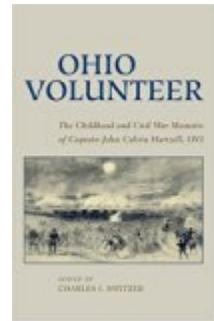


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Calvin Hartzell. *Ohio Volunteer: The Childhood and Civil War Memoirs of Captain John Calvin Hartzell, OVI*. Switzer. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005. xxix + 197 pp. \$28.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1606-8.

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## A Buckeye Goes to War

John Calvin Hartzell's *Ohio Volunteer: The Childhood and Civil War Memoirs of Captain John Calvin Hartzell, OVI* is a wonderful autobiography of his childhood and early manhood. Beginning with his birth on November 27, 1837, Hartzell continues the memoirs through his service as a member of the 105th Ohio Volunteer Infantry (OVI). At the request of fifty family members who petitioned him to write down his memories, Hartzell composed the collection between January 1, 1896 and April 22, 1898. Hartzell writes almost completely from memory; there is no indication that he kept a diary at any time during his life and *only occasionally* relied on sources outside his memory (p. xxiv).

Although fifty members of his extended family made the request, Hartzell addresses his work to his nephew Wilbur. At times, especially while recollecting his early childhood, Hartzell asked Wilbur to accompany him as he travels back through time, taking trips though Hartzell's childhood home. Together they go up and down roads, across fields, and through woods in circuitous routes as Hartzell describes, in detail, the sights, sounds, and smells. All the activities that accompanied his boyhood in a Pennsylvania German-Swiss community of Ohio are present and Hartzell revels in the memory of how things used to be. As Wilbur journeys with his uncle, the reader is provided with many insights into the life of Hartzell's family, friends, and neighbors. The reader accompanies the uncle and nephew as they progress through the elder's mind from childhood, when Hartzell received "many a whipping" (p. 3),

through adventures with his dog Turk. As the uncle begins to grow, additional tasks are assigned and one can observe in this work the progression from youngster to man on the American frontier. Anyone interested in life on the American frontier will appreciate this first section of Hartzell's work for the description of events and the overall pictures of how life flowed on a yearly cycle: candle making, maple syrup sugar production, sheep shearing, hog butchering, and working on the threshing floor are but a few of the topics that provide the reader a look into early and mid-nineteenth-century life.

Hartzell writes, "In concluding this, the story of my boyhood, let me look back a little" (p. 89). He continues, over several paragraphs, with a wonderful summary of his recollections up to that point. As one reads this summation one is drawn into the mind of this American. One of the most valuable aspects of this work is this section for it not only recalls how things used to be, it also explains why Hartzell and so many others chose to go to war. In the context of the twenty-first century, Hartzell may come across to some as close minded and one-way. If one allows himself to think about it as a true representation of the time, many today will look back upon with this work with at least some scorn. He is representative of the Anglo-American who moved across the United States. Others may see in this work these early Americans taking the land and following manifest destiny. In Hartzell's mind they are simply attempting to better themselves and their family. Throughout this section concerning his early life Hartzell prepares the minds

of his readers for what is to follow, his service with the 105th Ohio Volunteer Infantry. If one considers what Hartzell is truly saying the reader will understand that the author explains why he went to war: it was the right thing to do in order to preserve the proper way of life as he knew it.

Hartzell begins his account of the war with his enlistment and assignment as a second lieutenant in Company H. Anyone looking for an in-depth look at the battles, strategy, or analysis of the war fought between North and South will be disappointed. Hartzell and his company begin with all the promise, innocence, and high expectations one has come to know and expect of military recruits. His comments concerning the campaigning in Kentucky are amusing when one considers they were written thirty-five years after the fact by a veteran looking back at his own recent enlistment. He mentions the “utter greenness and ignorance” of the recruits, as they were “scarcely a week from the farm and school and shop at home,” at the same time indicating their disappointment at missing the battle with Kirby Smith, “cursing their luck” and wondering if “we’d ever get a chance at them” (pp. 90-92).

Hartzell can be brutally honest at times. The only good he ever saw from a pistol was when his first lieutenant killed himself and thus the handgun “benefited us to the extent of ridding us of a great coward early in our history” (p. 91). He does not spare himself in his honesty. Of his first actual fight, after the situation turns in favor of the “Johnnies” he begins his retreat by placing a tree between himself and the “Rebels.” He next turned on the “juice” running in a straight, direct line toward the rear because “I had very important business that lay right in front of me” (p. 95). Yet in the honesty comes the experiences of the common soldier as he grew from raw recruit to seasoned veteran.

One of the greatest strengths of the book is that it was (obviously) written by someone who participated in the events about which he wrote. As such, insights throughout the book are plentiful and dropped almost haphazardly. Speaking of the battle at Perryville, Kentucky, for example, Hartzell observes “no two men would tell you the same tale about this or any other fight” (p. 99). He goes on to explain, “in line of battle and the heat of an engagement one can’t see much of the battle except what is in his immediate front” (p. 99). Such an insightful attitude allows the reader to develop a closeness with the events being described and develops trust in the observations Hartzell relates.

The biggest problem in this book is that it frequently does not go far enough. At the end of his treatise, Hartzell writes, “in my story I have tried to show you, as well as I could, the life of the man with the musket” (p. 194). Yet, many times Hartzell leaves the reader hanging. The siege of Atlanta is covered in two paragraphs. On the battle at Chickamauga, Hartzell writes, “I stand almost dumb in trying to give you the faintest conception of the events ... it is not in human power to do it” (p. 124). The author then provides some of the best detail of the book; but just as he is drawing the reader in, Hartzell suddenly stops even though he states that he could go on providing even more details. It is at this point that the narrative of the battle, as a whole, simply ceases and the reader is redirected to Hartzell’s company and their experience guarding the supply train. The rest of the account concerns losses and general observations which, while interesting, one can find in many of the histories of the battle. To be fair, these histories were not readily available when Hartzell wrote and he was attempting to provide the reader with the overall slaughter of this particular battle. However, now that veterans like Hartzell, along with their personal observations, are gone, all we are left with—so many times—is the “big picture,” while a multitude of “little pictures” have been lost.

Overall this is a remarkable work by a veteran written some thirty-five years after the events related. Charles I. Switzer, the editor, does an excellent job of introducing the work in fifteen pages. Switzer helps place Hartzell and his relatives in their historical context, and provides a brief overview of the entire work. Maps are few (there are two in the entire work), but they are sufficient as one is drawn more into the mind of one man and his experiences: that, along with the two maps provided, are sufficient for the purposes of this work. Switzer also does a tremendous service to his reader by providing, in endnotes, explanations of the events and people involved in the related episodes. By placing these explanations in endnotes one must interrupt his reading instead of simply glancing to the bottom of the page, but that is a matter of personal preference more than criticism. There is not a long list of bibliographical sources, but, given the scope, intent, and nature of the work, one is not expected and the editor has provided enough information for further investigation should one desire to explore the events related further. This book will be a welcome addition to any library, especially one having a desire to explore life on the American frontier during the first half of the nineteenth century and the experience of one man during his service with the federal army.

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