

# The First Shot

By Rich Kohr

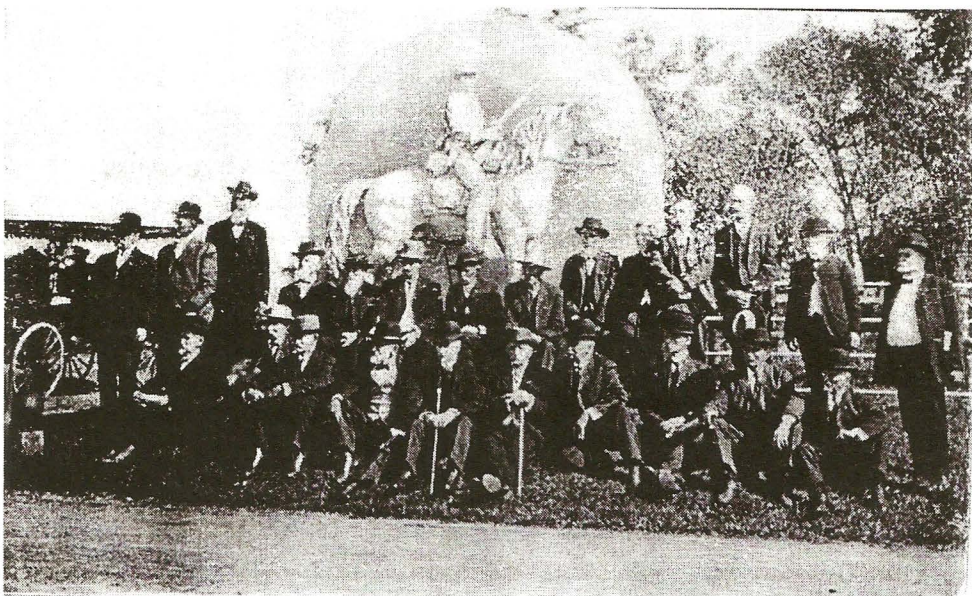
One of the least visited monuments on the Gettysburg Battlefield is the first shot marker west of town. Hidden by brush, it is difficult to find, difficult to view, and difficult to read. It is also difficult to determine its accuracy. Inscribed on the monument are the following words:

"First Shot Gettysburg, July 1st, 1863, 7:30 a.m."

According to the men of the 8th Illinois Cavalry regiment, this opening shot was fired by Lieutenant Marcellus Jones. However, other men from other regiments have disputed these words chiseled in granite along the Chambersburg Pike.

Lt. Jones commanded Company E of the 8th IL Cav. Four of his men, commanded by Sgt. Levi Shafer, were assigned to a vidette post along Knoxlyn Ridge. Early on the morning of July 1, a cloud of dust was seen rising over the pike to the west. As the Confederate column approached, Lt. Jones reached his videttes. One of his men, Private George Sager, shouted, "Here they come!" and raised his carbine. Lt. Jones interrupted, "Hold on, George. Give me the honor of opening the battle!" Jones borrowed Sgt. Shafer's carbine and fired a shot at the approaching Confederate column.

Another soldier posted along the Chambersburg Pike also claimed to have fired the fateful opening shot on that day. He was Corporal Alphonse Hodges of the 9th New York Cavalry, and he commanded a detachment of men protecting the bridge over Willoughby Run. According to Cpl. Hodges, he spotted the Confederate column approaching from the west and rode forward to investigate. Upon reaching the crest of Herr Ridge, he was fired upon by the Confederate infantry. Hodges wheeled his horse and galloped back to Willoughby Run where he dismounted and fired several shots at the approaching



17th Pennsylvania Cavalry Reunion Photograph at their Monument on Buford Avenue

Confederates. According to the regimental history, this incident occurred around 5:30 a.m.

Yet another Union regiment claimed that they fired the first shot of the battle, only they proclaim to have done it north of town. On the evening of June 30th, three companies of the 17th PA Cavalry were picketing the Carlisle & Newville (Table Rock) roads. Companies E, F & M, under the command of Major J.Q. Anderson, had established their main picket line at the junction of the Carlisle & Table Rock roads, with videttes, "thrown forward a mile or more beyond." At sunrise, (4:35 a.m.) on July 1st, or a little before, Confederates advanced on Major Anderson's pickets, "fully three miles out from the town." Dr. J.W. DeWitt, the surgeon of the 17th PA reported that he was treating wounded of Anderson's command by 7:00 a.m.

According to Colonel Thomas Devin in his official report,

"...My skirmishers on the right were forced back by the advance of the enemy's line of battle, coming from the direction of Heidlersburg."

"I immediately placed the 9th NY in support and dismounting the rest of my available force, succeeded in holding the rebel line in check for two hours."

According to the 9th NY Cav, they were ordered into line at 7:00 a.m. The Confederates who Anderson had encountered were probably members of Company A, 1st MD Cavalry or the 17th VA Cavalry.

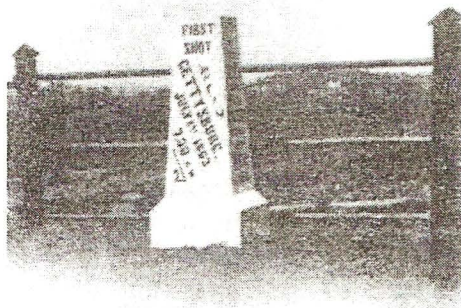
So, the question remains: Which of these three accounts is accurate? Who fired the opening shots at Gettysburg? It is unlikely that Corporal Hodges of the 9th NY deserves the honor. Hodges did command a picket post on

the Chambersburg Pike, but he was 1 1/2 miles to the east of Marcellus Jones and the men of the 8th Illinois. If Hodges had fired the first shot, it would have been necessary for the Confederate column to have bypassed Jones' pickets further west along the pike. The incident described by Hodges could be true, but it probably occurred around 8:00—8:30 a.m., after Jones' encounter with Heth's advance.

Marcellus Jones did open the fighting west of town. The question is a matter of timing. Various accounts state that Jones opened the fire between 5:00 a.m. and 8:00 a.m. Confederate accounts place the beginning of Henry Heth's march at approximately 5:00 a.m. The Confederate column could not have reached Marsh Creek until approximately 7:30 a.m. If the time stated by the men of the 17th PA Cavalry is accurate, they were engaged approxi-



Moses McKinney, 17th Pennsylvania Cavalry The Great, Great, Great Grandfather of our illustrious President, and author of this column, Rich Kohr. Perhaps Moses fired the first shot!



Crisis At The Crossroads

First Shot Marker on the Chambersburg Pike at Knoxlyn Ridge

Author's private collection

Author's private collection



mately 3 hours earlier than Lt. Jones.

If the first shots were not fired by Lt. Marcellus Jones, then why is there a marker on Knoxlyn Ridge? Some believe it was a decision made by the GBMA:

"John Bachelder, the historian of the Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association, who was extremely meticulous about accuracy, allowed the 8th Illinois Cavalry to place a marker along the Chambersburg Pike where Lt. Jones' post was located. This fact alone indicates the 8th IL actually fired the first shot..."

An interesting point to note, however, is according to Major John Beveridge of the 8th IL, Marcellus Jones, Lt. Riddler, and Sgt. Shafer, "purchased the ground and erected thereon their memorial. This stone, *beyond the domain of the Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association...* stands alone, a solitary and silent witness to tell the true story of the opening of the great and decisive battle of the war..."

Perhaps there is a reason why this memorial was dedicated outside of the jurisdiction of the GBMA. Perhaps Bachelder did not wish to give the honor to Lt. Jones until the matter was definitively decided. In any case, the men of the 17th PA Cavalry have a valid contention and a supportable claim on the honor. Only, they did not purchase land and mark their spot with a granite marker. Perhaps if they had, we would be listening to authors who do little or no research, giving them the honor without question.

There is an old adage, "You can't believe everything you read." We all know that is true. What we should add to it perhaps, is: "even if it's carved in stone!" ❧