

Brigadier General Thomas Benton Smith

50 Years a Prisoner

"At the head of this regiment, as he appeared in 1862, he was the physical embodiment of a magnificent soldier, with mental attainments and inclination that made him admired and respected by all who came in personal contact with him. Splendidly built, on grand proportions, a little over six feet tall, muscular, erect as an Indian, of a somewhat dark complexion, deep gray eyes, quiet and courteous in demeanor, cool, calm, and collected on all occasions, whether in genial conversation or in the thickest storm of shot and shell, with a most kindly interest in every man of his command, at all times approachable by any subaltern or private in the line, yet commanding the respect and esteem of those superior to him in military rank, he was the beau ideal of a soldier." -- Deering J. Roberts in his biographical sketch of Thomas Benton Smith, published in 1904 in "A History of the Twentieth Tennessee Regiment, C.S.A....."



Thomas Benton Smith was born February 24, 1838, in the little (and now gone) Rutherford County, Tennessee, hamlet of Mechanicsville. The Smith family would play a prominent and yet star-crossed role in the War for Southern Independence. Tom Smith's only brother, John, would die carrying the regimental colors at Murfreesboro on December 31, 1862. His

cousins [Dewitt Smith Jobe](#) and Dee Smith also made the ultimate sacrifice, the former giving his life in a manner which has immortalized him for the ages, and the latter as the former's avenging angel. And then there was Tom.

A bright young man with a gift for mechanical inventiveness ~ he received a patent for a locomotive pilot at the age of 15 ~, he was educated in the local schools before entering the course of study at Western Military Institute in Nashville at the age of 16. It was long thought that he had also been, for a time, a cadet at West Point, but a search of the United States Military Academy rosters for the years he may have been a student does not show his name. The coming of The War found him working for the railroad in Nashville, an occupation he gave up in order to help raise a company of volunteers in and about Triune. That company merged with a group raised by Joel A. Battle, and eventually became Company B of the 20th Tennessee Infantry. Through the efforts of Lt. Thomas B. Smith, Company B became the most proficient company in the regiment in terms of drill and discipline. At Shiloh, the regiment suffered over fifty percent casualties, including the capture and subsequent imprisonment of Col. Joel Battle. Upon reorganization a month after the battle, his fellow soldiers elected Thomas Benton Smith their new Colonel.

As Colonel of the 20th, he led them at Murfreesboro (where he was shot through the breast and left arm) and at Chickamauga (another, less serious wound) and on to Missionary Ridge, where his brigade commander, Col. Tyler, was wounded. As the senior field officer, he then assumed

command of the brigade (Wm. B. Bate's old brigade) and, according to Roberts led it "during the succeeding winter at Dalton, and throughout the long and trying campaign from there to Atlanta. At the end of this one hundred days, July 29, 1864, while in front of Atlanta, he received his commission from Richmond as Brigadier General, CSA...". He was the youngest brigadier in the Army of Tennessee. From Atlanta it was back to Tennessee with John Bell Hood, to fight at Franklin, and again at Nashville.

December 16, 1864. After being driven from their works the previous day, the devastated but still defiant Army of Tennessee took up a new line south of Nashville, extending from the Peach Orchard on the far right to the prominence later known as Shy's Hill on the left. At the apex of Shy's Hill stood the tattered remnants of the 20th Tennessee, along with the rest of Smith's Brigade. Throughout a day~long, misting rain the defenders of the hill were on the receiving end of (according to some estimates) between three and five thousand rounds of federal artillery fire, sent their way from three directions. Finally, a few minutes after four o'clock the federal infantry attacked, sweeping the outnumbered defenders over and then off of the hill. Most of the Confederates fled, hoping to escape to fight another day, but a few did not. Among the captured was Thomas Benton Smith, who had strictly adhered to Division Commander Wm. B. Bate's order to "hold the line at all hazards".

Accompanied by only a small squad of his soldiers, Smith had continued to fight on until the hopelessness of his situation had become apparent. Pulling a small white handkerchief from his pocket, he waved it over his head while ordering his men to cease fire. **Swiftly taken into custody by the jubilant federals, he had been marched only few yards down the hill and toward Nashville when he was approached by Ohio Col. William Linn McMillan, commander of a portion of the victorious federal troops. McMillan was an alcoholic who had nearly been cashiered from the service for misconduct, and at the moment he confronted Genl. Smith he may have been drunk, or perhaps simply flushed with adrenaline and "temporarily insane" from the intensity of battle. Whatever the reason,**

McMillan began to curse and berate Smith, whose only response according to witnesses was to state that "I am a disarmed prisoner". This simple reply further enraged McMillan, who drew his saber and struck Smith three times over the head, each blow cutting through Smith's hat and crashing into his skull. Shocked by the actions of their own officer, nearby federals rushed the severely injured Smith to a field hospital, where an attending surgeon examined the wound and remarked "Well, you are near the end of your battles, for I can see the brain oozing through the gap in your skull". The doctor was both right and wrong. Although he had indeed fought his last battle against the forces that would eventually bring his nation to its knees, the Boy General surprised his captors by recovering sufficiently enough to be sent on to the prison at Fort Warren, Massachusetts, where he remained until paroled after the



Yankee scum McMillan
War Criminal

end of war. At that point, only 27 years of age, Thomas Benton Smith's, fifty-eight year battle to escape a prison of a different kind began.

Returning to Nashville, Smith resumed his employment with the railroad, apparently living as normal a life as possible in those turbulent years immediately following the end of the war. He even ran for a seat in the U. S. Congress in 1870, but lost the election. But appearances were deceptive, and his remarkable recovery from his injuries proved only temporary. Periods of intense clinical depression came upon him in closer and closer intervals and finally robbed him of his ability to live independently. In 1876, he was admitted to the Tennessee state asylum, an institution more recently known as Central State Psychiatric Hospital.

From that point forward the days and years passed slowly for Thomas Benton Smith. A few attempts to resume independent living failed. However, even in those dire and depressing circumstances, he did not forget the brave men he had once commanded, nor did they forget him. Periodic reunions of the old Twentieth Tennessee Regiment were held, and Smith participated in them as fully as he was able. One such reunion was described in an article appearing in the "Confederate Veteran" magazine for December, 1910. The former Boy General was by then 72 years old...

"At a recent reunion of the 20th Tennessee Regiment at Nashville, Tenn., in the beautiful Centennial Park where was held the Tennessee Centennial Exposition in 1897, Gen. Thomas Benton Smith, an early commander of the regiment, who has been in the Tennessee Insane Asylum nearly ever since the war from a saber cut on the head after he surrendered in the battle of Nashville, was in command for a drill and short parade. The regiment was formed as a company, and the drill master, though now somewhat venerable, although he is said to have been the youngest brigadier general in the Confederacy, carried the men through the manual of Hardee's tactics as if half a century were half a year. General Smith was self~poised, as full of the animation of the old days as could be imagined. When they stood at "Right dress! Eyes right!" he said: "Throw them sticks down; you don't need them!" A picture of that scene and a repetition of all he said would be most pleasing. General Smith has times of deep depression, and is sad over his long "imprisonment", but he is always happy at Confederate gatherings, and is still a magnificent specimen of Confederate manhood."

More years passed, and with them most of his old comrades, including his faithful friend Thomas W. Shumate. Shumate was a junior 3d Lieutenant and acting adjutant of the 20th Tennessee who had been captured with him on Shy's Hill. He died in the spring of 1915. Among the last survivors of former Confederate generals, death finally released Thomas Benton Smith from his earthly bondage on May 21, 1923. He now rests with his former comrades in the Confederate Circle of Mount Olivet Cemetery in Nashville.

Many a young and promising life fell by the wayside as a result of the vagaries of the War of 1861 ~ 1865. In comparison to Thomas Benton Smith, even those who died or suffered permanent physical injury can be described as fortunate. Who can say what was lost when this young man, a natural leader with an inventive mind, was stuck down by the cowardly act of a deranged foe? Who among us can know what life must have been like for Thomas Benton Smith, a "prisoner of war" for nearly half a century?