where he was killed in an open field some seventy yards away to the more photographically interesting sharpshooter's "den" to produce a more saleable photograph.



*The famous Alexander Gardner photograph of the sniper in the Devil's Den. Library of Congress*



*"Judge" Bob Willey "trying" the neo-popular interpretation of the famous Alexander Gardner photo being shown on the wall behind him.*

Mr. Willey is a Fort Wayne resident who has been a re-enactor and an avid Civil War collector and historian

for many years. He has presented his topic this evening to the annual conference of the National Park Service a few years ago where he was one of only three speakers, the other two being a prominent Civil War author and Ed Bearss, the retired and revered former historian for the park service. The crux of Willey's "case" is that careful examination of the photograph, combined with some simple logic and the "testimony" of eyewitnesses on the field at the time of the battle, among other things, prove that Frassanito's interpretation of the early 1960's, while intriguing and invitingly popular, is, in fact, basically flawed. From the condition of the body compared to others on the field at the same time, to the artifacts surrounding the body, to the condition of the rocks and boulders near it, and on and on, Mr. Willey made a firm case that William Frassanito was, pardon the expression, dead wrong in 1964. In the end, when he rested his "case," all in attendance were clearly swayed to the side of the presenter before them.

A few artifacts that Mr. Willey brought along helped turn the tide, as well. A 37-pound sharpshooter's rifle and a 10-pound Parrott rifle shell both figured in the "new" interpretation and were on hand for all to examine.

A lively Q&A session was one of the most interactive ones seen in many a meeting. Clearly, this photo and its history is something of continuing interest to almost any Civil War buff. Civil War enthusiast.

## **Summer Civil War Encampment is Now Set**

**T**his summer the 42<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, Indiana Infantry, a re-enactment group of Roundtable member Joel Foust, will hold an encampment on the lawn of the Monroe County History Center on June 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>. There will be the real sights, sounds and smells of what it was like to be a civil war soldier from Indiana, including full uniforms, equipment, camp cooking, and simply the feel of being an 1861-1865 soldier.

Plan on stopping by on Saturday or Sunday and experiencing the feel of military life of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, chat with the soldiers, examine their gear, watch as they perform the basic manual of arms and even the simple routine chores of the more often than not lonely camp life of a soldier. . . only infrequently interrupted by the call to battle.

Look for further details as the summer approaches, both in our newsletter and in announcements and promotional material from the History Center, or call 332-2517.

## **A Call for Artifacts and Memorabilia**

**I**n conjunction with the encampment mentioned above, the Monroe County History Center, as mentioned in previous materials, will have a 90-day exhibit on the Civil War, beginning in June and running through August. Those having any documents, pictures, artifacts or even reproductions are encouraged to loan them to the History Center for the exhibit. These can range from family papers to collectors items to modern reproduced materials, or even items that are modern day but provide a new “slant” on the war. Any item will be considered. All items loaned will be meticulously cared for to preserve their condition and integrity for the owners when the exhibit ends in August. For details of how to loan items, contact the center at 332-2517. Items are being accepted now and will be until shortly before the exhibit opens.

## **Annual Meeting Next Month!**

**T**he April meeting of the roundtable will feature a presentation by member John Crosby on the “Confessions of a Civil War Transvestite.” John says this will be a light and lively and fun look at a woman impersonating a man impersonating a woman (or was it the other way ‘round?). At any rate, he encourages you to come and please, please bring your spouse or significant other. He promises to entertain.

The April meeting is also the annual meeting at which new officers are to be elected. At this writing, we have no willing candidates for our positions and it is a situation that is a bit threatening to the future of the Roundtable. While all of us who have served for the last two years are still enthusiastic and will not “disappear,” we need some new ideas, new slants and new enthusiasm. We encourage folks to get involved with the planning and running of our little group. We at least need folks to be involved in our executive meetings which occur the Tuesday before the monthly meetings (i.e. the first Tuesday of the month) at 11:00 am at the History Center. If you think you can contribute in any way, please come to that meeting on April 3<sup>rd</sup> and let us know what you think. If you would like details of what these “leader” roles are, contact anyone on the list at the end of the newsletter.

Steve Rolfe  
President

### **CONTACTS**

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Call any of the above people for questions, suggestions or comments regarding the Roundtable.