

An Irishman in the American Civil War by J C. Sullivan

James K. O'Reilly was returning from Sunday Mass at Cleveland's St. Edward Church on Woodland Avenue when news posters announced the assault on Ft. Sumter, South Carolina. America's Civil War began on that April day. O'Reilly, born in County Cork in 1838, came to Cleveland in 1858 via New York City. He and his Irish friends James Butler and Thomas Galwey were anxious to join Union forces before the fight was over. They hurried to the armory of the Hibernian Guards and enlisted for three months, officially becoming Co. B, 8th Ohio Volunteer Infantry. When it was all over, almost five years later, the 8th Ohio would have 97 men present for muster-out out of a total 990 that began the unit.



The honorable Kenneth R. Callahan, Common Pleas Court Judge in Cuyahoga County, is a direct descendent of Captain O'Reilly, his maternal grandfather's father.

He honors the spirit of his colorful and gallant forebear by insuring Americans don't forget the deeds and valor of the 8th Ohio, a unit that fought fiercely in most of the major battles of the Potomac Army.

He also wants to insure that history accurately reflects the role they played in turning the famous 'Pickett's Charge' at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania in July of 1863. By June, General Robert E. Lee's rag-tag forces had moved into the farmlands of Pennsylvania, rich in the much-needed resources of food, material and steed. The march to Gettysburg was brutally hot. Unlike modern armies, neither side at Gettysburg had winter and summer uniforms - only heavy wool. Some were lucky to have shoes. During the march it was frightfully hot. O'Reilly suffered sunstroke and went by horse-drawn ambulance to Gettysburg. "When he found out the 8th was positioned outside the Emmitsburg Road," said Callahan, "he left the hospital and ran out and joined the company there." O'Reilly, deathly ill, arrived at Gettysburg on July 3rd, after the first day of battle.

Colonel William Carroll (of the Maryland Carrolls) ordered the Hibernians immediately into a cornfield between the Union lines on Cemetery Ridge and Confederate lines on Seminary Ridge,

with orders were to push rebel sharpshooters back. With this advanced picket line established, O'Reilly's Hibernians spent the night there while the rest of the brigade was pulled out by General Hancock to support other areas. Confederate sharpshooters reminded them of their closeness throughout the evening by shooting at them.



On the morning of the 4th, General Lee, believing the center of the Union line to be weakened, opened up his attack with a two hour artillery barrage. "Nothing more terrific than this story of artillery can be imagined," said Colonel Franklyn Sawyer. "The missiles of both armies passed over our heads. The roar of the guns was deafening, the air was soon clouded with smoke, and the shrieks and the startling crack of the exploding shells above, a round and in our midst; the blowing up of our caissons in our rear; the driving through the air of the fence rails, posts and limbs of trees; the groans of dying men, the neighing of frantic and wounded horses, created a scene of absolute horror." General Lee followed this up by sending fifteen thousand graybacks into the fray. The 150 - 180 men of the 8th Ohio poured rifle fire into the left flank of James J. Pettigrew's division. "They moved up splendidly," Sawyer wrote, "deploying into column as they crossed the long, sloping interval between us and their base. At first it looked like they would sweep our position, but as they advanced, their direction lay to our left." "A moan went up from the battlefield distinctly to be heard amid the storm of battle," related survivor Galwey.

The surprised Southerners, led by gallant officers on horseback, broke and retreated. "...the first sign of faltering came from Colonel J.M. Brockenbrough's brigade of Virginians who, under Pettigrew, were stationed in the extreme left of the advance, that is, directly in front of the 8th Ohio," Callahan related. With Sawyer admitting their 'blood was up', he then turned his men ninety degrees and fired into the flank of Joseph Davis' brigade. When Union commanders saw this development, they sent reinforcements down to turn the attack. The 8th advanced, cutting off three regiments, capturing their colors and many soldiers. Afterwards, an attempt was made to discharge Colonel Sawyer from the service for it was believed he was drunk...one would think that no commander in his right mind would attempt such a maneuver with such a small force.

Later that summer, after the battle of Gettysburg, the 8th Ohio was sent to New York City for riot duty. When the draft was instituted, provisions were made for purchasing one's way out through the process of buying a substitute. Naturally, many Irish and other immigrants could not afford to do so and objected to the practice. While there, O'Reilly met his future bride, Susan O'Brien. "The whole thing was a drinking expedition," Callahan said. "Commander Sawyer was telling everybody not to get drunk but about an hour later he was arrested for drunkenness. I think they had a good time in New York City."

In August, 1865, at the war's end, O'Reilly returned to New York City and married Susan O'Brien at St. Stephen's Parish. The couple came to Cleveland and resided at 189 Quincy Ave., where they raised seven children. Part of the time he worked for Thomas Jones & Sons Monument Co., which was located at E. 28th & Prospect Ave. Because of his disability from his Gettysburg sunstroke, however, he was never able to work for long periods of time. He tried to get a pension the rest of his life in a protracted struggle with the War Department. His widow was finally awarded one thirty years after his death, in 1930. In 1900, after a funeral Mass at St. Edward's Church, O'Reilly was laid to rest in St. John's cemetery, next to the church. His stone, erected by his daughter, says simply, "Captain J.K. O'Reilly." Judge Callahan met Captain O'Reilly's daughter, Isabelle, in 1952. She blamed her father for the fact that she never married. "She claimed every time somebody came over to see her he pulled them into the parlor and kept them up until midnight telling stories about the Civil War."

Additional information on the 8th Ohio, including an image of Captain O'Reilly, can be found at their website, <http://www.cwreenactors.com/8thovi.htm> -30- BIBLIOGRAPHY GALWEY, THOMAS FRANCIS, *The Valiant Hours, Narrative of "Captain Brevet," an Irish- American in the Army of the Potomac.* Harrisburg PA., Stackpole Co., 1961. Col. William S. Nye, Editor DOWNES, CAPTAIN THOMAS M.F., Co. B. 8th Ohio Infantry (Reenactment) from a speech to the Ancient Order of Hibernians, Boland-Berry Division, Cleveland, Ohio 1989. CALLAHAN, KENNETH, *conversations*, 1993-4. Judge Callahan is a graduate of Cleveland's St. Ignatius High School and received his undergraduate degree from Cleveland's John Carroll University. He received his law degree from Cleveland-Marshall College of Law. Additionally, he's studied art, history, anthropology and literature at both Trinity and University Colleges, Dublin. Callahan is a published author and a military historian. He and his spouse Martha are parents of Casey and Eoin. This article has appeared in Ancient Order of Hibernian Division newsletters. Photographs courtesy of J.S. Sullivan.



Photograph of John Galwey, friend of James K. O'Reilly, as well as a fellow soldier and Hibernian.. Local cemetery buff Bernie McCafferty is shown at the gravesite of John Galwey, 19th Ohio Artillery, at St. John Cemetery.



J.C.Sullivan's wife Karen is shown decorating the grave of Sgt. James Kelly, Co. B, 8th OVI (Hibernian Guards). He was wounded at Gettysburg and died the following year, 07 JUL 1863. James K. O'Reilly was St. Edward Parish stonemason and engraved Kelly's monument, which is quite impressive and decorated with shamrocks.

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