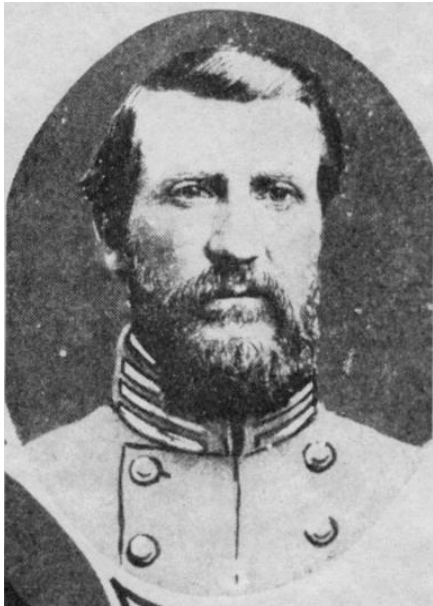


# Jesse Franklin Eller

By Byron Eller

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Jesse Franklin Eller was born December 17, 1835, the eighth child of Simeon and Fanny McNiel Eller, at the family home on Cole's Creek, a branch of the North Fork of Lewis Creek in Wilkes County, North Carolina.



Simeon was concerned that all his children receive the best education available at that time in their remote rural area of northwest North Carolina, and he, with his brother Peter, were instrumental in establishing the Wilkesboro Academy, one of the earliest schools of influence and importance in western North Carolina, therefore Jesse received the best schooling that the community provided in that day. Simeon made himself a prominent and well educated man, later being appointed in gratitude a captain in the Wilkes County Militia, which he drilled regularly, subject to orders from the Governor of the state. He, however, tragically met an untimely death in 1850, at the age of 56 years, as the result of what was diagnosed as acute indigestion, but what today would probably be called a myocardial infarction or acute appendicitis. ( 4 )

Jesse was a 15 year old lad when his father died. His mother was married a second time a year later to Colonel Isaac Brown. When Jesse was 17 years of age his older brother Harvey left the hills of Wilkes County, and joined his uncle David who had settled a homestead previously in 1838 in Jefferson County, Iowa. The following year two more brothers, John Cleveland (the writers great-great grandfather) and William joined Harvey in the frontier settlement of Iowa. There remained at home in Wilkes County five younger boys, James, David, Jesse Franklin, Anderson, and Thomas Jefferson, and two sisters Mary (Polly), and America. Another sister, Nancy, had died in 1847. No doubt Jesse continued on the home place helping his mother and the family with the farm duties, for his service record gives his occupation as farmer. On April 28, 1858, he married Mary Ann Laxton, and their first child, Oscal Pulaski, was born July 28, 1860.

War clouds were gathering over western North Carolina as they were throughout the entire country. Jesse "opposed secession in 1861 but when, by popular vote, (May 17, 1861) his native state of North Carolina made its decision to secede he did not hesitate to do what he conceived to be his duty as a loyal citizen". He volunteered for Confederate service, April 30, 1862, and was enlisted into the 53rd North Carolina Infantry Regiment as a First Lieutenant, by Major James J. Iredell, and Captain William J. Miller.( 5 )

The 53rd N.C. Infantry was a volunteer regiment, organized in the latter part of the winter and first part of the spring of 1862, and was mustered at Camp Mangum, near Raleigh, the first week in May, 1862. It was made up of ten companies, with men from at least a dozen counties of western North Carolina. Company "K" of the regiment was made up of men entirely from Wilkes County, with Jesse Franklin Eller being elected the First Lieutenant. He assisted in the further organization of the company as well as the recruiting of new members. Eventually belonging to his company were two of Jesse's brothers, David H., and James; four first cousins, Mathis, Francis, and William Harrison, sons of Absolom, and Harvey G. Eller, son of Peter; two second cousins, Harrison H. son of William, and William A. son of George. Leander Eller, another second cousin, enlisted into Co. K, but was transferred out in January 1863.( 6 )

In June, after the organization of the regiment, it was ordered to Richmond, Virginia, and from there was sent to Drewry's Bluff, on the James River, eastern Virginia, where it remained drilling and constructing fortifications through November. Here at Drewry's Bluff Jesse's brother David died, September 13, 1862, of typhoid. A first cousin, Harvey G, also died here, November 21, 1862.( 7 )

Jesse's and Mary Anne's second child, Virginia Eads, was born August 2, 1862, but the father must have been absent for the birth. However, Jesse was sent back to Wilkes County for further recruiting duty, where he remained through the months of January and February. Surely the time spent here was greatly enjoyed and appreciated, to be with his family again, which now consisted of a 2 year old son, and a four month old infant daughter. Jesse's service record states he was absent the months of January and February, 1863, as stated above, on detached service, so it is probable he returned to his unit in March, in time to participate in his regiment's first real action of the war in the Confederate attempt to recapture New Berne and Washington, North Carolina, which eventually ended in failure.( 8 )

In May, 1863, the brigade, including the 53rd, was transferred to the Army of Northern Virginia, with Robert E. Lee as commanding general, at Fredericksburg, Virginia. In June the entire Southern army left its camp near Fredericksburg on a northward march that would end at Gettysburg. The Southern army crossed the Blue Ridge Mountains into the Shenandoah Valley and by June 17, 1863, Jesse with the 53rd, crossed the Potomac into Maryland, and by June 24 reached Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, and by June 27 the men were at Carlisle on their way to Harrisburg, the state capitol. However, on June 30 the corps commander, General Richard S. Ewell, received orders to proceed to Cashtown or Gettysburg, as developments would dictate.( 9 )

On July 1 Jesse and his men were ordered to Gettysburg in haste for Union forces were uniting there in force. When some three miles north of Gettysburg the 53rd, with the division of Early and Rodes, was directed westward another mile or so to take its position on Oak Hill, the northern extension of Oak Ridge. The time was mid-day. Oak Hill today is the location of the "Eternal Light Peace Memorial" dedicated in 1938 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, on the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, to "Peace Eternal in a Nation United.( 10 )

The men had been marching all morning in scorching heat, and arrived about noon on Oak Hill exhausted, but the Confederate advantage was rapidly evaporating, for Union forces were being pushed

in great numbers north of the town to meet the gathering threat. The Confederates were thrown into line of battle ready for the advance. Jesse Franklin with the 53rd was held in reserve for the present time. Shortly after 2:00 p.m., without further reconnaissance, without even bothering to throw out a line of skirmishers, the commanding general, Major General Robert E. Rodes, ordered a full scale assault. These men were subjected to heavy artillery fire in an open field, and then to lethal musket fire from Federal men posted behind stone fences. Then the first charge failed.( 11 )

By 2:00 p.m. additional Confederate troops had reached the field, so now an organized and concerted forward movement was ordered and undertaken by a force of approximately 8,000 men. The 53rd with Lieutenant Jesse F. Eller was moved up to lend support to the left flank, and stepped off with this second try at the Federals. This assault, too, was hotly contested by volley after volley of musket fire that crashed into the Rebel lines. Despite ghastly losses, the Southerners refused to break and pressed forward, loading and firing as they went.( 12 )

No doubt it was during this desperate fighting that Captain William Miller the commanding officer of Company K, 53rd regiments, was killed on the field of battle, and Jesse F. Eller the ranking lieutenant in the company succeeded him in commanding the company. Jesse continued in this role until the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox three years hence, except for periods of absence due to illness and recuperation from wounds.( 13 )

The momentum of the second charge this mid-afternoon was finally checked very abruptly by a concealed rail-road cut through the hills of Oak Ridge. Because of the steepness of the sides and the depth of the cut it was impassable to the assaulting troops, and the advance was stopped, holding the whole brigade in a lethal stalemate. But Southerners eventually found their way along and around the cut, and the advance was taken up again. With additional troops joining in from the west the Federals began to give way, slowly at first, then eventually becoming a full scale retreat into and through the streets of Gettysburg where large numbers of them threw down their arms and surrendered. The 53rd, with other Southern forces, fought their way to the edge of town where they remained during the night under cover of a rail-road embankment. The Confederate flag was raised in Gettysburg town square at 4:30 p.m., after a hard fought and bloody battle, which was a crushing defeat to the Northern Army.( 14 )

On this first day of the three day battle of Gettysburg, the 53rd regiment suffered a loss of 13 killed and 104 wounded, Captain Miller of Company K being one of those killed.( 15 )

On the second of July the regiment remained in place being subjected to a heavy fire of artillery, with little loss however. Several small movements in position were made in late afternoon to escape the intense bombardment it was receiving.

July 3, at 3:00 a.m., Jesse moved with the regiment through Gettysburg, about 4 miles to the extreme left of the Confederate line northwest of town to a prominence called Culps Hill. After some skirmishing Jesse's men were ordered forward, repulsed, and directed to move forward again, eventually occupying some of the breastworks abandoned by the enemy. Here they remained until 2:00 or 3:00 p.m. This early morning struggle for Culps Hill at the extreme northeast of the battle line was only a prelude, a herald, to the bloody and dramatic climax to the Battle of Gettysburg to take place three hours later

when General George E. Pickett would make a final and futile charge up the slopes to hit the center of the Union line on Cemetery Ridge, forever to be known as "Pickett's Charge". Shortly after 3:00 p.m. Jesse's men were ordered 200 yards back where they remained until 3:00 a.m. of July 4.( 16 )

With Lee's defeat sealed by the failure of Pickett's charge, there was ordered a general withdrawal of all Confederate troops, and the long journey back to Virginia was begun by way of Fairfield, Waynesborough and Hagerstown, Maryland. The Potomac was recrossed at Williamsport on the night of the 13th, and there ended the Pennsylvania campaign for Jesse Franklin. But General Lee and his army had escaped to fight again.

Up the Shenandoah Valley the tired, tattered, shoeless Army of Northern Virginia proceeded, away from the Potomac. Skirmishes with the cautious Yank pursuers occurred at Ashby's Gap, in the Blue Ridge mountains, and Brandy Station, Virginia. The Confederate retreat ended south of the Rappahannock River in late July, 1863, and in the ensuing months the rival armies engaged in a campaign of maneuver--marching much, fighting little.( 17 )

By August 1 the Army of Northern Virginia was encamped at Orange Court House, south of the Rapidan River, with Jesse Franklin's regiment located at Morton's Ford on the Rapidan. Both Northern and Southern armies were back at the approximate starting point of two months ago.( 18 ) On August three Jesse was admitted to General Hospital #4, Richmond, Virginia, with the diagnosis of "Debilitas", meaning physical weakness, loss of strength, or exhaustion. Putting it into today's terms we would say that he was probably suffering from "combat fatigue". His disability was promptly reversed, however, for he returned to duty August 14, having taken an eleven day recuperation leave.

On September 13 Lee's army was seriously weakened by the removal to Tennessee of a whole army corps under General Longstreet. Nevertheless, in early October, believing conditions in his favor, Lee sent his army north again, but he was ambushed and shattered by the Federals under General George Meade at Bristoe Station, just south of the old battlefield of Manassas. After this ten day campaign, the Rebels again pulled back to the south bank of the Rapidan, having accomplished little except to add to the war's casualty statistics. Jesse's regiment, it appears, was not heavily engaged at Bristoe Station, for only one man was wounded in this fight, though the Confederates lost an aggregate of 1,900 men.( 19 ) On return from Bristoe Station, the Confederate soldiers were in a destitute condition--thousands were barefoot, and nearly all were without overcoats, blankets, or warm clothing. Lee thus decided to resupply his army and to rest his weary, footsore veterans.

Then on Thanksgiving Day, November 26, 1863, General Meade, the Federal commander, decided it was time to take the action to the Confederates. He planned a flanking attack across the Rapidan to strike at the Rebels who were strung out along a 30 mile line south of the Rapidan. But Lee was alerted to the Yankee's activities and shifted his force to meet the advancing Federals. Jesse, with the 53rd N.C., was ordered to leave the fortifications at Morton's Ford and march to meet the threat by establishing a formidable defense line behind Mine Run (Creek). The opposing forces met on November 27. A severe battle ensued which stymied the Confederates and punished and halted the Federals who were delayed in pursuing the advance, and for two days probed and entrenched for advantage.

By now the weather had turned wet, and so bitterly cold that water froze in men's canteens, and those on picket duty had to be relieved every half hour in order to keep them from freezing. One Federal recalled that "though our drooping eyelids called pitifully for sleep, each soldier knew that to sleep uncovered in that bitter air would be the sleep of death".( 20 )

Because of the formidable Confederate earthworks stretching for seven miles behind Mine Run, with troops and bristling artillery, and because the weather had become so intolerable, the Federals decided against further attack and on December 2 abandoned the offensive and returned north of the Rapidan to their winter quarters. Jesse returned to his old camp at Morton's Ford on the Rapidan and went into winter quarters. Thus ended all infantry operations between the opposing armies for the year 1863, and the beginning of a much needed five-month rest period.

All was quiet in the camps along the Rapidan. Lee returned from Richmond to spend Christmas with his army, men who were far from home as the usually gay holiday drew near. In the Confederate camps shortages were acute, General Lee spent the early months of 1864 petitioning Richmond for food, for shoes, and for warm clothes for his troops. In one dispatch he deplored "the wretched condition of the men, thousands of whom are barefooted, a great number partially shod, and nearly all without overcoats, blankets, or warm clothing". Such shortages, Lee advised, "are having a bad effect upon the men, both morally and Physically".( 21 )

Desertions became an increasing problem, and to offset the losses, the Confederate Government instituted a Conscription Act, January 11, 1864, which included males 18 to 45 year of age, and one month later this was increased to 17 to 50 year olds. This was a highly unpopular move by the South and was vigorously opposed in places, especially in North Carolina. There were desertions by Wilkes County men from the ranks of the Confederacy. Letters of those from the county contain comments and ask questions of home folks concerning the desertions. In one of his letters home, General James B. Gordon, the highest ranking Confederate officer from Wilkes, questioned the accuracy of the high rate of desertions, but facts do not bear him out. There are authenticated instances of deserters from Wilkes County being executed.

The North Carolina Historical Review, Volume 31, gives the information that "Zebulon Vance began his bold and energetic campaign (for Governor of North Carolina) by invading the heart of the peace country (Wilkes County). On February 22, 1864, he spoke at Wilkesboro, a mountain village where desertions and resistance to the Confederate Cause had run extremely high".(23)

In the north General U. S. Grant had become the Union's preeminent warrior. Formalizing this distinction, in March 1864, Abraham Lincoln made him General-in-Chief of the Army of the United States, at a renewed three star rank. This was confirmed by the Senate March 2, 1864. By April 9 Grant had developed a grand strategy.( 22 ) The Army of the Potomac was ordered to cross the Rapidan the morning of May 4 with its forces 122,000 strong to Lee's contingent of 66,000 hungry and ill fed but hardened and ready troopers. And so on May 4, 1864, the Wilderness Campaign began. Grant had intended to march through the heavy forest of the Wilderness so as to gain open territory for battle, but was forced to stop just on the edge of the Wilderness and wait for his supply train to catch up. Lee who

had anticipated Grant's move brought his up quickly so as to catch the Federals in the Wilderness. The Confederate forces were carefully positioned, with Junius Daniel's brigade and Jesse's 53rd, south of the Orange Turnpike. There was some fighting on the 4th but neither army was quite sure of the other's position.

By moving up heavy reinforcements on May 5 Lee forced Grant to fight in the Wilderness, to the Southerner's advantage for this was familiar territory to them. Not knowing the true composition of the Rebel forces Grant ordered an attack. The two armies quickly joined in a fierce battle. Because of the terrain and vegetation the fighting became a confused and uncertain contest.( 24 )

By early afternoon the battle in the Wilderness had taken on the nightmarish quality that would define it throughout. Soon the woods were on fire, and spread quickly in dry bramble-choked fields. The screams of wounded men, hurt too badly to flee, rose above the sounds of battle, many of them dying in the fiery holocaust. The charges on Jesse's front were met by countercharges time and time again, but Jesse's men and the North Carolinians under Brigadier Junius Daniel stood their ground. Then after one final charge the Federal troops staggered and gave way in the sector of Jesse's line, and were forced to retreat. Only sporadic firing continued, but it was a few miles to the south, along the Orange Plank Road, that the full weight of the battle was developing.( 25 ) The lines were a confused jumble, fronts askew, regiments and brigades scattered all over the tangled forest, not knowing whether their closest neighbors were friends or foe. The men, if they slept at all, simply nodded off on the spot where they had fired their last shot. Tomorrow would see the killings continued.

Both armies planned to attack on May 6. By 5:00 a.m. the spattering of musketry and the roar of cannon signaled the dawn of a second violent day. The fighting raged on both sides of Jesse's brigade but the 53rd saw little action on this day. The arrival of darkness brought hostilities to a close for the day. Although the troops did not yet know it, as they entrenched for the night the Battle of the Wilderness was over. Casualties in the two days of fighting had been staggering; the North had lost 2,246 killed, 12,037 wounded and 3,383 missing, a total of 17,666 of 100,000 engaged; the Confederate losses, from the usual incomplete records kept on Southern casualties, were something over 7,500 of 60,000.( 26 )

May 7 dawned rainy, and gloom hung over the opposing camps. By early morning Grant had made up his mind and he sent out orders for his army to move in the direction of Spotsylvania, in an attempt to flank Lee, moving round the Army of Northern Virginia toward Richmond.

Jesse's regiment arrived at Spotsylvania by the evening of May 8 in time to repulse an impulsive attack by the Federals, with heavy losses on the Union side. Both sides began building entrenchments and awaited the arrival of the remainder of their forces. The men spent the hot morning of May 9 digging and strengthening their earthworks, which eventually extended for a distance of three or more miles and which resembled a ragged "V", both ends being bent back and the center protruding northward into a strong salient. Because of the shape of this protrusion in the center of the line it has become known to its defenders as the "Mule Shoe". It was along the western face of this salient that the 53rd entrenched the evening of the 9th. No major action involving the 53rd had taken place that day.

The next day, May 10, the Federals launched several probing attacks during the day along the left of the Rebel line. Finally becoming convinced that the mule shoe was a vulnerable spot a plan was proposed to crack the Confederate defenses at this spot. At 6:10 p.m. the order was given to charge. Within five minutes the Yankees had made it over the parapet of the earthworks just to the right of Jesse's brigade. Because of the suddenness and the force with which the attack occurred, Jesse's men were forced to pull back until reinforcements came to help close the gap. With this accomplished the men in an organized attack struck the Federals forcing them to retire, and under darkness they retreated back to their lines.

A sudden change in the weather hampered all plans for operations on May 11. Unseasonable heat gave way to uncomfortable cold, followed by a wet northeaster. A heavy storm of wind, rain and hail made life miserable for the soldiers.( 27 ) A thick fog and mist still clung close to the ground the morning of May 12, making it difficult to see more than a few feet in front, but this did not deter 15,000 blue clad infantry men under General Winfield S. Hancock to leave their lines at 4:30 a.m. and overwhelm the Confederate lines at the north apex angle. Within a few minutes resistance seemed to vanish, and the enthusiastic Federals penetrated 1--the salient up to one half mile in depth. General Junius Daniel's brigade, which included the 53rd N.C. Infantry, and Jesse Franklin, was located on the west face of the salient and just to the left of the onrushing Federals. Daniels realigned his brigade at a right angle to the breastworks, and anchored it on the reserve line, thus presenting a solid front to the onrushing Federals, preventing further advance. With additional troops now on hand, at 5:30 a.m. a counter charge was ordered against the Union troops. In this charge General Junius Daniel fell mortally wounded, resulting in temporary confusion of his troops and slowing down of their attack. However, the counter-charge was successful in Jesse's sector in driving the invaders back to the original works.( 28 ) This was not true farther along the right of the line. Here from midmorning and lasting till past midnight of the 12th the battle surged back and forth over the contested works, in many places evolving into hand to hand personal combat. It was a common thing for the soldiers of the Civil War to assign a name to a given charge or fight or place of significance. There-would always be the "bloody lane", the "stone wall", the "sunken road", etc. but for both north and south there would be just one "Bloody Angle", and that was here in front of and to the right of Jesse Franklin and his men of the 53rd--in the Mule Shoe Salient.

The over all casualties at Spotsylvania had been horrendous. In the two days of fighting, May 10 and 12, close to 6,000 of Lee's veterans had been killed or wounded, nearly 4,000 men had been captured. Grant's official toll was equally devastating, 10,920 killed, wounded and captured. These figures stand second only to Gettysburg's figures for sustained casualties in a campaign.( 29 )

The casualties of the 53rd at Spotsylvania has not been recorded but the loss was staggering just the same, for Colonel James T. Morehead states "It was in the famous Horse Shoe at Spotsylvania...loosing its Major, James Johnston Iredell killed, Colonel Owens wounded, several of its captains and lieutenants, and scores of its men killed and wounded. It was brought out of the Horse Shoe under the command of a captain, its only remaining field officer, its Lieutenant Colonel being in command of the brigade, the Brigadier General (Junius Daniel) and every other officer in the brigade senior in commission having been killed or wounded.( 30 ) Since May 5 Lee's army had lost one-third of its corps, division, and brigade commanders. The already battered command structure could stand little more of the beating it

had received. A loss that could not be replaced and would be deeply felt by the Southern cause in the remaining ten months of the war.( 31 )

Rain again descended in torrents the night of May 12, making it easier for the Confederates to retreat into new trenches that had been hastily constructed across the base of the salient. As May 13 dawned over the salient, the Federal troops awoke to find nothing but corpses in it. A week of stalemate would ensue, but Grant was already planning his sidling maneuver to the left, and closer by 25 miles to Richmond. Lee detected Grant's move but was unsure of his intentions. In order to determine the location and activities of the Federals Lee ordered a reconnaissance in force into the area. Lee's troops for this side action included Jesse and the 53rd N.C. They attacked a supposedly weak Union line at "Harris' Faim" on May 19, and a vicious battle ensued, the opposing ranks firing volleys into each other at point blank range. At first the Rebels seemed to be progressing satisfactorily, but the Yankees rallied and now were holding the ground. By 6:00 p.m. the Confederates were forced to retreat leaving 1,000 casualties behind.( 32 )

James Hook states that Jesse "was severely wounded in the second day Battle of the Wilderness, May 9, 1864, which sent him to the hospital". So now we must digress from our narrative to consider the apparent discrepancy in the available records, to see if we can sort out the facts and determine the exact date and circumstances in which Jesse Franklin received his serious wound. In contradiction to Hook's statement, Jesse Franklin's service record obtained from the National Archives, Washington, D.C., notes on the Inspection Report of Rodes' Division, 2nd (Early's) Corps, Army of Valley District, commanded by Major General Robert E. Rodes of August 20, 1864-"Absent, commissioned-officers accounted for: wounded May 19, 1864", and again, 13unker Hill, Virginia, of August 20, 1864 it states "the captain was absent due to wounds received on May 19, 1864". These points of difference will be discussed as to their actual fact and merit.( 33 )

As we have seen from the account above the "Battle of the Wilderness" was a two day battle fought on May 5 and 6. If Jesse were wounded on the second day of the battle it would have been on May 6, but May 6 was a day of relative inactivity in the trenches south of the Orange Turnpike, so it is rather unlikely he was wounded on this day. By May 9 the Battle of the Wilderness was over and the armies had moved to Spotsylvania, some 15 miles from the Wilderness, and that campaign had already commenced. Also May 9 was a day of entrenching operations in the Spotsylvania breastworks, and it was a day of light fighting. May 10 was a day of very heavy combat for Jesse and the 53rd, but no mention is made of his being wounded on this day, and the same is true for May 12, a day that would forever be known for the "Bloody, Angle", and for the heavy casualties sustained. Neither is this day mentioned as the day in which he was wounded.

So we are left with May 19 as the date on which Jesse received a grave wound to the left shoulder as recorded in his service record. From all the evidence gleaned in this study as to the determination of a place and time, it is my conclusion that Jesse was wounded on May 19 in the late afternoon attack on Union lines at Harris' Farm. Casualties are noted to have been unusually heavy for the small force that was engaged.



Where Jesse was hospitalized and treated immediately after May 19 is not recorded, but he was admitted to the General Receiving Hospital (Charity Hospital), Gordonsville, Virginia, on June 6 with the diagnosis of "Vulnus Sclopeticum", or at times abbreviated to V. S. These terms were unknown to me, yet intrigued me very much. My large Random House dictionary did not have the term, and it was not found in my medical dictionary. The local library had no dictionaries that shed any light on the subject, however, the librarian had become interested in the mystery and suggested sending an enquiry on the term to the large public library in San Francisco, (North State Cooperative Library System). This she did, and a few weeks later the answer came saying "According to Billings, National Medical Dictionary Lea Bros. & Co.),-1890, 'Vulnus Sclopeticum' means gunshot wound". Today instead of V. S. we would say G.S.W. (gun shot wound).

The wound received to the left shoulder no doubt troubled Jesse the rest of his life, for Paul E. Hubbell states in his essay "Captain Jesse Eller, who was wounded at Spotsylvania Court House, carried a rifle bullet in his body until his death in 1900", and again, "One of Grandfather's brothers (Jesse Franklin) was crippled for life by bullet wounds". ( 34 )

From Gordonsville, Jesse was sent to the C.S.A. General Hospital, Charlottesville, Virginia, arriving June 13, 1864, and on June 20 transferred to the Ladies Relief Hospital, Lynchburg, Virginia. By July 7 (seven weeks after receiving his wound) he was able to be furloughed. No doubt he would have taken the opportunity to go to his home in Wilkesboro, North Carolina, which would have been a distance of about 180 miles, where he stayed most of the month. Jesse must have checked in to the Medical Directors office, Richmond, Virginia, on August 13, and was sent back to General Hospital, Charlottesville, Virginia, but was again in Lynchburg, Virginia, General Hospital #3 by September 27, then again at Wayside Hospital in Lynchburg. He was given another furlough November 27, 1864, authorized by General Jubal Early, whose troops were at New Market, Virginia, at the time.

While Jesse was absent because of his wounds, his regiment had been sent with the forces of Jubal Early into Maryland and on to the gates of Washington, D.C., itself. The story of Jesse's 1st cousin, William Harrison, along on this campaign to the north will be the subject of a future article for the Chronicles. General Early began his retreat from Washington, D.C. on July 12, recrossing the Potomac on July 14. In spite of the rebuff at the Northern capitol this Confederate force remained in Shenandoah Valley threatening the existence of Federals there until General "Little Phil" Sheridan was placed in command of the Union army in The Valley. Then things began to happen. Three major Confederate defeats took place in succession: the (third) Battle of Winchester on September 19, Fishers Hill on September 22, and finally on October 19 at Cedar Creek the Union army brought about a major defeat of the Southerners. The Shenandoah Valley remained essentially in the hands of the North till the end of the war.

What remained of Early's troops and the 53rd after the Cedar Creek disaster regrouped in the neighborhood of New Market, Virginia, and went into camp. It was in a report dated near New Market, November 29, 1864, that Captain Eller was granted his second furlough. Ten days later, December 9, the two divisions of the Second Corps, with the 53rd regiment moved under orders to return to Richmond. On December 14, in the dead of winter, the men marched to Staunton and there boarded a train for Petersburg, arriving December 16, and so went into winter quarters at Swift Creek, about three miles

north of Petersburg, taking their places in the fortifications erected protecting Richmond and Petersburg.( 35 )

The rival lines of forts and trenches composing these fortifications ran for more than 30 miles. They began north of the James River, then across the Bermuda Hundred neck to the Appomattox River to the southwest of Petersburg. If Lee had needed troops from his extreme left to support those on the far right it would have taken a two day march to get them there.( 36 )

It is uncertain as to the exact date that Jesse rejoined his regiment. His first furlough had been for a 30 day period, and assuming the second furlough was of a similar length of time he would have joined his regiment about the first of January. When he did return to his old command he found something that he could hardly have been prepared for, and that was seeing the results of the horrible losses in the command structure over the preceding six to eight months while he was absent. Starting at the top of the c d, at Corps level, the commanding general (Richard S. Ewell) had been replaced in May following an accident in which he fell from his horse incapacitating him for field command. In the division, Major General Robert E. Rodes, a highly respected officer, and one greatly beloved by his troops, was killed at the Battle (third) of Winchester, September 19, 1864. Brigadier General Junius Daniel, who had led the brigade from the early days of the war, and who was greatly admired by his troops, was mortally wounded May 12 in the Battle of Spotsylvania. The 53rd regiment had been dealt with very severely during the period as well, for the Colonel commanding, William A. Owen, of Charlotte, North Carolina, had been killed August 1, 1864. The major, or third in command was killed at Spotsylvania, as well as the adjutant, who was killed at Winchester, September 19. The second ranking officer had been wounded, so for a time a captain, the same ranking officer as Jesse Franklin, was commanding the regiment until Lieutenant Colonel James Morehead recovered sufficiently to return to duty.

Perhaps it was this very discouraging situation within the officer ranks that prompted Jesse to tender his resignation as commanding Company "K" on January 31, 1865. Or perhaps it was due to health reasons as a result of his wounds, for as has been noted previously he suffered because of them throughout his life time. His request for resignation was obviously rejected and Jesse continued his role as "commanding the company".

If there were discouragements within the command system, there were other problems to add to concerns of the officers in the Southern ranks. It was the middle of a severe winter, and as General Bryan Grimes noted, "snow was very hard on barefooted and half-naked men".( 37 ) Food supply had dwindled to a trickle so that men were undernourished to the point where starvation, literal starvation had so weakened the men that minor scratches often resulted in infection and even death. Enfeebled and dejected, the usually high-spirited Confederates had sunk into apathy".( 38 )

As a natural result of these conditions desertions were occurring at an ever increasing rate. General Robert E. Lee conceded the problem had reached alarming proportions when he reported that "General Gordon's corps, on the night of February 26, from 75 to 1,000 of Grimes (Jesse's division officer) division deserted ... and I regret to say that the greatest number of desertions have occurred among the North

Carolina troops, who have fought as gallantly as any soldier in the army".( 39 ) A later report of desertions in Grimes' division for a ten day period ending March 8, 1865, stood at 53 men, while the total for the entire army was 779.( 40 ). General Grant estimated that the Southern troops were deserting at the rate of a regiment a day, and "indeed it was reported in February that 100,000 soldiers were absent from the various Confederate armies. Many, at the urging of their loved ones, had gone home to the Carolinas to be with their families in the face of Sherman's depredations. Others simply crossed lines and surrendered".( 41 )

So this was the situation that Captain Eller found at the time he returned to service with his men. The regiment remained at Swift Creek, near Petersburg, until February 5, 1865, when it was moved to Burgess Mills as support to forces in battle in the vicinity, but returned to Swift Creek shortly. On February 17 the regiment was ordered to Sutherlands Depot, 12 miles from Petersburg on the right of the Confederate defensive works. On March 9, 1865, Jesse again "Tenders resignation" which apparently was not accepted, or he may have withdrawn the request, and he continued to sign papers as "Commanding the Company". In mid-march the entire division was ordered back into the trenches in front of Petersburg.

Early on the morning of March 25 the Confederates, led by General John B. Gordon, launched a full scale assault on Fort Stedman and nearby Federal lines. The 53rd played a very important part in this maneuver. Union troops were caught completely by surprise and the Southern troops easily captured the Federal stronghold as well as their adjacent entrenchments, and adjoining batteries next to the fort. However, the Federals very quickly organized a counter-attack, and the 53rd, with the rest of the Southern troops, after fighting courageously for two and a half hours, were forced to retire to their original breastworks. What started out to appear as a sure Confederate victory turned into a costly defeat.( 42 ) The casualty count in Jesse's regiment is not known, but in the division the loss was heavy, being 478 officers and men. For the entire Southern army there were 1,607 men killed or wounded and remarkably about 1,900 taken prisoner. The Battle of Fort Stedman was a major Northern victory. It was Lee's last, best effort to break Grant's hold on Petersburg, and it was clear afterwards that Lee could mount no more attacks on such a scale without risking the destruction of his army.

Jesse and other survivors of the regiment returned to the misery of the trenches. One soldier of the brigade described conditions at about this time as follows:

No one, who himself has not experienced a soldier's life in the trenches around Peterburg, can understand or appreciate the hardships then endured by Lee's half-starved soldiers. The trenches were unusually knee-deep in mud, the men always on the alert and ready for an attack, one-third kept awake at the breastworks every night and only one-third off duty at a time and they sleeping on their arms and with accoutrements on, as best they could .... All night only the pickets kept up an incessant firing, the sound resembling at a distance the popping of firecrackers, and the flash of rifles illuminating the darkness like fire flies on a summer's night, while now and then a mortar shell would gracefully glide through the air and explode with a deafening roar.( 43 )

As of March 25, Jesse would have no way of knowing that his war would last just 15 more days, but surely he had an inkling that the Southern cause was lost and the great conflict was nearly over. The Battle of Fort Stedman must have been to him an omen of this fact. Although we don't know whether Jesse was aware of what was transpiring in the near vicinity of Fort Stedman, it was a fact that the massed troops of the Union army, not actually engaged in the battle, were involved in a "review", with the honored guest being none other than their Commander-in-Chief, Abraham Lincoln.

Saturday, April 1. Union troops under the command of Generals Phil Sheridan and Gouverneur Warren assaulted enemy positions around White Oaks Road and Dinwiddie Court House, southwest of Petersburg, and by evening completely overpowered and crushed General George E. Pickett's troops. No less than 10,000 Southern troops were lost in this action. Five Forks was called by one noted Southern general as "the Waterloo of the Confederacy".( 44 )

Sunday, April 2. Believing that Lee's defenses would be seriously depleted after the losses at Fort Stedman and Five Forks, Grant put into operation a plan for a massive assault along the entire Petersburg line, one he had been perfecting over the past month. On the night of April 1 the Northern generals readied their men for a supreme effort. It was nearly 5:00 a.m. of April 2 when the attack began. The first Southern works to be reached was the strong defensive earthworks of Fort Mahone. Among the defenders in the trenches behind the lines of this fort was the 53rd North Carolina Infantry where on an average throughout, the space from man to man was at least eight feet.( 45 ) This fort, called by the Yankees "Fort Damnation", lived up to its reputation, for hundreds of charging Federals went down beneath volley of musketry and salvo of double-shotted cannister. A soldier of the 53rd recalled that "the open space inside of Fort Mahone was literally covered with blue coated corpses". Some wounded men actually drowned in the mud and water in the trenches.( 46 )

By 9:00 a.m. most of Fort Mahone had been captured, but the 53rd, with the others of the regiment and brigade, were ordered to charge the enemy and they partially succeeded in driving the Yankees from the works. The charges and counter-charges continued through the day but the Rebels managed to hold on to most of the breastworks. With insufficient reserves to either recapture the entire works or to maintain their hold on the portion retained, General Lee ordered the heroic defenders, including the 53rd, to abandon the fort at 7:00 p.m., and without the knowledge of the Federals they withdrew to the north side of the Appomattox River, proceeding towards Amelia Court House.( 47 )

It was a different story in other sectors of the Petersburg defenses where the breastworks were less formidable than at Fort Mahone. Serious breakthroughs occurred at several different places along the extent of the defensive line, and by the afternoon of April 2 Lee had determined it was impossible to hold the line against further onslaught and began to carry out his plan of withdrawal.

"On the morning after that holocaustic assault, a photographer named Thomas Roche carried his bulky equipment to a captured strong point in the Confederate line, which had defied Grant's army for ten desperate months. Known as Fort Mahone, the earthworks had been manned by troops of the 53rd North Carolina. Roche found the place defended now only by Confederate dead; he photographed these men sprawled as they had fallen, in Fort Mahone's mud-choked labyrinth of trenches. Some were clearly

veterans, but many were boys--one only 14 years old, by Roche's estimate. Their faces evince a repose that contrasts poignantly with their torn bodies. The deaths... seem all the more painful because the victims were struck down in one of the war's last battles--for a cause already lost."( 48 )

Monday, April 3. At 8:15 in the morning Union forces accepted the surrender of Richmond. Lee's of Northern Virginia moved westward over five separate routes, the immediate destination-Amelia Court House where the troops were promised they would receive provisions. But none had arrived at that place.

Tuesday, April 4. Further retreat west to Amelia Springs, then moving on toward Farmville where General Lee hoped to be able to feed his hungry forces.

Wednesday, April 5. Captain Eller's division acted as the rear guard in the early days of retreat, and constantly skirmished with the pursuing Yankees. The 53rd did not reach Amelia Court House until the morning of April 5. Here they remained stationary in line of battle, confronting the enemy. After dark the regiment followed the army taking up the rear, being much impeded on the march by the wagon train, the vehicles of which were being abandoned along the route, caused by exhausted and famished horses.( 49 )

Thursday, April 6. At sunrise General Gordon's rear guard, with the 53rd North Carolina, was just leaving Amelia Springs, a hamlet four miles west of Amelia Court House, just escaping a strong attack by the Federal army. However, when the Yankees saw the Rebels had already left the area they faced about and took up the chase again. "A sharp running fight commenced at once with Gordon's Corps which was continued over a distance of fourteen miles, in which the opposing forces were "in almost incessant battle".( 50 )

In the confusion of the retreat and delaying action of battle, the Confederate army became separated and split into three parts. The middle section was assailed at Saylor's Creek where in the afternoon a violent action took place that was disastrous to the Southerners. As a consequence General Richard S. Ewell, the commanding general of the Second Corps (of which the 53rd was a part) for most of the war, and seven other generals were taken prisoner along with 6,000 men.

In the meantime, the 53rd under General Gordon, and others of his troops who had been following and protecting the wagon trains, took a road to the north of the area in which the action was taking place at Saylor's Creek. These troops avoided the catastrophe that befell Ewell's men, but found themselves in similarly desperate straits. About 4:00 p.m. as the troops came to a crossing of Saylor's Creek, a bottleneck presented to the passage of the wagons. The column was slowed and at that time was subjected to a relentless attack by the Federals from the rear. The Confederates were eventually forced back among their wagons and against the creek. The overwhelmed Rebels were then given orders to save themselves by making it across the creek as best they could, which many of them did, and where they that remained were pulled together and marched to the southwest toward High Bridge and Farmville. But General Gordon had to leave behind 1,700 men who were taken prisoner, 200 wagons, etc. Never before had the Army of Northern Virginia sustained such a defeat as it had that day at Saylor's

Creek. The 8,000 casualties it had suffered since morning amounted to roughly one-third of its total strength.( 51 )

Friday, April 7. After crossing to the north side of the Appomattox at High Bridge, the 53rd moved westward to a crossroad known as Cumberland, named for a church that stood at the site. Here they were met with meager rations that had been obtained in Farmville by other Confederate units, but they were forced to wolf down their uncooked food and rushed forward to meet a threat posed by Sheridan's cavalry. Union infantry shortly arrived on the scene by mid afternoon, and charged with reckless enthusiasm expecting another route as of the day before at Saylor's Creek. General Grimes ordered his soldiers, including the 53rd, to counterattack and they soon recovered artillery lost, captured a large number of prisoners, and successfully held this position until sent for by General Lee. The Union forces suspended the fighting until next morning. But the Confederates had been delayed another half day at Cumberland Church while Federal cavalry were racing westward--to a small railroad crossing at Appomattox Station where Lee expected to find much needed supplies and rations for his starving army.( 52 )

That night Grant addressed a short well worded message to his Confederate adversary suggesting to him that because of the hopelessness of the Southern situation further resistance would be pointless.

Saturday, April 8. Lee's answer to Grant's message was "Not yet", and this day headed his army toward Appomattox Station, 25 miles to the west. General John B. Gordon's forces, with Jesse and the 53rd, were now leading the Confederate army. Since the Rebel command believed that only Federal cavalry were in front of them at the station, it was decided that Gordon should attack westward to clear Appomattox Station of the Yankee Cavalry. If successful, Lee might still get his remaining forces to Lynchburg and then on to Danville. But Gordon knew that if Federal infantry were present in Appomattox their cause was lost. Another message from Grant got a second response from Lee of "Not yet".

Sunday, April 9. In the clear, cool, Spring dawn of this Palm Sunday, Gordon turned to his ablest division commander, Major General Bryan Grimes, and ordered him to "drive them off!". The Confederate army now numbered less than 30,000 men, the majority of whom were of little use, for only about 8,000 had retained the strength and spirit to keep their weapons.( 53 ) Grimes led three seriously depleted divisions, including the 53rd North Carolina, forward in a sweeping attack. The Confederates were successful early in taking some dismounted cavalry breastworks. The joyful Southerners pressed on, but from a crest of a low ridge they saw what they knew to be their finish--the Federal infantry deployed in line of battle (some of these Union men had marched 96 miles in three and a half days to take their position here in front of the Confederates). The Southern army had lost the race to Appomattox Station and the last charge of the war by their regiments had been made, the last cannon fired, the last man had fallen in the four awful years of America's Civil War.( 54 )

By mid morning General Lee was forced to acknowledge this fact, and said, "Then there is nothing left for me but to go and see General Grant, and I would rather die a thousand deaths". Shortly after one o'clock of the 9th Generals Lee and Grant, with their staffs, met in the home of Wilmer McLean located

in the usually quiet village of Appomattox Court House to arrange the terms of surrender of the Confederate army under Lee's command. Shortly thereafter Federal officers were designated by General Grant to carry into effect the paroling of Lee's troops before they should start for their homes.

Three days after the surrender (April 12) The Confederates marched by divisions to a designated spot in the neighborhood of Appomattox Court House and there the troops stacked their arms and deposited their accoutrements in a formal surrender ceremony. Paroles were then distributed to the men, and the Army of Northern Virginia passed out of existence.( 55 ) For all practical purposes the war was over. The process of paroling and exchanging the Southern troops now began. At the very end of the fighting on the 9th, General Lee had estimated 8,000 fighting men at his command, this in marked contrast to the total number of 28,321 men paroled--2,781 officers, 25,480 enlisted men. It seems that stragglers kept drifting in, deserters and others had simply been sleeping or trying to find food, but the men knew they needed that parole paper which would allow them to get through Union patrols on their way home.( 56)

The "Parole List at Appomattox" names the officers of Bryan Grimes' brigade giving Jesse Franklin Eller as Captain of Company K, 53rd North Carolina Infantry, but Captain Eller could muster a mere three men in his company, with a total of 81 for the regiment, and 527 in the brigade.(57) None of the other Ellers originally in the 53rd regiment made it through the war to the surrender at Appomattox, for one reason or another.( 57 )

Jesse Franklin's parole was dated April 9, 1865. He found his way from Appomattox, Virginia, to Wilkes County, North Carolina, approximately 200 miles distant, arriving home to his wife Mary Ann, and their two children. It would appear that Jesse moved his family to Ashe County, North Carolina, to join his brother James who had moved there at the wars end, to distance himself and family from the "bushwhackers" that had made existence so unpleasant for the family in the closing days of the war.( 58 ) Hook makes no mention that Jesse made this move to Ashe County, but he does state that Jesse's third child, Junius Arthur was born in Ashe County, April 20, 1866.( 59 )

In contemplating on the name Jesse and Mary Ann gave their second son, it would not be difficult to surmise that he was named for Brigadier General Junius Daniel, who was Jesse's brigade commander, thus his immediate superior officer. Daniel had started early in the war as a colonel of a North Carolina regiment, then going to brigade command, had been with these same troops until meeting his death in a glorious charge at the Mule Shoe at Spotsylvania. It is said that "Junius Daniel had the essential qualities of a tried soldier and successful officer, brave, vigilant and honest...gifted as an organizer and disciplinarian, skilled in handling troops. He was noted for giving his verbal commands in a deep, well trained voice". After a close association for three years or more there can be no doubt this officer had become Jesse's personal friend and whom he not only greatly admired, but one he deeply respected.( 60 )

Quoting again from Hook, "In 1869 Captain Eller moved with his family in a covered wagon to Wapello County, Iowa, where his brothers Harvey, John Cleveland and William then lived. In 1873 in company with his brothers John Cleveland and William he moved to Clay County, Nebraska, where he homesteaded a farm near the town of Harvard. During these early Nebraska years he joined other

homesteaders in founding and building a small Baptist church on the prairie. He remained on his Nebraska farm until 1880 when he removed to Smyth County, Virginia, and settled on a farm near the village of Atkins. Here he lived until his death, his obituary in a local paper saying in part the following;

"He was an honest man and just. His convictions were strong and he was unbending in his adherence to them. He was a devoted father, and his absorbing aim in life was to inculcate, in his children, character, and to leave them the priceless heritage of worthy example and an unblemished name. He professed the holy religion of Christ during the second year of the war, and afterward united himself with the Baptist Church. He has ever since been a zealous Christian worker in his church. He was largely instrumental in organizing and building two churches. The latter years of his life were attended by sore affliction and he has been, during most of the time since, practically helpless."( 61 )

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