



# *Forgotten Memorial: The Civil War Trees of Berry Township*

BY CAROLE ROCHE

**I**N THE SUMMER OF 1953, Maybelle and Earl Ewald were looking for a country home near Madison. The couple wanted a place that would be near enough to the city for an easy commute to Earl's job, yet far enough away to enjoy a quiet, rural lifestyle. "After driving around for several hours that morning, we came across a house for rent in the Town of Berry, some twenty miles northwest of Madison," recalls Maybelle. "As we drove up the driveway to the house, we were both struck by the beauty of three magnificent Norway spruce trees planted along the edge of the property."

The couple inquired with the owner, Earl Seston, as to price of the rental. While Earl Ewald was discussing the property price with Seston, Maybelle went to have another look at the Norway spruces. "I knew immediately there was something special about those trees," she says, "and I wanted to know more about them." Maybelle Ewald, who is now in her eighties, still recalls how over lunch that day Seston eagerly related what he knew about their history.

The history of the Norway spruces that so captured Maybelle's attention began with Earl Seston's grandfather, William Seston. William Seston lived on the Town of Berry property in the 1860s, during the Civil War. Earl Seston told the Ewalds there used to

be many more trees than the three remaining. "A total of thirty-eight blue spruce trees had been planted on the west edge of the property line along Old Settlers Road to honor area Civil War recruits," he said. "The forty women of the Town of Berry Mothers' Club came up with the idea, and a tree was planted with an individual brass marker placed on each tree for every recruit and enlistee from 1861 through 1865."

The Ewalds were surprised that so few trees remained, and they inquired as to what had been done with the brass markers. "The plan was to give each man his marker back when he returned home from the war," said Ewald, but Seston admitted he was uncertain when the trees were removed or if the brass

**Clockwise from upper-left: The three remaining trees as they stand today; Civil War-era gravestones in the Sunning Hill Cemetery; Sargeant Erastus J. Buck from the Eighteenth Wisconsin Regiment; grave marker for Town of Berry Civil War recruit Christian Berri**

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markers made their way back to those who returned to Berry after the war.

The first Civil War contingent from the Berry area was composed of seventeen enlistees ranging in age from twenty one to thirty four. John Ford, Frederic T. Stevens, Robert Gillette, John Carter, and James Cutler joined of their own accord, as did brothers Willis and Steven Porter, Abraham and Webster Emily, and the three Fowler brothers: Benjamin, John, and Joseph. These men were farmers, business owners, and family men—all with responsibilities at home, yet willing to fight for the Union cause. “As the different groups went, trees were planted, each man having a tree which bore his name on a small, metal tag,” wrote Genie Laws in a 1931 *Capital Times* article.

the service. It was in the bloody fights on the Cache, in Arkansas; of Port Gibson, Champion Hills, Black River Bridge, the siege of Vicksburg, and the battle of Jackson. In the assault on Vicksburg it lost 107 men killed and wounded, and during several campaigns over half its members have fallen. ... No regiment from the State has fought more nobly or done better service than the Eleventh. The Valley of Mississippi is studded with the graves of its fallen heroes.

Toward the end of the war, William Seston’s brother George was also recruited into the Eleventh Regiment, but he returned home unharmed. Others were not so fortunate.

were uncommon during the Civil War, they weren’t unheard of. Sherman Buckley Leavenworth and his wife Charlotte lived in Eldred, New York, during the Civil War. They sent four sons off to war, and planted four trees—one for each son. Two sons, Hezikiah and Atwell died, so their trees were cut down.

Yet Laws notes that all of Berry’s trees were still there on Old Settlers Road as of 1931, so they weren’t cut down as soldiers died. So what happened to the thirty five missing trees? Lynn Seston, a lifelong Berry resident and the great-grandson of the original property owner, William Seston, has as strong a connection to the trees and Sunning Hill as anyone. But he can’t say for sure what happened to the trees. “Not only was my great-grandfather instrumental in having the first trees planted on the ... property,” says Lynn Seston, but “my aunt, Inez Seston, spent a great deal of time taking care of the Civil War graves.” “It was not an easy task,” he says, noting that “over ten years ago, the Town of Berry agreed to maintain Sunning Hill.”

While many people have searched for the brass markers from the Civil War trees over the years, including the Ewald’s three sons, none has been found. As recently as May of 2008, Town of Berry resident John Gorman spent a few fruitless days searching for the markers with a metal detector. “All I found were the usual coins, tin cans, and barn paraphernalia,” says Gorman, pointing to the area where the trees used to run along Old Settlers Road. “As this was once a planted field—and has been plowed under innumerable times—it is unlikely that these metal tags will ever be found. Although, one day I may come back with a stronger detector.”

With no tags to be found, the mystery leads back to the trees, which were cause for discussion in recent years thanks to the discoveries of Mary Bauschelt, a horticulturalist for the University of Wisconsin–Madison Botany Department. Prior to Bauschelt’s review, there had been some question as to the trees’ true lineage. “Although the 1931 newspaper article stated the memorial trees were

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Many of the men from Berry were assigned to Company A of the Eleventh Wisconsin Regiment in 1861, and sent to serve their country along Missouri’s Iron Mountain Railroad and, later, on the front line of sieges at Vicksburg and Jackson. “A brief sketch of the labors of this regiment cannot prove but interesting,” reads an 1864 update from the battlefield in the *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, continuing with highlights of the Eleventh’s exploits:

[The Eleventh Regiment] made two campaigns in Missouri and one in Arkansas with General Curtis in 1862, and went through all the battles fought by Gen. Grant, closing with the siege and capture of Vicksburg. It has marched over 3,000 miles, and travelled nearly 10,000 since it entered

Located just a quarter of a mile up the road from the Ewald property, hidden on a hilltop just off Old Settlers Road, is Sunning Hill Cemetery. Deeded to the Town of Berry on April 29, 1870, Sunning Hill holds the remains of the nine area Civil War soldiers who died in the war, including Corporal John Nagel and his son, John Jr.; Frederic T. Stevens, killed by a sharpshooter; and Timothy A. Perry, who died in Richmond’s notorious Libby Prison. All of these men had trees planted in their honor. And, according to Laws’s 1931 article, the trees should still be there. “[The] tags have long since disappeared, but the 38 trees still stand firm and true to the purpose for which they were put there and serving as sentinels to the Sunning Hill Cemetery.”

While these types of planted memorials

a type of fir,” says Bauschelt, “they are actually Norway spruce or *Picea abies*, a somewhat rare species of tree for this area of Wisconsin.

Today the three remaining Civil War trees continue to attract the attention of passersby. Inquisitive visitors make frequent visits to the Ewald property. “I sometimes see people out on Old Settlers Road just walking up and down, looking up at the trees. And, occasionally, people will come up to my door to ask me about them,” says Maybelle Ewald, happy to share the history of the trees with anyone who asks. “A woman even traveled all the way from California in May of 2007 to find the trees—and her Civil War relatives—and we spent several hours talking about

their history. ... Sometimes, [people] ask me what happened to the other thirty-five trees,” she says, shaking her head. “A question that will probably never be answered.”

According to the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, a nonprofit organization founded in 1881 to honor Civil War veterans, there are some 350 Civil War memorials in Wisconsin. Ewald believes that officially designating the trees and surrounding area as a memorial site would not only identify them as an important part of state and national history, but also ensure that they would be protected from any kind of development or roadway expansion. “I have contacted the Dane County Historical Society about placing a

marker on the site for future generations, but, so far, there has been no response,” says Ewald. “Still, I am hopeful that one day a marker will be placed there.”

Until that day arrives, Maybelle Ewald will take comfort in her own makeshift sign—a kind of homemade memorial—that she puts under the trees every year to make sure that people know that there is something here, a bit of history by the side of the road. The sign reads:

PLEASE TAKE A MOMENT TO LOOK AT THE CIVIL WAR MEMORIAL TREES ALONG OLD SETTLERS ROAD AT THE WEST END OF THIS PROPERTY. OF THE THIRTY-EIGHT TREES PLANTED IN HONOR OF AREA RECRUITS, ONLY THESE THREE ARE STILL LIVING. ✱



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Right: Civil War-era gravestone markers at Sunning Hill Cemetery in the Town of Berry. Sunning Hill is one of many small, Civil War-era cemeteries nestled throughout the state, some of which are on private property or cannot be accessed by the public