

# When is the Civil War Not the Civil War?

Don Wedll and John Hoenig trace Wedll's great-grandfather's military service

THE CIVIL WAR WAS never something I studied much, so when my friend Bob suggested we visit Civil War sites along the Mississippi River, it seemed like it would be interesting.

We headed east from Minneapolis, down through Illinois, ending up at the Shiloh battlegrounds. From there, we crossed over to Vicksburg. At the battleground interpretive center, Bob asked if any of my relatives served in the Civil War. I had not given much thought to this question. After a few moments, my answer was yes, my mother's grandfather served in the Civil War. Bob told me that I could get a certificate for his service if I knew his name.

I called my mother back in Minnesota and asked her how to spell my great-grandfather's name and what she knew about his Civil War record. She didn't know much about it, but said her mother had a picture of him in uniform. With the correct spelling of his name, I asked the attendant at the Vicksburg interpretive center for a copy of his certificate. They did a computer search and printed a certificate for John Holthusen, private in the Illinois 12th Infantry. My thought was "How did he end up in Illinois?" They said for an additional \$40 us I could get his military records. I filed this away for later. We continued the trip, ending up on the Natchez Trace.

When I got home, it seemed like a good idea to request the additional information, so I sent a request off to Broadfoot

Publishing Company, which markets Civil War service records. They e-mailed me stating they found the information confirming that John Holthusen was in the Illinois 12th Infantry and was 45 years old at the time. Now this seemed highly unlikely since he passed away in 1932, which would have made him 103 years old. Something was wrong.

Going back to my mother and asking her what information she had

about my great-grandfather led me on a long search. She had his obituary which stated that John Holthusen served in the Civil War. He was born on 30 April 1840 and so, after arriving in the United States from Hanover, I presume he was drafted into the Civil War.

Unfortunately, I haven't been able to find his passenger arrival record, so I don't know exactly when he came to America. After the war, he moved to Elizabeth, Minnesota. With this information,

I started a search to find the military unit in which he served. The search generated six John Holthusens in the United States during the 1860s to 1930s, plus some with different spellings. The John Holthusen in the Illinois 12th Infantry was from Illinois. Only one other John Holthusen showed up in databases of Civil War soldiers.

Ancestry.com listed a John Holthusen in the New York 39th Infantry, which was also called the "Garibaldi Guard". This was a German infantry unit, so it looked interesting. The 1860 federal census listed an "A. Holthausen" in North Carolina in the county of New Hanover. The age was right, so maybe the first name was wrong and A. Holthausen was my great-grandfather. The next question was how did he end up in the Union Army? Then I came across the term "Galvanized Yankee", which referred to Confederate soldiers who were captured and



Don Wedll's great-grandfather John Holthusen, in his military uniform. Inset: A close-up view indicates that the pupils of Mr. Holthusen's eyes were embellished with ink and that someone used pen and ink to hand tint the red and yellow trim of the uniform.

placed in the Union Army. These soldiers were generally placed in the west and fought against Indian tribes. It was interesting and the logic fit with family lore that he was in the Civil War and Indian Wars. But when I checked with the National Archives, I found there was no John Holthusen in the New York infantry units. There was an "August Holthusen" in the New York 26th Infantry, and the next entry was John Hollington in the 39th Infantry. It appears that a person creating the database for Ancestry.com inadvertently combined part of one line with another line to create an erroneous record. Everything ended in dead ends.

What did I know for sure about my great-grandfather? He lived in Minnesota, his obituary stated he was in the Civil War, and I had a picture of him in uniform. A picture is worth a thousand words. The picture might lead to the unit in which he served, if I could identify his uniform. In showing the picture to different people knowledgeable about the Civil War, I got a number of answers. These ranged from an officer's uniform, to Confederate soldier, to a suggestion that it was not a Civil War uniform. The US Army Quartermaster Museum in Fort Lee, Virginia, gave me a referral to West Point Academy to see if they could help.

The e-mail reply from Michael J. McAfee, the Curator of History at the West Point Museum, read: "Your photograph is of a Hanoverian soldier of the 1860s. The German state of Hanover was the state from which the English monarchs originated and for many years well into the 19th century, the soldiers of the Hanoverian Army wore English uniforms with the crest of the House of Hanover (rampart horse — seen on front of the helmet in center of insignia). Obviously he served in that army before coming to the United States."

Questions immediately arose.

Did this really happen? Was there a war going on in Europe? How did that translate to the US Civil War?

Here is what I found in Wikipedia, the online encycloped-

**J. HOLTHUSEN'S  
LIFE AND DEATH**

**Sketch of Career of Civil  
War Veteran and Good  
Citizen**

John Holthusen was born in Hanover, Germany, April 30, 1840, and came to this country as a young lad. His parents died while he was still a small boy. His father was a roof builder in Germany and while building a roof fell and was killed.

Very shortly after Mr. Holthusen arrived in this country, the Civil War broke out and he served as a soldier in the army for seven years. After the war he located in Red Wing, Minn.,

*Obituary indicates John Holthusen served in the Civil War.*

dia: "The Austro-Prussian War (also called the Seven Weeks' War, the Unification War or the German Civil War) was a war fought between the Austrian Empire and its German allies and Prussia with its German and Italian allies in 1866 that resulted in Prussian dominance in Germany. In Germany and Austria it is called Deutscher Krieg (German war) or Bruderkrieg (war of brothers)."

Thus, my great-grandfather apparently did serve in the Civil War — the German Civil War. Since he only spoke German, he may have referred to the war as the *Bruderkrieg* (war of brothers) and his children interpreted that

as the United States Civil War because of the reference to brothers fighting brothers. That is the trail I am now following. But what about the Indian Wars in family lore? Perhaps that was just an embellishment to entertain his children.

Recently I received an e-mail from the Arbeitskreis Hannoversche Militargeschichte which identifies the uniform.

Michael-Andreas Tänzer wrote "The uniform on the picture is that of a private of infantry in the Royal Hanoverian Army 1860-66. From the shako it is also obvious that the soldier pictured is a private. The shako plate is that of the infantry regiments 2 (Celle), 3 (Einbeck and Northeim), 4 (Stade), 5 (Lüneburg), 6 (Hannover) and 7 (Osnabrück). The name Holthusen is not in the books of the garrison-churches in Hannover and Hameln, and also not in the list of wounded in the Battle of Langensalza 1866. The muster-rolls of the regiments mentioned are in the Hanoverian archives, [www.staatsarchiv.niedersachsen.de](http://www.staatsarchiv.niedersachsen.de), where further research should be made."

There are several important lessons here. Question everything. Documents, including obituaries, are often filled with errors. There is usually a grain of truth to family stories.

And, sometimes a photograph can be extremely revealing.

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