John Preston Sheffey and the Civil War in Southwestern Virginia

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Southwestern Virginia has always been the stepchild of the Old Dominion. Its population is a far cry from the crowded urban centers around the state. Its air is fresh, its water clean, its noise level low. These are major reasons why inhabitants love the region.

In the Civil War, however, southwestern Virginia was vital for both the safety and the success of Virginia and the Southern Confederacy. Lead and iron mines in the Wytheville area supplied the major ingredients for bullets and weapons; the ponds at Saltville provided the only known ingredient for preserving meat; coal mines throughout this part of the state fueled steam engines of all varieties. In addition, and perhaps most important of all, the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad snaked all the way through the geographical quadrant.

The longest single rail line in America at the time (it stretched 209 miles from Lynchburg to Bristol), the Virginia and Tennessee transported necessary raw materials from source to wartime use. The railroad was also the primary connecting link between the Confederate capital at Richmond and the Western military theater in Tennessee. Control of the Virginia and Tennessee line was as necessary to the Confederates as severing the railroad was to the Federals.

No extensive wartime writings by a resident of southwestern Virginia were known to exist until the recent discovery of the letters of Capt. John Preston Sheffey. His observations from the home front and the battle lines along the eastern West Virginia-western Virginia border are an historical breakthrough. Sheffey was a highly educated, deeply observant soldier who wrote on everything from army movements to Greek mythology.

The ninety-odd preserved letters are also a chronicle of 19th century romance. When civil war came, Sheffey of Marion was falling in love with Josephine Spiller of Wytheville. The progress of the romance continued through their letters to their marriage in 1863 and the coming of peace in 1865.

Fortunately for the region, and our knowledge of history, Sheffey's roots were deeply planted in southwestern Virginia soil.

Two brothers of Dutch descent came to America in the late 1700s and made their way to the western Virginia frontier. The oldest, Daniel Sheffey, settled in Wythe County, studied law under Alexander Smyth (for whom a county would be named), and eventually became a successful attorney and state legislator in Staunton. The other sibling, Henry Sheffey, established his home in Washington County, and made his mark as a large-scale farmer in the Cripple Creek vicinity. He married Margaret White, sister of Col. James White, a man of powerful ability and standing in the area.

From that union came a son, appropriately named James White Sheffey. He prepared for a law career under the tutelage of several attorneys in Abingdon. At the age of twenty-one, Sheffey was admitted to the bar. His uncle and namesake, James White, entrusted Sheffey with legal work pertaining to nearby salt ponds and lead works, in which Col. White had large interests. Sheffey's Abingdon law practice became lucrative.

In September 1835, Sheffey married Ellen Preston, a direct descendant of the William Preston who was a pioneer in the settlement of what is now southwestern Virginia. Not only was Ellen's mother a Preston, but Ellen had thirteen brothers and sisters. To say that Ellen Sheffey's links with the Preston clan were strong would be an understatement.

James and Ellen Sheffey moved shortly after their marriage to Marion. Their union produced eleven children, only seven of whom survived infancy. The second child — and only son to survive — was born December 12, 1837. He was christened John Preston Sheffey and known to his friends as "Pres."

The lad grew up in a well-to-do, intellectual environment. Basic education came from private tutors in Marion. Sheffey then enrolled at Emory & Henry College, where he graduated at the head of his class in 1857. Two years of law studies followed at the University of

Virginia. Once admitted to the bar, young Sheffey joined his father's law firm. By then the elder Sheffey was one of Smyth County's largest landowners as well as the region's leading attorney. The father-son legal practice flourished for eighteen months before dark clouds of civil war appeared on the horizon.

James White Sheffey was elected Smyth County's representative to the Virginia Convention. That body, formed in February 1861, had the singular task of recommending whether or not the Commonwealth of Virginia would leave the Union and become part of a new and independent Southern nation. Like most delegates from western Virginia, the elder Sheffey was a moderate in the secession crisis. Not until President Abraham Lincoln issued a call for soldiers to march across Virginia to suppress the Southern "rebellion" did Delegate Sheffey and his western Virginia colleagues vote for Virginia's exodus from the Union.

Meanwhile, back in Marion, "Pres" Sheffey had become one of the most outspoken advocates of secession. He addressed a number of local political rallies before helping to organize a local company of cavalrymen. The unit adopted the name "Smyth Dragoons." It was among the first contingents to volunteer for military service in the Confederate States of America.

As such, the company actually had a choice of 1) proceeding to the rendezvous camp at Lynchburg for attachment to the main army forming in Virginia; 2) becoming part of the guerrilla forces of Col. R. C. W. Radford; or 3) serving in the threatened western Virginia counties under newly commissioned Gen. John B. Floyd, a former governor and Secretary of War. Both Floyd and his wife were cousins of Sheffey's mother. Hence, young Sheffey pushed to have his unit serve with his kinsman. Thus the "Smyth Dragoons" soon became Company A of the 8th Virginia Cavalry Regiment and headed into the mountains rather than into the piedmont.

This decision of assignment was fateful. The 8th Virginia Cavalry was never in the legendary Army of Northern Virginia; it never fought in a major battle of the Civil War.[1] For the three years that Sheffey was in the field, the regiment's service was in eastern West Virginia, southwestern Virginia, eastern Tennessee, and the Shenandoah Valley. That alone makes his wartime letters so valuable. He presents full views of the struggle in an overlooked — if not forgotten — area. Few

writers have paid much attention to that military theater. Yet men of North and South fought there; they bled and died there, just as did comrades at Malvern Hill, Antietam, and Gettysburg. Further, what took place on the western perimeter of the Old Dominion was far more critical to the outcome of the war than most students of history realize.

When Pres Sheffey left for war in the spring of 1861, he had two immediate goals in his life: to defend his beloved Virginia, and to marry Josephine Spiller.

The quest for Miss Spiller had begun three years prior to civil war. Josie Spiller, a native of Wytheville, was two and a half years younger than Sheffey. Her father, William H. Spiller, was a highly prominent merchant who owned stores and extensive real estate in both Wythe and Smyth counties. In 1855, a mentally unbalanced young man who had sought in vain to marry one of the Spiller daughters murdered the father. James White Sheffey was prosecuting attorney in the ensuing trial, in which the defendant was committed permanently to an asylum.

Apparently Pres Sheffey met Josie Spiller in 1858, when he was at Emory & Henry College and she was elected "Queen of Love and Beauty" at an annual summer pageant in Wytheville. Sheffey was immediately smitten; Miss Spiller was more reserved. In March 1861, Sheffey reopened correspondence with a long, practiced, highly intellectual letter. He wrote: "Like the ghosts of pleasant dreams, the memories of my boyhood and youth, of my college days and university days gather round me, but no reminiscences of the past do I better love to recall than the memory of that correspondence, short-lived and ill-fated though it proved to be." Sheffey signed the letter: "Ever your sincere friend."[2]

When Josie made a quick and positive response, Sheffey replied with an essay-length letter. The long-distance romance thus began. So did civil war a month later.

Sheffey wanted a wedding before the start of his active military service. Josie was understandably hesitant. She asked for time to consider the matter. In May 1861, Sheffey and his cavalry company left Marion for additional training in Wytheville. For two months, he and Josie became better acquainted. Yet a wedding date remained somewhere in the future.

Orders for field duty came in late July. Sheffey was then twenty-three years old and five feet, seven inches tall; he had hazel eyes, sandy hair, and a light complexion.[3] He was also by then hopelessly in love. In his next letter to Josie, he declared: "My thoughts revert as they have done constantly since my departure from Wytheville to you and the good old town which has so long been dearer to me than any other spot on earth because it was your home." He closed the letter with the statement: "I think I will be quite successful in making myself a soldier. With your love to urge me & sustain me, I could accomplish anything."[4]

That was not quite so, because Sheffey was now in the command of Gen. John B. Floyd. Only disaster could result.

Earlier that July, Union forces in northwestern Virginia had defeated the main Confederate force there at Corrick's Ford. The Union advance through extreme western Virginia continued, then faltered when the Federal commander, Gen. George B. McClellan, was summoned to Washington to take charge of the principal Union army in the East. Confederate authorities moved to take advantage of this lull by directing Floyd's command to march north to Lewisburg and there join Gen. Henry A. Wise's legion, retreating through the Kanawha Valley from Charleston.

No way could Wise and Floyd work together. Both men had been appointed to field command because of political prominence, not military experience. Both were ex-governors, autocratic, tempestuous, and jealous of competition. Floyd was the senior in rank and in overall command. Wise displayed a consistent reluctance to take orders from Floyd. They spent more time facing down one another than confronting the enemy. Wise once commented of Floyd: "I feel if we remain together, we will unite in more wars than one."[5]

Even Union Gen. Jacob D. Cox, who campaigned against the two Confederates that autumn, stated after the war: "If [Wise] had been half as troublesome to me as he was to Floyd, I should indeed have had a hot time of it."[6] As it was, Cox and his Union force had an easy outing with the two prima donnas.

Sheffey always sided with Floyd in the heated exchanges over command. After all, the general was a distant cousin.

The Marion lieutenant's first contacts with the enemy came on August 26 at Cross Lanes and on September 2 at Hawks Nest. Both

engagements were only skirmishes; to Sheffey, they were monumental encounters. That he survived his initial contact with the Federals gave Sheffey a momentary and macabre sense of humor. "One of the [wounded] Yankees," he wrote Josie, "lived more than a day with his brains shot out, conclusive evidence that they can get along almost as well without [brains] as with them."[7]

A week later, at Carnifex Ferry, Sheffey got his first full taste of battle. Four hours of fighting ensued, and the Smyth County officer emerged from it a real soldier.

With letters being the only possible contact with his fiancée, and with mail delivery sporadic at best, Sheffey spent much of the war's first autumn begging Josie to write more often. He repeatedly voiced frustration that the Floyd-Wise combine could not accomplish any military objective — even after Gen. Robert E. Lee came west from Richmond to offer assistance. Sheffey was witness to skirmishes at Sewell Mountain, Armstrong Creek, Loup Creek, and Guyandotte. Weather and terrain were consistent obstacles to success. At the same time, the sickness and diseases that would kill two men for every one fatality in Civil War battle had engulfed the southwestern Virginia soldiers. Encampments became as dangerous as engagements.

Little improvement came with the new year, 1862. Josie's letter-writing did not improve. At one point Sheffey moaned: "The days lengthen into weeks, the long weeks into months, and still you will not write.... I ... will surrender myself to the Yankees or incurable blues within a fortnight if you don't write." What made the loneliness so unbearable, Sheffey added, was that "we live here like Greenlanders, warming our frozen bodies with fats and oils, and shivering like Switzerlanders in the midst of glaciers and peaks covered with ice and snow."[8]

A long encampment followed at Princeton. The principal duty of Sheffey's company was to guard one of the major approaches for a possible Union stab at the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad. Sheffey was in the action at Giles Court House, Princeton, and — especially — the May 1862 battle of Lewisburg. Although he escaped injury, Sheffey was not a happy soldier. His regiment was part of the 1500-man "Army of New River" under Gen. Henry Heth, an officer for whom Sheffey had little respect (as he made clear in his letters). Conditions inside the 8th Virginia Cavalry were unpleasant. The unit was

at half-strength; even though Sheffey became captain of the "Smyth Dragoons" that spring, he did not enjoy cordial relations with either the regimental colonel or the lieutenant colonel.

In mid-May, his patience with Josie Spiller came momentarily to an end. He suggested that the two either wed or cease the interminable waiting. She responded by inviting him to visit her and discuss their relationship. Sheffey obtained a short furlough and hastened to Wytheville, but little seems to have been accomplished. The waiting period would continue.

Late that summer, just before the twin Confederate disasters at Antietam Creek (Maryland) and Perryville (Kentucky), Sheffey experienced the most exciting action of his Civil War career. Union troops were departing western Virginia in a steady stream to reinforce Gen. George McClellan's Army of the Potomac. Gen. Lee suggested that Confederate cavalry in far western Virginia take advantage of the lightly defended region by widespread raiding of Union posts and by regaining the vital Kanawha Valley.

Gen. Albert Jenkins took command of the movement. With 500 mounted troops (most of them from Sheffey's regiment), Jenkins undertook a 500-mile ride through all of the Union-held counties of western Virginia. "Jenkins' Raid" involved a circular sweep by Southern horsemen as far north as Weston, near the birthplace of Gen. "Stonewall" Jackson. Then the horsemen galloped west, crossed the Ohio River, and became the first Southern force to raise the Confederate flag on Ohio soil. Jenkins completed the circuit by riding through Charleston and up the Kanawha Valley.

The gains from the expedition were more psychological than material, and the victory was short-lived, but it was a dramatic success coming at a time when the South needed a boost in spirit. Pres Sheffey was part of the raid, and he wrote extensively about it.

Then it was back to dull and dreary patrol duty on the western Virginia frontier. Sheffey saw duty in Monroe, Mercer, and Greenbrier counties. Eventually came duty closer to home. Portions of the 8th Virginia Cavalry guarded the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad at Newbern and Central Depot (now Radford) before returning to the picket posts at Lewisburg. The captain also began making acquaintances with the leading Southern generals in that department: Samuel

Jones, John Echols, John McCausland, and Gabriel C. Wharton. Echols and Wharton became his good friends.

Sheffey achieved one major triumph in the first half of 1863: he finally secured a wife.

For two years he had personified the adage that "absence makes the heart grow fonder."[9] He was deeply in love, but he had to court his sweetheart solely by the medium of letters. A certain charm arises throughout the Sheffey letters as he pursued Miss Spiller's hand, for he used every possible approach.

In 1861 he urged that they marry quickly so that their lives would be one before he left for the unknowns of war. Then he was begging to marry on the premise that she could take pride in having the love of her life serving patriotically in the army. Miss Spiller was apparently unimpressed. In 1862 Sheffey employed simple arithmetic: the quicker they wed, the longer life they would have together. When that tactic failed, Sheffey turned to a desperate ploy: they should wed at once because he could meet death at any moment. That too fell on deaf ears.

His 1863 strategy apparently won the day. Letters to Josie began containing lengthy descriptions of beautiful and unattached women he was meeting in Lewisburg, Princeton, Beckley, and other encampments. That may well have jolted Miss Spiller into a Code Red situation. In any event, on June 9, 1863, Pres Sheffey and Josie Spiller were married in Wytheville.

Returning alone to duty in Greenbrier County, Sheffey wrote his bride of three weeks: "I have been congratulated to an enormous degree. I do not think that a young man forced away from a wife, who is dearer to him than every thing else on earth, is an object of congratulation."[10]

Sheffey sought long but in vain to have Josie join him in camp. Meanwhile, isolated from the major military theaters, he could only speculate on the big picture of the Civil War. Perhaps marriage and the assumption of new home responsibilities had a sobering effect, or possibly war weariness struck the bridegroom as it did most soldiers of that struggle. In any event, Sheffey began to express anxiety over the outcome of the conflict. He wrote more often of the fallacies of conscription, the overwhelming superiority of Union forces, and the pros-

pects of peace. Comments on skirmishes, friends, and compatriots became more serious.

Then, without warning, a Union threat on July 17-18, 1863, appeared in Sheffey's backyard. Some 1,300 Union cavalry, attempting to cut the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad, struck Wytheville. A sharp fight ensued, producing at least 100 Union casualties. Federal soldiers retaliated by burning several town buildings and looting a number of private homes. Sheffey spent days agonizing over the safety of his wife. To his relief, he learned that Josie had not been harmed.

Well into the autumn of 1863, Sheffey and his men were on patrol in Greenbrier and Tazewell counties. Confederates were continually moving to counter Union probes aimed at the railroad and the vital ponds at Saltville. Even Sheffey's father marched out with the home guard to meet enemy threats. Two preserved letters from siblings in Marion give a clear picture of patchwork affairs on the home front.

Dejection twice struck Sheffey in the war's third summer. First, he was unable to have his wife join him in camp. Then he contracted a facial infection that dangerously involved an eye. Although the disease persisted through the remainder of 1863, Sheffey regained high spirits and continued his highly observant reports of residents he met in various counties, movements his company was making, dull routines of field duty, and the constant flow of rumors passing through the camp.

In mid-October 1863, the 8th Virginia Cavalry was ordered to Abingdon to become part of a mounted brigade under Gen. William E. "Grumble" Jones. However, until the following spring, Sheffey's service consisted of being judge advocate on a departmental court-martial meeting far to the west in Lee and Scott counties. Boredom was the overriding emotion of those weeks. Yet, as Sheffey admitted, he was at least indoors and away from the elements of winter.

For five weeks in April and May 1864, Sheffey was posted near Wytheville and his wife. This long gap in his letters is regrettable, for it was the time when the new Union general-in-chief, U. S. Grant, unleashed a multi-front campaign that would eventually crush the Southern Confederacy. One such offensive led to the May 8 battle of Cloyds Mountain, the largest engagement ever waged in southwestern Virginia.

A second threat sent the 8th Virginia Cavalry and its sister units galloping northward into the Shenandoah Valley. Sheffey arrived too late to participate in the June 5 battle of Piedmont, where Southern cavalry were routed and Gen. "Grumble" Jones was killed. Yet Sheffey did see action at Lynchburg, Hanging Rock (near present-day Salem), Leetown (West Virginia), and Frederick (Maryland), during the first stage of Gen. Jubal Early's raid on Washington.

Sheffey expressed mixed feelings at his first sight of Maryland. "A more beautiful country never gladdened the eye of man," he told Josie. "The horn of plenty has been outpoured upon the fields. ... But the people, the villainous Dutch with their outlandish lingo! What a pity that they should hold so fair a land."[11]

Confederate cavalry were resting in camp near Moorefield, West Virginia, when, on August 7, Union horsemen swooped down in a surprise dawn attack. Among those wounded were Col. William E. Peters of the 21st Virginia Cavalry. He was Sheffey's brother-in-law and former mentor at Emory & Henry College. Among those captured was Capt. Sheffey.

For the next six months, Sheffey's address was Camp Chase Military Prison at Columbus, Ohio. A former training compound for Union recruits, Camp Chase in 1862 became an enclosed-barracks prison surrounded by high wooden fences and guard towers. Its peak population came in January 1865, when more than 9,000 Confederate prisoners of war were there.

Camp Chase was nowhere near the hell-holes that Andersonville, Elmira, and other Civil War prisons became. In fact, the officer section of Camp Chase seems to have been quite tolerable. Sheffey's chief complaint in his short letters home was loneliness. As he wrote his wife in November: "The weary time drags very slowly away at best, but when many days elapse without bringing me a letter from you, it becomes still more intolerable."[12] Other than a smallpox vaccination that became briefly infected, Sheffey underwent few physical discomforts at Camp Chase.

His confinement ended in February 1865, after North and South had resumed a policy of prisoner exchange. Sheffey was transferred to Point Lookout Prison, Maryland, and there exchanged for a captured Federal officer of equal rank. In all likelihood, Sheffey was back in southwestern Virginia prior to Lee's surrender at Appomattox in April.

Josie wanted to continue living in Wytheville, but Sheffey insisted that they settle in Marion, where his father had offered him a home. The former captain had little free capital, but he was able to furnish the home on Main Street. There he and his wife spent the remainder of their lives.

In the summer of 1865, Sheffey attempted to become a candidate for commonwealth attorney of Smyth County. Being a disenfranchised Confederate blocked his hope. He then resumed the practice of law and soon became Marion's leading attorney. He and Josie raised five daughters and two sons. Sheffey became a devoted member of the Presbyterian church and was a longtime elder. Josie spent many years as the church organist.

In 1895 Pres Sheffey became judge of the Seventh Judicial Circuit in Virginia; he continued as a judge until his February 1904 retirement. A local editor said of him: "He left the bench with the respect and affection of the lawyers who had practiced before him; and all men who knew him, whether as a private citizen, as a lawyer, or as a judge, will bear willing testimony to his spotless integrity and to the nobility of his character."[13]

Retirement from the bench was short-lived. On November 19, 1904, Josephine Sheffey died. The blow undoubtedly was severe for her husband, who lived only nine months thereafter. Sheffey's death occurred August 26, 1905, in Marion. He was sixty-seven.

The John Preston Sheffey Letters are now a key collection in the Virginia Center for Civil War Studies at Virginia Tech. They offer an unprecedented picture of the Civil War in the remote southwestern quadrant of the Old Dominion. Sheffey's observations of people and events in the border counties on each side of the Virginia-West Virginia line have no parallel in printed works. He even described actions so isolated that they are mentioned only in passing in the 128 thick volumes of the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*.

Pres Sheffey literally pushed the door open a little farther to reveal what transpired in this region during three of the four years of civil war. That in itself makes his letters invaluable. He was in his mid-twenties when he donned a uniform. He left for war with the same feelings inherent in every American recruit of every war: to defend hearth and home, and to fight for the way of life that was his

country. At the same time, the Marion soldier gave to history through his letters a fascinating mixture of love and war.

Today Pres Sheffey and his family lie buried in Marion. They might have continued to abide in obscurity but for the discovery of his wartime letters. Not only do the letters tell us much about Pres himself; they are also amazingly revealing for the Sheffey family, Smyth County, the 8th Virginia Cavalry, and southwestern Virginia during the stormiest and most dangerous period of its existence.

The Sheffey war letters have recently been published[14] in a book that will long be a reference work for this section of the state. It is not too farfetched to declare that southwestern Virginia has at last acquired an articulate spokesman for the Civil War years.

All royalties from the book will go into a John Preston Sheffey Graduate Scholarship in Civil War History at Virginia Tech. Such is a fitting memorial. More to the point, it is something that Pres Sheffey would have liked. Throughout a varied and quite extraordinary life, he maintained a love of country and a sense of history. He, as much as any man, surely fought the good fight and kept the faith. The epitaph barely visible on Sheffey's fading tombstone is a quotation from the fortieth chapter of Isaiah: "But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."

Thanks to the publication of Sheffey's wartime letters, present and future generations can reply: "Sleep well, my friend. We shall not forget."

Endnotes

1. The only printed history on this unit is Jack L. Dickinson, 8th *Virginia Cavalry* (Lynchburg, Va., 1986).
2. John P. Sheffey to Josephine Spiller, March 14, 1861 (John Preston Sheffey Papers, Virginia Tech).
3. Oath of Allegiance for John P. Sheffey, February, 1865, *ibid.*
4. John Preston Sheffey to Josephine Spiller, July 28, 1861, *ibid.*
5. U. S. War Dept. (comp.), *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, D.C., 1880–1902), Ser. I, 5:127.
6. Jacob D. Cox, *Military Reminiscences of the Civil War* (New York, 1900), 1:97.
7. John P. Sheffey to Josephine Spiller, August 28, 1861, Sheffey Papers.
8. John P. Sheffey to Josephine Spiller, February 24, 1862, *ibid.*

9. The author of this famous quotation was an anonymous Englishman.
10. John P. Sheffey to Josephine Sheffey, June 30, 1863, Sheffey Papers.
11. John P. Sheffey to Josephine Sheffey, July 18, 1864, *ibid.* A large segment of the population of western Pennsylvania and western Maryland were of German background. In the mid-19th century, they were derogatorily termed as "Dutch."
12. John P. Sheffey to Josephine Sheffey, November 9, 1864, *ibid.*
13. Unidentified newspaper clipping, *ibid.*
14. *Soldier of Southwestern Virginia: The Civil War Letters of Captain John Preston Sheffey*, ed. James I. Robertson, Jr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004).