

Rochester boasts unassuming Civil War hero

By Father Robert F. McNamara
Guest contributor

Ninety-nine years ago this week the Battle of Gettysburg took place — that epic engagement which marked the turning point of America's bloody Civil War. Many a Yank from western New York took part in the combat from July 1-3, 1863.

Rochester's best-known hero there was Col. Patrick Henry O'Rorke, a West-Point graduate killed in the defense of "Little Roundtop." But Rochester was also represented by another — a surviving colonel — of whom the *Post Express* said, "this city has reason to be proud."

John McMahon, the third son of Michael and Elizabeth McMahon, was a native of County Cork, Ireland. He was born in either 1830 or 1834. He must have been quite young when his parents, driven no doubt by Ireland's dreadful economic plight, brought their family to Rochester.

McMahon married rather young. His wedding to Mary E. Shields took place at Rochester's Immaculate Conception Church on Jan. 5, 1853. They raised a family of three sons and one daughter.

The Civil War broke out with the Confederate assault on Fort Sumter, S.C., on April 1, 1861. On April 15, and again on May 3, then-President Abraham Lincoln called for volunteers to put down this southern insurgency.

Many men in Rochester, especially members of the state militia, responded to these summonses. McMahon did not. However on Nov. 9, 1861, he enlisted for a three-year term in the 105th Regiment of New York State Volunteer Infantry. His company — known as Company G — was part of that outfit's "Irish Brigade."

Bidding farewell to his family, he was mustered in as a buck private on Dec. 23. His militia experience was soon acknowledged when he was elected his company's lieutenant on Jan. 8, 1862. He was commissioned its captain on March 23.

In the second Battle of Bull Run on Aug. 30, 1862, McMahon was struck by a shell fragment. The impact caused not only a severe wound but a "concussion of the spine" that impaired his ability to walk. Hospitalized briefly in Washington, he was sent home to recover. He remained shaky after his return to camp in mid-October, and only in December, 1862, could he again reassume command of Company G.

Constantly on the firing line, the 105th had lost so much manpower by March 17, 1863, that it was consolidated with the 94th N.Y. Volunteers. McMahon continued to captain the company under its new number.

Thus far the Rochester officer had been warring in Virginia. At the end of June, 1863, his regiment was ordered north to Pennsylvania, where the eye of the storm was focusing on Gettysburg. The 94th New York was placed under the command of Major General John F. Reynolds.

Captain McMahon saw little of the vast battle. He was taken captive during the fighting on July 1.

At that time it was customary for captors to demand the swords of captured officers. McMahon's sword had been given to him a year before by the Rochester Common Council. During the formal conferral, somebody had half jokingly warned the captain, "Don't let the Johnnies have it!"

Perhaps Captain Jack remembered this warning as he unsheathed the weapon at Gettysburg. Before he handed it over to the "Johnnie Rebs," he broke the blade over a stump. One of



Courtesy of Roger D. Hunt
Brigadier General John McMahon of Rochester fought in the Battle of Gettysburg from July 1-3, 1863.

the Confederate lieutenants wanted to shoot McMahon then and there, but was overruled. The commanding rebel officer sent McMahon and others to Libby Prison in Richmond.

Captain McMahon spent from July, 1863, to March, 1864, in the tedious confinement of this former tobacco warehouse. Libby was not the most notorious of the South's prisoner-of-war camps, but it did affect his health. He was released on March 7, 1864.

Two days later he reported, head high, at the Federal "Camp Parole," in Virginia. He had been promoted to major on Feb. 17. His military superiors then granted him a generous leave.

Rochesterians had long since heard of McMahon's daring act of disdain at Gettysburg and his long internment at Libby. When he reached his hometown, therefore, the Common Council resolved to present "Major Jack" an even finer sword to replace the one sundered and surrendered.

The presentation took place during a Council meeting held the evening of March 31, 1864, with many guests in attendance. Mayor Nehemiah Bradstreet presented the gift.

The mayor was not content with merely handing over the sword. In a long, grandiloquent oration he praised the valiant impulse that prompted McMahon to enlist; the courage he had demonstrated in leading his men, even when he was wounded; and, of course, the fine disdain he had shown to his captors at Gettysburg.

In contrast, Major Jack's reply was brief and unassuming. He thanked the city for its kind attention. He disclaimed any right to the title "hero" in a particular sense: many another Ro-

chester soldier deserved it more than he, Major Jack said.

The reason he had enlisted was to aid "somewhat" in putting down the rebellion. He had simply done his duty — rather tried to do it — neither seeking nor expecting a reward. As for giving the rebels a broken sword, he had merely wanted — as he put it — to "lessen the spoils of the traitors."

The Tiffany sword and scabbard, tarnished by age but still eye-catching, is now the property of the Rochester Museum and Science Center.

McMahon reported back at camp in May, 1864. He was commanding offi-

cer of the 94th from midsummer to autumn, when the unit was engaged around Petersburg, Va.

That October, his military career took another turn. A new upstate regiment, the 188th Volunteer Infantry, was raised by his brother Michael. New York Gov. Horatio Seymour named John as its head. His commission as colonel was dated Oct. 20.

The new outfit was quickly dispatched to Virginia in the spring of 1865, to fight under Gen. Philip Sheridan. The unit's career in the field was brief, but very intensive.

From March 27 to April 9 the men were engaged in fighting or marching night and day. He was wounded at Five Forks and again shortly afterward, but in neither case seriously.

His division fired the last shot in the war, when the Confederacy "busted up" on April 9. President Lincoln's assassination on April 14 imposed a month of mourning, but Col. McMahon was happy to ride at the head of his regiment in the grand military review staged in Washington on May 23-24. The 188th New York was mustered out on July 1. McMahon accompanied his veterans back to Rochester on July 4, 1865. Finally, everyone thought, all was over.

Well, not quite all. In July, 1867, Colonel Jack received from the War Department the commission of brigadier general "by brevet," awarded "for meritorious services," effective retroactively to June 30, 1865. Brevet commissions gave no command or recompense, but — though basically honorific — they conferred a genuine rank. The unpretentious McMahon never used the higher title.

John spent the rest of his life with his family in Rochester. He and his brother Michael ran a small contracting firm, and it seems that the city employed the colonel as an inspector as well. Sociable as ever, he was most active in the Grand Army of the Republic — the veterans' organization of Yankee soldiers founded in 1866.

Jack McMahon died at home on Dec. 30, 1891. While his last illness began with grippe, the main cause of death was complications resulting from his wounds and internment. Thus he was a belated victim of the Civil War.

The McMahon family saw to it that his headstone in Holy Sepulchre Cemetery referred to him as "General" John. John could no longer object.

Paper receives four Catholic press awards

The *Catholic Courier* took home four awards during the Catholic Press Association's annual convention in Milwaukee, Wisc. last month.

Presented May 15, the awards honored excellence in national and diocesan Catholic newspapers, magazines, books and newsletters during the year 1991.

Staff writer Lee Strong won first place in the Best Feature Story category for his article, "Jesuit shares struggle of Salvadoran people." In their comments on the award, judges noted "... the story brought home the continuing struggle of the church's work in Central America. Without lecturing, the piece lets the subject tell an important story with eloquence and simplicity."

The *Courier* received a second-place award for Best Use of Color in a Special Section for its Christmas-issue cover. Judges observed that the cover

— which featured a blazing star above the stable at Bethlehem — had "drama."

The front pages from the Nov. 28, Dec. 5 and Dec. 12 issues collectively garnered the third-place award for Best Front Page. "Daring design," the judges observed, "is eye-catching."

The *Courier* also received an honorable mention for Best Treatment of the Gulf War. The judges cited the paper's "long-term, overall, comprehensive coverage of the war," in giving the award.

The General Excellence awards went to the *Catholic Twin Circle* in Studio City, Calif. (national); the *Florida Catholic* in Pensacola-Tallahassee (1-17,000 circulation); the *Acadiana Catholic*, newspaper of the Lafayette Diocese in Indiana (17,001-40,000); and the *St. Cloud Visitor*, newspaper of Minnesota's St. Cloud Diocese (40,001 plus).