



Letters from the war: Alamance resident's great-grandfather wrote from the fight

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[Jay Ashley / Times-News](#)

His initials spell “war” and he spent three long years of his life fighting one, but William Anderson Rorrer remained a farmer at heart and longed to return to his home as he suffered the hardships and hunger of the Civil War.

Norma Loy, 86, who lives in the Village of Alamance today, never met her maternal great-grandfather, but some of the letters he left behind provide a window into his life as a soldier in that great national fight.

Rorrer was the son of David Alexander Rorrer Jr. and Nancy Brown and lived in the Meadows of Dan area of Virginia. He enlisted as a private on April 1, 1862 in Turner’s Light Artillery Regiment Virginia. On Oct. 9, 1862, Turner’s Artillery became the Orange Light Artillery Regiment.

Rorrer never questioned his duty as a soldier, but his stomach complained to him about the victuals, or rather the paucity. In a May 20, 1862 letter from the field he wrote his wife, Catharine, “What few hogs is here now have to prop themselves up by the fence to stand.” And, speaking about a bivouac near a cornfield, he said his fellow soldiers “are around it every night pulling out corn to parch and make hominy. We have never stole any yet, but if our rations don’t get better we will have it to do.”

In a moment of humor, the Confederate wrote, “We are afraid that we will have to secede and go back to the union again. Would be willing to do most anything to get to come home. If they keep us here much longer and feed us on crackers, we will (be) like the poor hogs. We will have to prop us up against the fence.”

And, in closing he wrote: “You must make all the brandy you can for when I come home. I will get drunk. Tell Susan to make all the corn she can. I will be ... hungry when I get home.”

RORRER’S COMPANY fought at Petersburg, Va. and then marched to Fort Warren.

He wrote, “We expected a big fight and when we got there the bomb shells whistled around us for about two hours and seven of our men got killed and (we) killed 60 yankees and sunk one boat so they tell us. The Federals had to retreat back and we are yet here waiting for them to return. Our rations are getting so small they feed us on five crackers a day. ... I am getting very tired of this place. I want to come home and see you all very bad, but I don’t know when I can come. There is some talk of our company going to Western Virginia. There is no chance for us to come unless we press a furlough and we don’t want to do that. Our officers are very clever men and treat us well and we are very well pleased to be in the artillery company.”

In a letter dated April 17, 1863, Rorrer wrote his wife that he is sending his “likeness (which was) taken yesterday. ... It cost me twelve dollars.” And then he adds, “... We are looking for a fight at Fredericksburg...”

On May 16, 1863, he wrote from Guinea Station, Caroline County, Va., describing the Battle of Chancellorsville and how tired of fighting he was, and made note of a tragic occurrence for the Confederacy — the death of Gen. Stonewall Jackson.

“I was fighting all day on the 3rd of this month ... I can inform you that we lost six men killed and nine wounded of our company — General Jackson was killed ... I saw Capt. Overson killed ... It is reported here that General Hooker was wounded. I don't know whether the report is true or not. But I hope it is, for he is the one who fought us so hard on the third of this month at Chancellorsville, but we give them a decent whipping and ran them back across the river. They are camped on one side of the Rappahannock River and we are on the other side in sight of each other. But don't think we will have any more fighting to do here soon. At least I hope we will not, for I am getting very tired of fighting ... I want to come home and see you all very bad, but I see no chance for me to come home soon, unless we could have peace and I see no prospect of peace at this time ...”

As history reports, Confederate pickets accidentally shot Stonewall Jackson at the Battle of Chancellorsville on May 2, 1863. He lost his arm to amputation, yet survived for eight days, finally dying of complications of pneumonia on May 10.

Rorrer was hospitalized on May 23, 1863 at Moss's Creek, Va., sick with chronic rheumatism, which was later speculated to be rheumatic fever. He returned to duty Sept. 11, 1863, but was hospitalized again on Oct. 12, 1864 at Charlottesville, Va. The letters he wrote are now housed in the Library of Virginia in Richmond.

YEARS AFTER THE WAR, in 1884, Rorrer made “Application for Aid to Citizens of Virginia Wounded and Maimed During the Late War.” He wrote that a rifle ball passed through his right arm during the Battle at Spottsylvania, “benumbing that arm so much so as to produce partial paralysis (sic) disabling me very much in regard to labor...” The permanent injury was attested to by a physician.

“Most of what I know was there in the letters,” Norman Loy says today of her great-grandfather's service. The letters, in an almost indecipherable handwriting, were transcribed by her daughter, Lisa Wright.

Loy said Rorrer “had a big family” and “sold some timber to Bassett Furniture Company. The property bore stands of large oaks, but Rorrer was never interested in selling the land.

“He would say, ‘It was thar when he was born and was thar when he left.’”

Norma Loy was born in Rockingham. Her dad was a loom fixer who came to Burlington and was hired by J. Spencer Love, the textile magnate, when she was 6 years old.

“I can remember mom and dad sitting in the swing one day discussing whether or not to move back. They decided the opportunities here were better.”

She married Kemp Loy, the son of a Methodist minister.

According to his obituary, William Rorrer “fought in many fearful battles and was engaged in the great Spottsylvania battle and during the retreat, he carried from the field one of his friends, Tazewell Thomas, who had been severely wounded. He was in the Battle of Second Manassas and could walk over the dead seven miles one way and four the other. He was also engaged in the Battle of Seven Pines.”

He was laid to rest in the family burying ground near Buffalo Ridge, Va., on July 4, 1913, the 50th anniversary of the battle at Gettysburg. He was 79.