



# THE ELECTROLIER

Newsletter of the St. Helena Historical Society, Summer 2005, Vol.3 No.3

## **William Thomas Simmons: Congressional Medal of Honor Winner**

*By Kathy Kernberger*

On November 5th, the St. Helena Historical Society will hold its 3<sup>rd</sup> annual cemetery tour. This year, we will honor some of the Civil War veterans buried in our Public Cemetery. One of them was a Congressional Medal of Honor winner named William Thomas Simmons, born in Virden, Illinois, January 29, 1843. After moving to this area, he also, became one of Napa County's best known citizens.

The Congressional Medal of Honor, also known as the Badge of Courage, can only be earned by "conspicuous deeds of bravery in actual fighting." The recipients can be soldiers or sailors of any rank. It is equivalent to the Victoria Cross in the United Kingdom. Approximately, 2,500,000 men fought for the North during the Civil War. The Medal of Honor was awarded to less than 2,000 of them. Nearly 1,000 were awarded to one single regiment, the 65th Maine Volunteers Infantry. Their tour of service ended the day before the Battle of Gettysburg. Instead of leaving, the entire unit stayed to participate in the battle, with a major loss of life.

William earned his medal at the Battle of Nashville on December 16, 1864. This was a last minute and desperate attempt by Confederate forces, led by General John Hood, to drive the Union Army and General Sherman out of Georgia. Hood's forces arrived at Nashville on December 2nd where they were met by a strong line of Union fortifications, set up under the leadership of General George Thomas, with the intention of destroying the Confederate forces. General Thomas' plan, as outlined to Grant was to attack both of Hood's flanks. On December 15th, the attack began. Union forces led by Major General James Steedman successfully struck the Confederate right flank. That afternoon, the left was also successfully attacked. When the fighting stopped for the day, General Hood, still hopeful, moved his forces about two miles

south of their previous location. Again, Union forces attacked, coming as close as 250 yards in early maneuvers. The Confederate forces dug in at a location called Overton's Hill. Unfortunately for them, Union forces were able to take the hill, causing Hood's troops to flee for their lives. They were chased by the Union forces for the next 10 days until soundly defeated. After this battle, General Hood resigned his command.

William Simmons later described his part in the battle. " Just before the assault, all of the boys in my company, as well as myself, were commenting upon a Confederate flag(the Stars and the Bars) planted on the

enemy's entrenchment directly in our front. Several of us had remarked banteringly that we would have the flag before dark, when the order came to assault. We had been under a heavy fire, but as we started forward, the regiment in our immediate front wavered and became somewhat broken up under the murderous fire, so that my regiment pressed forward and, passing them, dashed on about 200 yards. A moment later,

my captain fell. I was left in command of the company and leaving my place as file closer, I sprang to the front and led the way, making straight for the flag. I was first to reach the breastworks, and demanded the surrender of the colors. The Confederate sergeant attempted to run away and I was compelled to shoot, wounding him and thereby securing the flag." William received his medal on February 25, 1865 at Nashville.

After the end of the Civil War William Simmons came West. Like many others, he was looking for a better and more peaceful life. Trained originally as a carpenter, he found ready work in the growing town of St.Helena. Here, he worked on the Presbyterian Church.

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Dear Members,

Those of us on the St. Helena Historical Society Planning Team are beside ourselves with excitement! Encouraged by the terrific response we have had from both long-time St. Helena residents and new comers alike, we have spent the summer preparing a strategy for growth and evolution.

After two preliminary meetings we spent two full days planning the future of the St. Helena Historical Society. We listened to each other, brainstormed, and evaluated with the guidance of local organizational development firm, Creativity Works! The result of our activity will be a comprehensive plan to expand and transform the SHHS collection, programs, and reference archives into the St. Helena History Center or Museum -- the premier repository of artifacts and historical information about our community-- by the year 2010. We eagerly await the draft of this Strategic Plan, which we will finalize at the end of this month.

Implementation has already begun on some preparatory aspects of the plan. We are expanding our Board of Directors from 8 to 15. We are clarifying our relationship with the City of St. Helena and the invaluable partnership we have with the St. Helena Public Library. We have also begun an exciting new partnership with the St. Helena School District. Our overall plans will be formally launched in the fall. Anyone with suggestions or comments is invited to call me at 963-5748 or email [wartuhi@comcast.net](mailto:wartuhi@comcast.net)

When you take time to look, St. Helena history is everywhere! It's hiding in all sorts of places downtown. Drop by the Silverado Credit Union and see the poster size photographs of downtown. Visit St. Helena Real Estate and see the Palmer Collection. When you are in the Pritchard Building, Adams & Railroad, stop to see the framed photographs in the hallway. Look to your right as you enter City Hall and see the large original map hanging there. A copy is in the library. In the basement of Tra Vigne Restaurant there are several large pictures of a serious train wreck nearby in the late 1800s.

We have a special guest coming to speak at our October 4 meeting at Beaulieu Vineyards' Hospitality Center—Mary Morton's old house. Author Marvin Collins is in preparation of a life and times of Hamden McIntyre resulting from five years of archival research. Mr. Collins is a working journalist and a contributing photographer to Wine & Spirits Magazine since 1989. He is also researching the life of Hamden's brother, Dr. Hugh Henry McIntyre, who for twenty years was the top agent for the Alaska Commercial Company, owned in part by Gustave Niebaum. He will present an illustrated lecture and tour of the Ewer & Atkinson Winery, now BV. This will be a longer meeting than usual, so please plan ahead and join us. **RESERVATIONS ARE REQUIRED** by calling 963-5244 X 187 and leaving your name and phone number. This is so we have enough chairs for everyone.

See you there,  
Mariam Hansen

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Officers and Directors

Mariam Hansen, President  
Susanne Salvestrin, Vice President  
Gwen Becker, Secretary  
Kim Farmer, Treasurer  
Frank Harrison  
Larry Hlavska  
John Sales  
Tricia Westbrook

Committee Notes:

The **Collections Committee** coordinates and manages the acquisition of new materials. It meets the last Monday of the month at 9:00am in the library upstairs meeting room. Current chair of the committee is Frank Harrison. You can email him at [jackielfrank@aol.com](mailto:jackielfrank@aol.com)

The **Events Committee** plans and produces events to teach the public about our local history. The Committee is currently working on the Cemetery Tour which will be held November 5, 2005 and the next Museum for a Day event in February, 2006. Call Mariam Hansen, 963-5748 for more information.

Questions? Comments?

Call or email the Newsletter editor,  
Kim Farmer, at 963-0630,  
[ksfarmer@seedgrain.com](mailto:ksfarmer@seedgrain.com)

***I'd like to join the St. Helena Historical Society!***

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

Individual \$20 Family \$30

Business/Organizatoin \$100 Life \$500

***I would like to:*** Volunteer \_\_\_\_\_ Make a donation to the Society \_\_\_\_\_

**A Reminder...**

Renewal letters were mailed in June. If you have not already done so, please renew your Historical Society membership today using the form in this newsletter. Thank you!

## HISTORICAL SOCIETY ACTIVITY BRIEFS

### *New Historical Exhibits at St. Helena Library*

Two new exhibits on the history of St. Helena are now at the St. Helena Public Library. They are located in the Beringer Room near the Napa Valley Wine Library section.

The life of Dr. George Belden Crane, early resident and wine industry pioneer, is illustrated in photographs assembled by Susanne Salvestrin. "Sunny Acres", Dr. Crane's residence is now the home of the Salvestrin family, a bed & breakfast inn, and the Salvestrin Winery.

The second exhibit focuses on the building of St. Helena High School and the time capsule placed in 1912. The St. Helena Historical Society met at the site and viewed the contents of the time capsule. Pictures of the contents are on display. The contents were saved digitally, prints of which are on view.

The exhibits are open to the public during library hours.

### *SP Depot Desk Donated to SHHS*

Mike Van Wormer donated a desk which is reputed to have been used in the St. Helena Southern Pacific Depot. The cal-

endar glued to the writing surface is from 1908. It will need repairs before it can be displayed, perhaps in a future exhibit on the railroad. The desk has been in Mike's family for some time and we are grateful he donated it. Mike is an avid collector and volunteer at the Napa County Historical Society, having grown up in Napa.



*(cont. from page 1)*

On April 30, 1873, he married Mary Jane Risley, born January 15, 1850 in Ohio. Their house was at the corner of Oak and Madrona. He and his wife had 5 children: Lulu Penwell, Edwin William, Leonice B, Leora J, and William Frederick. In the 1870's, the family moved to Calistoga. Here, William continued in the furniture business, as well as branching out into undertaking and became an agent for Wells Fargo and Co.

An interest in civil activities led him to serve as a Justice of the Peace for Napa County. He also, served as Northern Commander of the Northern California branch of the Grand Army of the Republic. This was an association of Union Civil War Veterans formed in 1866. Membership was open only to military veterans, men and women, who had fought in the Civil War. The original Medal of Honor very closely resembled the one worn by members of the GAR and it is possible that many people seeing it did not realize what his actually was. William Thomas Simmons died December 27, 1909, leaving his wife and three of their five children to survive him. The end had come for St. Helena's very own Medal of Honor winner. A thank you to Gwen Becker for her help on this article.

## WANT ADS

### *Civil War Buffs*

The annual Cemetery Tour will focus on Civil War veterans buried in St. Helena Cemetery. The November 5 event will be a guided tour. Re-enactors in uniform have been invited to provide 1860s ambience to the event. Are you a Civil War buff? Do you have an ancestor buried in St. Helena Cemetery who was a Civil War veteran? The historical society would like to hear from you! Please send an email to [shstory@shpl.org](mailto:shstory@shpl.org) or leave a message at 963-5244 X 187.

### *Silent Auction Collectibles*

The society is planning to repeat the wildly successful "Museum for a Day" event on February 19, 2006 at the Native Sons Hall. New to the event will be a silent auction of antiques and collectibles. Do you have a unique item with no place to display it? Would you like to help the society's fundraising efforts? Donations of a chair, silver object, porcelain, pottery, glass, jewelry, clocks, watches, metalwork, toys, sports items, advertising signs, movie posters or books will be gratefully accepted! Please send an email to [shstory@shpl.org](mailto:shstory@shpl.org) or leave a message at 963-5244 X 187.

### *Researchers Wanted*

Want to learn more about our history? Would you like to learn to use the research capabilities of the St. Helena Library? Your society has projects waiting to be completed on the history of St. Helena. For example, a time line of the city government offices is waiting. Who was the fire chief in 1937? Find out! Training provided! Please contact Mariam Hansen at [wartuhi@comcast.net](mailto:wartuhi@comcast.net) or 963-5748.

## CALENDAR

Call our voicemail at St. Helena Library to reserve a space: 707-963-5244 x 187. See our website: [www.shstory.org](http://www.shstory.org)

### September

**Sep 6:** Tour, 4:00pm, The Ink House, 1575 So. St. Helena Hwy at Whitehall Lane. Built in 1884 by Theron Ink, this grand and historic landmark home is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. **Only a few spaces left!**

### October

**Oct 4:** Illustrated Lecture & BV Winery Tour, 4:00pm, Beaulieu Rutherford House, 1074 Rutherford Crossroad. This event will take place at Seneca Ewer House next to the winery Ewer & Atkinson built. "Wineman, the Glorious Wineries of Hamden Wallace McIntyre" is the subject of a lecture by author Marvin Collins. McIntyre designed Greystone (now Culinary Institute), Beaulieu, Far Niente, Tre-fethen, Chateau Montelena & Frog's Leap.

### November

**Nov 1:** Tour of Napa Valley Masonic Lodge #93 & Ritchie Building, 4:00pm, 1331 Main Street. In honor of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Masonry in St. Helena, we will visit the historic lodge in the Ritchie Building. It has been immaculately maintained with many antique furnishings. See the history wall of photos of past grand masters going back to the 1800s.

### December

**Dec 6:** Christmas Party, 6:00pm at Sutter Home Inn, 277 St. Helena Hwy. Potluck Dinner & lecture. Learn about John Thomann, the Sutter and Trinchero families and enjoy a great dinner. See the beautiful home Thomann built. Last names A-H bring salads/sides; I-Z bring main dishes.

### *Mission Statement*

**The St. Helena Historical Society is a public educational organization. Its mission is to collect, preserve, exhibit, and provide access to historical materials of all kinds from our community as well as to promote public awareness and participation in the collection of such materials.**

### Third Annual Cemetery Tour

### Civil War Veterans at rest in St. Helena

Saturday,  
November 5,  
from 1-4pm.

St. Helena Cemetery  
2461 Spring Street,  
at Chardonnay.

Tour the graves of our Civil War veterans with a guide. Listen to their biographies telling how they came here.

St. Helena Historical Society  
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