ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Orphan Brigade of Kentucky

By **Kent Masterson Brown**

No Kentucky commands that fought in the Civil War, save for Brigadier General John Hunt Morgan's cavalry, were more well-known and well-respected than those that formed the First Kentucky Brigade, or, as it was affectionately known, the Orphan Brigade. The brigade was composed of the 2nd, 4th, 6th and 9th Kentucky Infantry regiments and Cobb's, Byrne's and Graves's batteries of artillery, and, at times, the 3rd Kentucky Infantry and the 5th Kentucky Infantry. The Orphans campaigned over more territory (8 states), suffered higher casualties, and lost more brigade commanders than any other comparable unit in the war. And as if those trials were not enough, after February 1862 the brigade was never able to return to Kentucky to fight for its native state; instead, it fought the entire war far from home. A November 1862 circular prophesied: "However this war may terminate, if a man can truthfully claim to have been a worthy member of the Kentucky Brigade he will have a kind of title of nobility."[1]

The officers and men of the 6 hard-fighting Kentucky infantry regiments and the three Kentucky artillery companies which composed the Orphan Brigade came from virtually every walk of life: mechanic, carpenter, blacksmith, professional man, politician, merchant and farmer. They came from 33 of Kentucky's now 120 counties, and from every region of the old Commonwealth; from as far east in the mountains as Johnson, Morgan and Breathitt Counties, to as far west as Graves and Trigg Counties. They came from counties along the Tennessee border—Logan, Simpson and Allen—and they came from counties along the Ohio River—Union, Henderson and Davies. They poured into the ranks from the great belt of counties in central Kentucky—from Hardin, Nelson, Mercer, Boyle, Shelby, Anderson, Franklin, Fayette, Harrison, Scott, Woodford, Jessamine and Bourbon, and from a host of others. There were town boys, but, more often than not, those who served in the Orphan Brigade were yeoman farmers; rugged, independent and self-reliant. Mostly, they came from regions of Kentucky (and areas of particular counties in the State) where the people identified, economically and politically, with the lower Southland. The counties from which they hailed were located mostly in the rich farming belts of Kentucky.

[1] Ed Porter Thompson, *History of the Orphan Brigade* (Louisville, KY: Lewis N. Thompson, 1898), 21.

The diaries and letters of the Orphans reveal that those men were deeply religious; many were firm Southern Baptists, although their commanders were, in large measure, Presbyterians and Episcopalians.

Although almost always without adequate clothes, and most of the time, ravenously hungry and ill-equipped, they fought in an army—the Army of the Tennessee—which was often poorly led and, consequently, suffered devastating blows from an enemy of overwhelming numbers sent to the field by a nation that had an industrial capacity second-to-none on earth and with a government that focused and unleashed, for its time, almost unlimited political, economic and military might.

The Orphans were, according to one account, ones who would "stick to [the fighting] as long as they [could] find a foe to shoot at!" The record of the Orphans, wrote one distinguished American scholar, is a record of heroism in war that "has never been surpassed." General Joseph Eggleston. Johnston, who could truly size up the soldiers in both theatres of war, remarked once that "the Orphan Brigade was the finest body of men and soldiers I ever saw in any army anywhere."[2]

Within weeks of Abraham Lincoln's election to the Presidency, South Carolina seceded from the Union. By April 1, 1861, every state in the lower South, save Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina and Tennessee, had passed ordinances of secession. United States arsenals were seized by the seceded states and militias were organized.

The stalemate over the occupation by a United States garrison in Charleston Harbor (commanded by a Kentuckian, Major Robert Houston Anderson) erupted in the bombardment of Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861. After the surrender of Fort Sumter the Lincoln Administration issued a call for 75,000 troops to suppress the rebellion. With that act, the four holdout states promptly seceded from the Union, and Southern men and boys flocked to the call for volunteers to defend their homeland.

Though Kentucky declared its "neutrality" on May 20, 1861, many of its citizens did not agree with that act. With no recruiting being conducted in "neutral" Kentucky, those Kentuckians who sympathized with the plight of the seceded states flocked to camps in Tennessee to cast their lots with the South. The most prominent of those camps, not surprisingly, was named Camp Boone, near Clarksville, Tennessee. There, and at nearby Camp Burnett, the commander of the pro-Southern Kentucky State Guard, West Point trained Brigadier General Simon Bolivar Buckner, assembled most of the elite Kentucky State Guard and its officer core, including Captain Philip Lightfoot Lee of Bullitt County, Captain Joseph Pryor Nuckols of Barren County, Captain Thomas Williams Thompson of Jefferson County, Major Thomas Hart Hunt of Fayette County (John Hunt Morgan's uncle), Captain John William Caldwell of Logan County, and Major Thomas Bell Monroe, Jr., of Franklin and Fayette Counties, to name a few. Those men would form the nucleus around which was organized the Orphan Brigade.

[2] Thompson, *Orphan Brigade*, 24; Ibid., 28; Ibid., 24.

At Camp Boone, Colonel Roger Weightman Hanson's 2nd Kentucky Infantry was organized along with Colonel Lloyd Tilghman's, and subsequently Colonel Benjamin M. Anderson's, 3rd Kentucky Infantry as well as Captain Robert H. Cobb's Kentucky Battery, and Captain Rice E. Graves's Kentucky Battery. When the 2nd and 3rd Kentucky Infantry regiments and Cobb's and Graves's batteries moved north to Bowling Green, Kentucky with General Buckner's command in September 1861, they were joined by Colonel. Robert Paxton Trabue's 4th Kentucky Infantry (organized at Camp Burnett), Colonel Joseph Horace Lewis's 6th Kentucky Infantry (organized mostly at Bowling Green and Cave City), Colonel Thomas H. Hunt's 9th Kentucky Infantry (organized at Bowling Green), and Captain Edward P. Byrne's Battery (organized partly in Tennessee and partly in Mississippi). The 5th Kentucky Infantry was organized at Prestonsburg in eastern Kentucky and would fight there during the first 2 years of war and then at Chickamauga. It would join the Orphan Brigade on November 5, 1863 at Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Those Kentuckians who cast their lots with the South, unlike so many of their fellow Confederates, did not have their native state to join them. Kentucky as a state not only did not approve of secession, it evolved to become a "Union" state in every way. Kentucky overwhelmingly sent a pro-Union delegation to Congress after the June 20, 1861 elections. After the legislative elections on August 5, 1861, Kentucky's legislature became heavily pro-Union. The new legislature went so far as to make joining or supporting the Confederate Army a felony.

Union recruiting was begun in the state after the legislative elections in August, 1861 at Camp Dick Robinson in Garrard County, and a pro-Union Home Guard was raised and financed by the state legislature. Kentucky eventually declared itself for the Union. By the end of the war, Kentucky had raised 55 Union infantry regiments and numerous infantry and Home Guard battalions, 17 Union cavalry regiments, and 5 batteries of Union artillery from every geographic region of the Commonwealth, including the rich lands of the Bluegrass. Ultimately, Kentucky provided nearly 80,000 of its sons to the Union war effort, three times the number who served in the Confederate armies.

Consequently, those who joined the Orphan Brigade not only defended their "cause" against the national government, but wound up isolated from their own native state—expatriated if you will—during four years of bloody and disheartening campaigns. Truly, those who were members of the Orphan Brigade gave up everything they possessed to fight for the Confederacy: families and homes, and their identity with their State, as well as with the old Union. Moreover, as it turned out, they were forced to fight the entire war far from the borders of their beloved Commonwealth. This is the reason why they were known as the "Orphans."

Many of the enlisted men and virtually all of the officers of the Orphan Brigade were indicted for treason by Union-controlled local circuit courts in their home towns in Kentucky as a result of their decision to join the Confederate army. Such indictments in

areas like Breathitt County in the eastern Kentucky Mountains precipitated some of the feuds among families which lasted for generations. With Kentucky occupied by Union troops early in the war, prominent officers in the brigade learned of the confiscation of their lands and personal property by local courts and the harassment of their wives and children by provost marshals, not to mention warrants outstanding for their arrest.

Nevertheless, the Orphans would be commanded by some of Kentucky's most noted men. Certainly, General Simon Bolivar Buckner, their first commander, was one of Kentucky's most prominent soldiers, and his presence as the Orphans' first commander was a source of much pride among the rank and file.

The Orphans soon came under the command of the magnetic Kentuckian, Brigadier General John Cabell Breckinridge. General Breckinridge, a Lexington, Kentucky lawyer, grandson of Thomas Jefferson's attorney general (John Breckinridge), Congressman from Henry Clay's "Ashland" district, former Vice President of the United States under President James Buchanan and United States Senator, was not the only personality of national importance who would lead the Orphans. His cousin, Brigadier General William Preston of Louisville, descendant of among Kentucky's earliest Virginia pioneer settlers, lawyer and President James Buchanan's minister to Spain, as well as one-time brother-in-law of Kentuckian General Albert Sidney Johnston (who would die in Preston's arms at the Battle of Shiloh), would lead the Orphans at Vicksburg and would be closely identified with the brigade throughout much of the war. Brigadier General Benjamin Hardin Helm; lawyer; son of two-time governor of Kentucky, John Helm of Hardin and Nelson Counties in Kentucky; grandson of United States Senator from Kentucky, John Hardin (one of young Captain Abraham Lincoln's commanders in the Black Hawk War in 1832); and husband to Emily Todd, half-sister to none other than Mary Todd Lincoln, the wife of President Lincoln; would lead the brigade twice and die in its heroic September 20, 1863 attacks at Chickamauga.

Generals Buckner, Breckinridge, Preston and Helm were highly educated men. Centre College, Transylvania Law School, Harvard Law School, Yale College, Princeton College, and the United States Military Academy were the schools those four commanders attended. Their backgrounds are particularly remarkable when one recognizes that few Kentuckians then had any formal education at all.

Not all of the brigade commanders were highly educated, however. Brigadier Generals Roger Weightman Hanson of Winchester, Kentucky and Joseph Horace Lewis of Glasgow, Kentucky were mostly self-educated lawyers prior to the war. Colonel Robert Paxton Trabue, a native of Columbia, Kentucky and the grandson of Daniel Trabue, one of the earliest Virginia pioneers to enter Kentucky, was also a largely self-educated lawyer.

It was John C. Breckinridge, "Old Breck," whom the Orphans idolized. As brigade historian and veteran Edward Porter Thompson wrote years after the war, "the

history of the Kentucky Brigade is necessarily in a great measure the military history of General Breckinridge."[3]

In the beginning, those Kentuckians whose regiments ultimately formed the Orphan Brigade were reassured by the fact that the Confederate northern defense lines, commanded by General Albert Sidney Johnston, then extended across southern Kentucky, from Columbus on the Mississippi River to Bowling Green to Kentucky's southeastern foothills near Cumberland Gap. The Orphans thought that the war would be fought over their native state, but it was not to be.

On January 19, 1862, while the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 6th and 9th Kentucky infantry regiments and Cobb's, Graves's, and Byrne's artillery batteries were at Bowling Green, Kentucky, Johnston's right flank was crushed at the Battle of Mill Springs, in Pulaski County, Kentucky, and the Confederacy's northern frontier began to collapse. Quickly, General Johnston sent the 2nd Kentucky infantry and Graves's battery to Fort Donelson on the Cumberland River below the Kentucky border.

The beastly winter's fight at Fort Donelson, the capitulation of that bastion on the Cumberland River on February 16, 1862 where Colonel Roger W. Hanson and his 2nd Kentucky Infantry and Captain Rice E. Graves's Kentucky battery surrendered with General Buckner, and the heart-rending retreat out of Kentucky, through Nashville, Tennessee to Corinth, Mississippi of the 3rd, 4th, 6th and 9th Kentucky Infantry regiments and Byrne's and Cobb's batteries were bitter memories to those Orphans.

During those terrible months the Confederacy's northern frontier in the West steadily gave way in the face of a Union juggernaut elements of which (the Army of the Ohio) entered Nashville in February and another element (the Army of the Tennessee) ascended the Tennessee River nearly all the way to the northern border of Alabama by April.

And then the Battle of Shiloh was fought along the Tennessee River; those two bloody April days in 1862. There the Orphan Brigade was born in fire and steel; there it freely bled. Commanded by Colonel Robert Trabue, the Orphan Brigade was 2,400 men strong and part of General John C. Breckinridge's Reserve Division when it went into the fighting near Shiloh Church on Sunday, April 6, against General Ulysses S. Grant's five Union divisions.

As the brigade moved onto the battlefield and observed then Captain John Hunt Morgan and his squadron of Kentucky cavalry along the road, the men cheered and sang:

> "Cheer, boys, cheer; we'll march away to battle;
> Cheer, boys, cheer, for our sweethearts and our wives;
> Cheer, boys, cheer; we'll nobly do our duty,
> And give to Kentucky our arms, our hearts, our lives."

[3] Thompson, *Orphan Brigade*, 358.

Riding up to General William J. Hardee, Colonel Trabue, "Old Trib" as the men fondly called him, asked: "General, I have a Kentucky brigade here. What shall I do with it?" "Put it in where the fight is the thickest, sir!" was Hardee's response.[4]

Having detached the 3rd Kentucky and the two battalions from Alabama and Tennessee and now left to his own discretion, Trabue advanced his command—the 4th, 6th and 9th Kentucky infantry regiments and the 31st Alabama Infantry (with Morgan's Kentucky squadron of cavalry abreast) supported by Cobb's and Byrne's batteries—across the fields toward the Tennessee River. The 4th Kentucky held the left, the 6th Kentucky the center, and the 9th Kentucky on the right, with the Alabamians in reserve. Trabue ordered the men to fix bayonets and then called for the brigade to advance.

Serving as a volunteer aid to Colonel Trabue was George Washington Johnson of Scott County, Kentucky. Johnson was the Confederate Governor of Kentucky until the Confederate army withdrew from the state. He was now the governor-in-exile. Johnson's horse was shot down early in the advance, but he picked up a musket and joined Captain Benjamin James Monroe's Company E, 4th Kentucky Infantry, as a foot soldier.

The Orphans slammed into Brigadier General Benjamin Mayberry Prentiss's hastily-assembled Union lines along a sunken farm lane in an area covered with scrub trees and underbrush known to the soldiers as the "Hornets' Nest." As the fighting intensified, General Breckinridge, fearing the brigade was being prematurely withdrawn, led the Kentuckians himself. A shell exploded nearby. "Never mind this boys," yelled Breckinridge, "press on." "Charge them!" he cried. Every member of "Old Breck's" staff fell in the melee from wounds or the loss of mounts. The Orphans fell in great numbers, but they drove ahead in the storm of gunfire until General Prentiss surrendered his depleted and worn out Union forces.[5]

On the first day at Shiloh, the brigade lost 75 killed and 350 wounded. Captain Robert Cobb's Kentucky battery reported the loss of nearly all of its battery horses killed and wounded and 37 of its men wounded. The Orphans had beaten the enemy on April 6, but luck eluded them.

Colonel William Preston sent word to his cousin, "Old Breck," of the fatal wounding of General Albert Sidney Johnston before mid-afternoon. There were such bright hopes that morning. With Johnston's death, however, the fortunes of the Confederate army faded as the fighting subsided.

[4] Larry J. Daniel, *Shiloh: The Battle that Changed the Civil War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 189.
[5] William C. Davis, *The Orphan Brigade: The Kentucky Confederates Who Couldn't Go Home* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 87-90.

The next morning, General Grant's army, reinforced the previous night by Major General Don Carlos Buell's Army of the Ohio which had arrived from Nashville, counter-attacked. The Confederate lines slowly gave way in brutal fighting. By the end of the second day the Orphan Brigade had been decimated. The ground it had gained on April 6 had been lost. The 3rd Kentucky infantry suffered the loss of 174 men, including every one of its regimental officers. The 4th Kentucky lost over one-half of its number, including the noble Governor George W. Johnson who fell on the field after bullets struck him in the right thigh and abdomen. Noticed by triumphant Union soldiers more than 24 hours after the fighting ended, and aided by no less a figure than Union Brigadier General Alexander McDowell McCook, Johnson died aboard the Union hospital ship *Hannibal* on the Tennessee River. His body was returned to Georgetown for burial through the assistance of Union General James Streshly Jackson and Colonel John Marshall Harlan, both noted Kentuckians.

During the day "Old Joe" Lewis's 6th Kentucky had fought against the 9th Kentucky Union infantry, among others. Not far down the line, Colonel John Curd Wickliffe, commander of the Confederate 7th Kentucky infantry and cousin to Colonel Preston's wife, was mortally wounded. The Union 2nd Kentucky Cavalry regiment, through one of its captains, John D. Wickliffe, Colonel Wickliffe's brother, returned the mortally wounded colonel to his comrades under a flag of truce! "Whenever Kentucky met Kentucky, it was horrible," wrote Colonel Preston.[6]

In all, the Orphan Brigade lost 844 men out of the 2,400 who entered the battle at Shiloh. The loss of officers was horrendous. Among the casualties were Major Joseph P. Nuckols and Captain Thomas W. Thompson of the 4th Kentucky who were severely wounded; Major Thomas B. Monroe and his brother, Captain Benjamin J. Monroe, both mortally wounded; Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin Anderson of the 3rd Kentucky, wounded; Lieutenant Colonel Martin Hardin Cofer of the 6th Kentucky, severely wounded; and Colonel John W. Caldwell, Lieutenant Colonel Robert A. Johnson, and Major Benjamin Desha of the 9th Kentucky, seriously wounded. The shattered remains of Major Thomas B. Monroe were buried by his men beneath a giant oak tree not far from Shiloh Church. On the tree was inscribed: "T.B. Monroe, C.S.A., Killed April 7, 1862." Such was the last resting place of the former mayor of Lexington, Kentucky and former Kentucky secretary of state.

Wrote one veteran of the brigade:

> "Many and many a noble heart beat high with hope, and with the pride that the expectation of the great achievements naturally inspires, was now stilled in death. These, our slain, lay in soldiers graves, scattered promiscuously, and with no mark even so much as to name them, and say to the future generations that such and such a one sleeps here. The victory that the very first blow [on April 6] promised, and that seemed, to all who

[6] William Preston to Margaret Preston, April 25, 1862, Preston Family Papers 1836-1888, University of Kentucky Libraries, Special Collections Library.

> lived till nightfall…. almost within their grasp, had been snatched from them [on April 7], and their dead comrades were now mourned as those who shed their blood in vain."[7]

From Shiloh back to Corinth and on to Vicksburg, briefly under the command of General William Preston, the Orphans marched. Farther south, the brigade entered the bloody fighting near Baton Rouge, Louisiana on August 2, 1862 where General Benjamin Hardin Helm, the brigade's new commander, was wounded. Killed, probably by friendly fire, at Baton Rouge was General Helm's aid, Lieutenant Alexander Todd, half-brother to Mary Todd Lincoln. As the Orphans fought their way farther from Kentucky, they watched the Confederacy's western front crumble.

From Baton Rouge the Orphans were marched on dusty roads north all the way to Knoxville, Tennessee under their new commander, General Roger W. Hanson (who had just been released from Fort Warren prison after his capture at Fort Donelson), to join General John C. Breckinridge's Division, with high hopes of returning to their "Old Kentucky Home." They bid farewell to the 3rd Kentucky which returned to Vicksburg. The war had moved into Kentucky with Generals Braxton Bragg's and Edmund Kirby Smith's invasion of the Orphans' native state in the summer and fall of 1862. The hoped-for reunion with Kentucky soil was not to be, however. Instead, General Bragg's army withdrew from Kentucky in mid-October after the bloody fighting at Perryville on October 8, 1862, and the Orphans marched to join General Bragg's Army of the Tennessee as it returned to Murfreesboro, Tennessee. The Orphans never stepped foot on their native soil.

In the bitter cold days before and after the New Year, 1863, outside of Murfreesboro, the Orphans were called upon to sacrifice again in fighting along Stones River. Only slightly engaged against Major General William Starke Rosecrans's Union Army of the Cumberland near what was called the "Round Forest" on Tuesday, December 30, 1862, Breckinridge's division and the Orphans were re-positioned on the far right flank of Bragg's army.

It was Friday, January 2, 1863. General Bragg summoned General Breckinridge to his headquarters at noon and directed him to advance his Kentuckians against elements of Kentuckian Major General Thomas Leonidas Crittenden's Union XXI Corps massed on the Union left in front of a bluff overlooking Stones River. Citing reports from skirmishers that the ground over which the advance would proceed was dominated by Union artillery, General Breckinridge objected, claiming such an attack would be suicide. The irascible Bragg retorted, "Sir, my information is different. I have given the order to attack the enemy in your front and I expect it to be obeyed." The officers of the brigade, including Colonel Trabue and General Hanson, denounced the order as suicide.[8]

[7] Thompson, *Orphan Brigade*, 95.
[8] William C. Davis, *Breckinridge: Statesman, Soldier, Symbol* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 340-342.

One soldier described the day of January 2 as "gloomy and cloudy." It was cold and "peculiarly dreary," wrote another. Before noon it began to rain and drizzle. Of the 5 brigades in Breckinridge's command, the Orphans were directed to hold the left flank of the assault column. They would have to pass in front of the Union guns on their left without any protection at all. "Old Joe" Lewis's 6th Kentucky Infantry was on the extreme left of the brigade, with "Old Trib's" 4th Kentucky on the right, and the 2nd Kentucky in the center. To the right of the 4th Kentucky was the 41st Alabama. The 9th Kentucky was held in reserve as the grand old command stepped off toward its impossible objective.[9]

"Up, my men, and charge!" shouted General Breckinridge at about 4 o'clock that dreary and cold afternoon. "Charge bayonets. Double-quick, forward, march!" yelled General Hanson. The drums rolled. The men, beneath their blue, Hardee battle flags, bearing silver discs and hand-painted battle honors, and under a hail of gunfire, negotiated a swollen pond, then crossed the undulating fields alongside the shallow, frozen Stones River, delivering volleys of rifle fire at General Crittenden's blue columns which included the 8th, 9th, 11th, 21st and 23rd Kentucky (Union) infantry regiments. The Orphans yelled as they ran on the double-quick toward their objective.[10]

As the Union skirmish lines and then the infantry columns slowly withdrew before the ferocious attack, they unmasked Captain John Mendenhall's massed Union artillery batteries — 58 guns in all — on top of the bluff to the left of the Orphans. In a moment, the frozen and desolate landscape exploded in the faces of the Orphans. Among the first to fall was General Roger Weightman Hanson, "Old Flintlock," who was struck below the left knee by the burning iron fuse from a spherical case shot that exploded nearby. Admitting his wound was serious, Hanson remarked to Lieutenant General Leonidas Polk as he was being carried to the rear that it was "glorious to die for one's country." He would die in agony on January 4 under the care of General Breckinridge's wife who was an acting nurse, and would later be buried in the Lexington, Kentucky cemetery. The brigade was truly earning its nickname.[11]

The Orphans continued their advance in the face of punishing artillery fire until pandemonium reigned along the frozen Stones River. The Kentuckians fell by the scores. Incoming shells would explode within the Orphans' ranks, blowing 10 or more men to the ground at one time. "Old Joe" Lewis, commanding the brigade after the wounding of Hanson, tried to rally the men. It was to no avail. The men were being slaughtered.

[9] A.D. Kirwan, *Johnny Green of the Orphan Brigade: The Journal of a Confederate Soldier* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1956), 67.
[10] United States War Department, *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 20, part 1, p. 826-7 (hereafter cited as *O.R.*, I, 20, pt. 1, 826-7); Thompson, *The Orphan Brigade*, 179.
[11] *O.R.*, I, 20, pt. 1, 827, 833 and Davis, *The Orphan Brigade*, 157.

Recalled veteran E. Porter Thompson,

> "The artillery bellowed forth such thunders that the men were stunned and could not distinguish sounds. There were falling timbers, crashing arms, the whirring of missiles of every description, the bursting of the dreadful shell, the groans of the wounded, the shouts of the officers, mingled in one horrid din that beggars description."[12]

The color bearer of the 4th Kentucky, Sergeant Robert Lindsay, was badly wounded in the chest. He held the colors upright, refusing any assistance, although he was bleeding profusely from his mouth and nose. Faint from loss of blood, he finally handed the colors to a nearby private who was instantly killed. Finally, Private Joseph Nichols carried the colors off the field. Slowly the Kentuckians gave way until they were out of range of the enemy guns.

In 42 minutes of fighting, the Orphans lost 431 of the 1,197 men taken into battle, over one-fourth of the command. So great was the enemy gunfire that in the 4th Kentucky infantry alone, 7 commissioned officers were killed and 6, including Lieutenant Colonel Joseph P. Nuckols, were wounded. Never had so many men fallen in so short a period of time. The 2nd Kentucky lost 108 of its 422 men taken into the fighting. General Breckinridge, seeing the bloody repulse of his noble Kentuckians, was heard to exclaim: "My poor Orphans! My poor Orphans!" The men had never seen him so visibly moved. The brigade had won its nickname.[13]

In 1912, Lot Dudley Young, formerly a lieutenant in the 4th Kentucky infantry, visited the site of the attack at Murfreesboro while attending a Confederate Memorial Day celebration. Upon hearing the signing of "My Old Kentucky Home" by a children's choir and remembering those who had fallen along those fields, including his dear friend, Captain William Peter Bramblett of Paris, Kentucky (whose last, parting glance before receiving a mortal wound, Young could not erase from his memory), tightly hugged a nearby tree and wept out loud, unashamed of his display of emotion.[14]

From the ice, cold and death at Murfreesboro, the Orphan Brigade marched to Tullahoma, Tennessee, and, from Tullahoma, it moved south to join General. Joseph E. Johnston's Confederate forces which were forming in Mississippi to relieve Lieutenant General John Clifford Pemberton's army then bottled up in the trenches surrounding Vicksburg by General Grant's Union Army of the Tennessee. The Orphans never arrived in time. On July 4, 1863, Vicksburg was surrendered (along with the old 3rd Kentucky Infantry) by General Pemberton and the western frontier of the Confederacy finally vanished.

[12] Thompson, *The Orphan Brigade*, 196.
[13] *Ibid*, 182 and Davis, *The Orphan Brigade*, 151-160 and Davis, *Breckinridge*, 347.
[14] Lot Dudley Young, *Reminiscences of a Soldier of the Orphan Brigade* (Louisville KY: Courier Journal Job Printing Company, 1918).

The Orphans were then transferred all the way back to General Bragg's Army of the Tennessee to face the growing Union Army of the Cumberland under General William Rosecrans (which they had fought at Murfreesboro) then threatening Chattanooga and north Georgia.

At the Battle of Chickamauga the Orphans were sent into the iron and lead hail of battle again. Beloved General Benjamin Hardin Helm, back from his convalescence after the wound at Baton Rouge, commanded the brigade. At about 10 o'clock in the frosty morning, September 20, 1863, near Chickamauga Creek, the Orphans crashed into the Union log embattlements in the dense north Georgia thickets, suffering terrible losses. Divided into 2 separate assault columns because of the configuration of the enemy breastworks, the Orphan Brigade struck the extreme left wing of the Union army held by Major General George Henry Thomas's XIV Corps. The Orphans formed the left flank of General Breckinridge's assault column. With supporting brigades too far behind them, the Orphans entered the fighting with their left flank entirely exposed. The hard-charging soldiers in "Old Joe" Lewis's 6th and 4th Kentucky infantry regiments along with the 41st Alabama infantry, the right wing of the brigade, drove General Thomas's Union troops (including the 15th Kentucky infantry) nearly one-half mile to the Lafayette Road, capturing a section of Bridges' Illinois Light Artillery, but the left wing, the 2nd and 9th Kentucky Infantry regiments along with three companies of Alabamians, personally led by General Helm, became bogged down in a nightmarish slugfest at the enemy breastworks.

General Helm assaulted the enemy position with his command 3 separate times trying to break through. Those fearless blows were not enough to break the Union lines. Exposed to enfilading fire, Helm's attack finally faltered. By the time the fighting ended, the command suffered losses of nearly 52%. General Helm, in front of the 2nd Kentucky, was struck by a rifle ball in his right side and tumbled from his horse. He was carried from the battlefield. The last words from Helm's lips at a field hospital were "victory, victory." He was dead in a few hours. It was reported that President Abraham Lincoln, when told of the death of General Helm, wept with grief. "I feel like David of old when he was told of the death of Absolom," Lincoln remarked to Illinois Senator David Davis. The Orphans were orphans again.[15]

Losses had been fearsome. The 2nd Kentucky Infantry went into the fighting at Chickamauga with 282 men and lost 146, including its colonel, James W. Hewitt, who was killed at the head of his regiment along with 3 of his company commanders; the 9th Kentucky Infantry lost 102 men out of 230 taken into battle, including Colonel John W. Caldwell who was desperately wounded. The 4th Kentucky not only lost heavily in officers and men, it suffered the final loss of its brave colonel, Joseph P. Nuckols, to a disabling wound. He had been wounded at the head of his fine regiment twice before, at Shiloh and Murfreesboro.

[15] R. Gerald McMurtry, *Ben Hardin Helm, Rebel Brother-in-law of Abraham Lincoln, With a Biographical Sketch of His Wife and an Account of the Todd Family* (Chicago: The Civil War Roundtable, 1943), 49.

From the shallow victory of the Army of the Tennessee at Chickamauga, the Orphan Brigade, commanded after the death of General Helm by General Joseph H. Lewis once again, its 6th commander since the war began, moved to heights overlooking Chattanooga known as Missionary Ridge. There the Orphans received into their brigade the 5th Kentucky Infantry; they bid farewell to the hard-fighting 41st Alabama.

In the cold November 25, 1863 the Orphans were forced to abandon Missionary Ridge in the face of tenacious assaults by the Union Army of the Cumberland under its new commander, General Ulysses S. Grant. Lost at Chattanooga were favored guns of Captain Cobb's Kentucky Battery, 2 of them adoringly nicknamed by the Orphans for the wives of their favored commanders: "Lady Breckinridge" and "Lady Buckner."

Then, from Dalton, Georgia to Jonesboro and the evacuation of Atlanta, in the face of Major General William Tecumseh Sherman's well-fed and well-equipped Army of the Tennessee and the Army of the Cumberland, the Orphans earned a place for themselves in the annals of war that beggars description. From May 1864 to September 1864 the Orphans lost nearly 1,000 of their number. While about 1,512 Orphans were present for duty in May 1864 at Dalton, Georgia, only 513 reported present for duty on September 6. The entire 2nd Kentucky Infantry numbered only 69 officers and men in September. The 6th Kentucky Infantry numbered only 74. The 4th Kentucky Infantry numbered 156. Only three years before those regiments numbered almost 600 officers and men each! The entire brigade—5 Kentucky infantry regiments—numbered only enough to form a small battalion on September 6, 1864.

In 120 days, from Dalton through the final days before Atlanta, the Orphans suffered the almost unbelievable losses of 123%. From Dalton, Georgia, when the brigade withdrew toward Atlanta with Sherman's legions pressuring their rear and when the command boasted 1,512 officers and men strong, to Jonesboro, the Orphan Brigade recorded 1,860 cases of death and wounds, 23% more than there were men in those 5 peerless regiments! Men would be wounded, return to the brigade only to be wounded again and again, or killed. Less than 50 men were reported to have passed through the campaign without a wound. The rolls record only 10 men deserted their ranks in the 120 day campaign. The Battles of Dalton, Resaca, Pine Mountain, Kennesaw Mountain, Intrenchment Creek and Jonesboro are written in red with the blood of those Kentuckians.

Wrote historian Nathaniel S. Shaler,

> "A search into the history of warlike exploits has failed to show me any endurance to the worst trials of war surpassing this. The men of this campaign were at each stage of their retreat going farther from their firesides. It is easy for men to bear great trials under circumstances of victory. Soldiers of ordinary goodness will stand several defeats; but to endure the despair which such adverse conditions bring for a hundred days

> demands a moral and physical patience which, so far as I have learned, has never been excelled in any other army."[16]

In early 1862, the Orphan Brigade numbered nearly 4,000 officers and men. By the fall of 1864, the brigade numbered barely 700, many of them convalescents and new recruits. They were mounted and fought General Sherman's advance into the Carolinas only to be forced to surrender in early May 1865 at Washington, Georgia, not far from Augusta.

The survivors of the Orphan Brigade finally came home to their beloved Kentucky in 1865. Many were disabled by wounds and exposure. Most of them were penniless. Some managed to find meaningful work. Some were wholly unable to care for themselves and sank into poverty. "Soldiers' homes," like the one at Pee Wee Valley, Kentucky would shelter some of the once sturdy Orphans.

Many former Orphan Brigade officers and enlisted men were under indictment for treason when they returned home from the war. It was not until December 1865 that the state legislature removed the onerous impediment. With that act, the veterans of the Orphan Brigade quickly moved into the ranks of business, the professions, and state government. Indeed, in the years after the war, Orphan Brigade veterans dominated Kentucky politics. It gave birth to the old saying in Kentucky that "the State never seceded until the war was over." Simon Bolivar Buckner became Governor in 1887. "Old Joe" Lewis was elected to the state legislature, and then served three terms in Congress. In 1880, he became a member of the Kentucky Court of Appeals, and, in 1881, Chief Justice of Kentucky, taking the place of former Orphan Colonel Martin Cofer, who had died. Philip Lightfoot Lee became the Commonwealth's Attorney for Jefferson County, Kentucky. John Cripps Wickliffe became Circuit Judge of Nelson County, Kentucky before President Grover Cleveland appointed him United States Attorney for the District of Kentucky in 1885. The twice wounded John W. Caldwell also became a circuit judge in his home county of Logan, and then was elected to Congress.[17]

The Orphan Brigade veterans, to the last, formed a close fraternity. By 1882, they began holding annual reunions, the first being held at the Blue Lick Springs Hotel in Robertson County that year. That was followed by reunions in Lexington in 1883, Elizabethtown in 1884, Glasgow in 1885, Cynthiana in 1886, Bardstown in 1887, Frankfort in 1888, Louisville in 1889, Lawrenceburg in 1890, Owensboro in 1891, Paris in 1892, Versailles in 1893, Russellville in 1894, Bowling Green in 1895, and finally Nashville, Tennessee in 1896.

[16] Nathaniel S. Shaler, "Nature and Man in America, Third Paper," *Scribner's Magazine,* 8 (November, 1890), 654.
[17] E. Merton Coulter, *The Civil War and Readjustment in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926), 439.

In the end, the Orphans left behind a magnificent legacy, one never to be repeated in Kentucky. They went to war to fight for what they believed was principle. In doing so, they gave up everything. They lost more commanders and suffered more casualties than any comparable command. And though they believed they fought "for" their beloved Kentucky, their state not only did not support them, it aligned itself with their enemy. In the end, they were defeated in war, but not in heart. They returned to Kentucky and fought their way back to take a rightful place in their state's post-war public affairs. In every way, those old Orphans became the idols of Kentuckians.

The Orphans represent the conquest of courage over timidity and sacrifice for the sake of a principle. The cry of General Breckinridge, "My poor Orphans!" was not in vain. The Orphans' memory lives on. As the Orphans' poet, a Union Soldier, wrote:

In the earth that spring where the heroes sleep,

And in love new born where the stricken weep.

That legion hath marched past the setting sun;

Beaten? Nay, victors; the realms they have won,

Are the hearts of men who forever shall hear,

The throb of their far-off drums.[18]

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[18] Young, *Reminiscences of a Soldier in the Orphan Brigade* (Paris, KY: Courier-Journal Job Printing Co., 1918), 4. The verse is from the poem, "The Orphan Brigade," by Nathaniel Shaler