

Elisha Odle and the Iron Brigade

by Kyle D. Conrad

To a Civil War researcher or military history buff, the term “Iron Brigade” commands the attention comparable to the recognition we give today to “Navy SEAL” or “101st Airborne Division”. This elite group of Midwestern soldiers saw the fiercest action in the Civil War, and, regrettably, suffered the highest percentage of casualties of any brigade in the Union Army. These men were also known as the ‘black hats’ due to them wearing the 1858 style Hardee hats instead of the blue kepis worn by most other Union regiments. The Confederate units would later refer to them as “that damn black hat brigade.”

The Iron Brigade was comprised of the 2nd, 6th, and 7th Wisconsin regiments along with the 19th Indiana. After suffering tremendous casualties, they were joined by the 24th Michigan in an effort to refortify its number of soldiers. The 19th Indiana regiment was raised at Indianapolis on July 29, 1861 and consisted of ten companies and a band for a total of 1046 men. A majority of the men that comprised the 19th were from the central Indiana counties of Marion, Wayne, Delaware, Randolph, Johnson, and Madison. Another company was comprised of mostly Elkhart County men and another from Owen County. Only two men who were members of the Iron Brigade, and the Indiana 19th Infantry at that, are known to have had ties to Newton County. Lewis Fiers was a member of Co. K of the 19th Indiana and is buried at the Liberty Cemetery in Iroquois County, Illinois. His discharge papers are recorded in the Newton County Recorder’s office in Kentland. The other soldier, Elisha B. Odle, was also a member of Co. K of the 19th, and is the subject of this article.

Elisha Barrett Odle was born 24 February, 1838 in Randolph County, Indiana, the son of William and Elizabeth (Franklin) Odle. He was 23 years old when the Confederate army fired upon Fort Sumter South Carolina in April of 1861. In July of that year, Elisha volunteered for the Union Army with his residence being listed as Muncie. Elisha was mustered in Co. K of the 19th Indiana Volunteer Regiment in Indianapolis on 29 July, 1861.

The 19th was immediately combined at Washington with the Wisconsin regiments to form the Army of the Potomac’s Iron Brigade.

Before Elisha went off to war, he had

met a young lady by the name of Margaret Bryant, who he traded letters with throughout the war. We are fortunate that some of these letters still survive. Margaret Bryant would become the wife of Elisha Odle in 1863.

The first skirmish that the 19th was involved with was in Lewinsville, Virginia on September 11, 1861. From there they moved on to Falls Church before moving into quarters at Fort Craig near Washington. In March of 1862 the Iron Brigade was attached to McDowell’s corp and moved toward Fredricksburg and the Shenendoah Valley. It is during this time that we get the first glimpse of life during the war in Odle’s own words:

Battlefield of Sharpsburg, Maryland September 23rd, 1862

“Miss Briant

I received your highly interesting missive some months since but we received marching orders the next day and we have been marching and fighting ever since, for this reason I beg you pardon me for not wrighting. I presume you have herd of the late battles fought in Virginia and Maryland. I have been in all of them and not hurt though this Regiment has lost two thirds of the men engaged. On the 28 of Aug. we were ingaged in a hard battle also on the 30th retreating in good order from Bullrun, Centerville. On the 3 of Sept. we crossed the Potomac and marched cross the District of Columbia and found ourselves in Maryland where we found the foe the 13th inst. We fought at Fredric City where we repulsed the enemy and drove them back to Sharpsburg where they got reinforced and on the 18th inst. we had a Decisive battle the number ingaged supposed 100,000 on each side. We held the field all day and expected battle the next day but the Cesesh stole away like a thief in the night and cross the Potomac into Virginia and our men are on pursuit of the Grey Coats. This Corps are permitted to rest a fiew for the first time in 6 weeks.”

It is important to note that the battles Odle is describing is the battle at south mountain where the regiment lost forty killed and wounded and seven missing, and at Sharpsburg went into action with two hundred officers and men of whom but thirty seven returned from the field. Today we know the battle of Sharpsburg by the more common name of Antietam. It was



Elisha Barrett Odle, 1838-1901, member of Company K, 19th Indiana Volunteer Regiment. Hiestand/Odle Collection.

the bloodiest single day battle in American history with 23,000 casualties and the first to take place on northern soil.

The 19th saw a couple of small skirmishes after Antietam and moved into winter quarters until called upon to engage in Gen. Hooker’s Chancellorsville campaign, where it was in an engagement at Fitzhugh’s crossing of the Rappahannock where it lost 4 men killed and wounded. Let’s let Odle describe the events of that time:

Bell Plain, Va. Feb. the 1st, 1863

“...we made another attempt to cross the Raphanock but the rades were so bad that we could not cross in safty, so we were ordered back to our old quarters where we expect to stay for the winter. We have comfortable shantyes and enjoy our selves well for soldiers. Geners. Burnside, Franklin, & Suner resigned last week. General Hooker now commands the Grand Army of the Potomac...”

The Iron Brigade was subsequently

attached to 1st brigade, 1st division, 1st corps, which was the first of the infantry to engage the enemy at Gettysburg on July 1, 1863. They assisted in the capture of Archer's Confederate brigade but suffered heavy losses with 210 out of 288 men being lost on that first day. During the next two days of battle, they held a position on Culp's hill and saw little action.

Following Gettysburg, the 19th took part in the Mine Run campaign and wintered at Culpepper, where Odle and a portion of the regiment re-enlisted. Soon afterwards, Odle returned home to Indiana and on January 29, 1864 in Newton County, he married Margaret Bryant, a native of Henry County, Indiana. How Elisha met Margaret or first came to Newton County is not known.

Upon his return, the regiment broke winter camp at the beginning of the Wilderness campaign; was engaged at the Wilderness, Laurel Hill, above Spottsylvania, at the North Anna River and Cold Harbor; and was then constantly on duty in the trenches before Petersburg until the end of the siege.

Its losses from May 4 to July 30, 1864, were 36 killed, 168 wounded and 16 missing. The non-veterans were mustered out at Indianapolis early in Aug., 1864, and the veterans and recruits as part of the "Iron Brigade" took part in the expedition against the Weldon railroad. On Oct. 18, 1864, the regiment was consolidated with the 20th Ind. and served until they were mustered out at Louisville, Ky., July 12, 1865. One of their final destinations was to be present at Appomattox Court House for the surrender of General Robert E. Lee and the Confederate Army.

Following the war, Elisha and Margaret began raising their family. In 1880 they purchased a farm two miles south of Brook where they lived the rest of their lives. Children born to their union included Rosa Ellen, Warren, Samuel, Editha, Belle, Sarah, and Mary. Elisha Odle, Newton County's only Iron Brigade soldier, died on February 20, 1901 and is buried next to his wife in Riverside Cemetery at Brook.