

# Roots in Ripon

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Chuck Roots

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## A Soldier's Reflections

Memorial Day is now passed. As Americans, we celebrate this special day each May acknowledging the sacrifice of patriots who placed their lives in harm's way so you and I could live in peace and freedom.

So, all of this attention on the price of freedom and the visit to a special Memorial Day service at a local cemetery got me to thinking. Browsing through my shelves of books on the Civil War, I ran across one particular volume about Charles W. Sherman, a soldier with the 12<sup>th</sup> Connecticut Volunteer Infantry. The book is the compilation of letters (160 in all) that Private Sherman wrote home to his wife, Virtue, during his two years of military service. Entitled, *Letters to Virtue*, the book is subtitled, *A Civil War Journey of Courage, Faith, and Love*.

Charles Sherman is truly an American story! He was born in England in 1828, immigrating to the United States in 1838 with his family. In 1848, Charles married Virtue James, also an immigrant from England. They had five children. He seems to have been something of a Jack-of-all-trades, working first as a harness maker in Connecticut as recorded in the census of 1850, then as a carpenter in Webster, Massachusetts in the census of 1860.

The Civil War began in 1861, requiring men to leave their families and their vocations to serve their country in order to preserve the Union. In January of 1862, at age 33, Charles Sherman enlisted in the 12<sup>th</sup> Connecticut. He must not have had much of an education as his letters reflect poor spelling and grammar usage. However, his ability to express what was important to him comes through with clarity. You see, "*Charles enlisted because of his strong belief in the principles of his adopted country as well as his firm opposition to slavery.*"

It is a fascinating journey to catch glimpses of a soldier's life during the most arduous of wartime challenges. His unit left Connecticut, traveling to Louisiana, then to Virginia, before finally returning to Connecticut at war's end. He is quick to express his love for his wife and five children in each of his many letters. His graphic descriptions of combat and its horrors are not enjoyable reading, but he is frank and honest in his assessment of their conditions and the combat they are frequently engaged in.

In his last letter home, dated October 15, 1864, Cedar Creek, Virginia (The Battle of Cedar Creek), he shares a thought that must have been troubling him for quite some time. Describing preparations for battle, he writes, "*It is not fear, but a*

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*sad feeling when you see the skirmishers deploy into line, and the regiments unfold themselves into a line of battle." He further describes the cacophony of battle. "When the thunder of the artillery comes upon you, you forget everything else and look out for the shells that come screaming toward you, not that you can dodge anything, but you want to see where they are coming from."*

He conveys the relief in returning to camp, saying, "A man feels better in going away from danger than in going to it." I can vouch for that!

But it was this expressed thought that captured my attention, and his reluctant acceptance of war's horrific devastation, regardless of who wins and who loses. He wrote, "I do wish this cruel war would come to an end, for this going about to kill one another has an unchristian look to me, when you come to look at it in that light, but it has to be done, I suppose."

On October 23, 1864, Sergeant Edward S. Larkum wrote a letter to Charles' father. "Dear Sir, It devolves on me as a tentmate of your son to line (write) the sad news of his death, which occurred in terrible battle of the 19<sup>th</sup> of the present month. As a soldier, he was much respected. He was courteous alike to everyone and there was not a man in his regiment who did not respect him. He was killed in the foremost rank, bravely fighting for his country which he thought so much of. . . . Any information that I can give will be gladly attended to, and if I can be of any benefit to you in any other way, willingly will my services be offered and gladly will I pay the last tribute to him who was so brave and so kind."

Corporal Charles Sherman joined the ranks of the fallen, but whose shed blood has helped to insure a future for all Americans, whether native born, or naturalized citizen.

God bless America!