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FOR OLD ABE AND THE UNION, OF COURSE:

Horace Howlett, a Staunch Lincoln Man

by Mark H. Dunkelman

Who Horace Howlett voted for in the 1860 presidential election, or indeed if he voted at all, is unknown. What his political proclivities were in the postwar years are also unknown, although chances are he was a Republican, as were a majority of his townsmen and especially his fellow Union army veterans. We know little, in fact, about his life before and after the Civil War. But like many of his army comrades, Horace Howlett left a rich record of his wartime experiences in a series of letters that have been preserved through the years by his descendants. From them we can glean an intimate look at his steady devotion to the Union cause, and his staunch support of Abraham Lincoln in particular. Howlett also provides us with eyewitness accounts of two encounters with the president in the momentous year of 1865--a time of triumph in March, and a time of tragedy in April.

Horace H. Howlett was born in Cottage, a hamlet in the township of Dayton, Cattaraugus County, New York, on January 26, 1836. His parents, William and Betsey (Phelps) Howlett, were native Vermonters who had left the town of Castleton in the Green Mountain State in 1833 and emigrated west to Dayton. Horace had an older sister, Sarah (another sister died in childhood), and a younger brother, Moses. The Howletts were described as kind, friendly, hospitable folks, noted for their help to the needy. By 1860, Horace had established his own

family, with a wife, Adaline, and two sons, four-year-old Aris and Hart Nash, a few months old. Baby Hart apparently died within the next five years, and another son, Horace Elmer Howlett was born on November 3, 1862, not long after his father joined the army.¹

Horace was 26 years old when he left his family and farm and enlisted at Dayton on August 30, 1862, in response to President Lincoln's call the previous month for 300,00 three-year volunteers. He stood five feet, eleven inches, and had a fair complexion, blue eyes, and dark hair. Several of his Dayton neighbors enlisted the same day, among them forty-four year old Barzilla Merrill. After the Dayton area recruits were mustered in at Jamestown, New York on September 25, 1862 as Company K of the newly-formed 154th New York Volunteer Infantry, Horace formed a mess with three other young privates. William Jason Hull, from neighboring Perrysburg, was Horace's age. Theodore Wheelock and Alva C. Merrill were Dayton teenagers. Alva--Barzilla Merrill's son--was seventeen and had fibbed about his age to enlist.²

From the regimental rendezvous at Jamestown the 154th New York journeyed to Washington by rail and joined the Eleventh Corps of the Army of the Potomac in northern Virginia. While their early weeks in the service were mostly uneventful, the green soldiers still found their new way of life exciting. As they struggled to accustom themselves to life in the field, the Merrills reported Howlett was adapting well. Barzilla described Horace as very steady, prudent, and "tough as a pig", and asked his wife to pass his assessment along to William and Betsey Howlett. The senior Merrill also overheard Horace say he would give twenty-five cents to see one good looking woman in the war-ravaged and depopulated neighborhood of their camp near Fairfax Court House.³ Tentmate Alva Merrill described how he and Horace bought two bundles of cornstalks for ten cents and wove them into a wall for the end of their tent--"we have quite a comfortable house now"--and how Horace bought a rubber blanket for three dollars.⁴

About the time the 154th made an inconsequential movement to Thoroughfare Gap and back to its Fairfax camp in November 1862, the foursome of Howlett, Merrill, Hull and Wheelock broke up. Hull and Wheelock got so "shiftless", Alva noted, that he and Horace left them. Laziness wasn't the only factor that separated Merrill and Howlett from their tentmates, as Alva

elaborated to his mother. "Horace and I tent alone now," he wrote. "Jate and Theadore got so nasty that we could not stand it with them and not only nasty but lousy [lice-ridden] to you need not tell anybody so but it is a fact." Alva then confessed, "You better believe that I and Horace takes a lot of comfort together if one gets any good thing the other has half I dont know what I should do with out him I know I should be homesick if he was not here."⁵ Barzilla Merrill thought it was best the four "disolved", and he told his wife, "The reason we [Barzilla and Alva] dont tent together is he and Horace wanted to go to gether they two are alone now they are clost buy us they come and eat with us some times they seem to enjoy them selves well and have no trouble."⁶

At the end of the month, Horace voiced his reactions to army life and his opinions of the war in a letter to his sister and brother. He was not optimistic.

It is Sunday and we dont have eny work to do and that is the case a most every day I tell you what it is I shall get so lasy by the time I get home that I dont believe I shall do much work for a while but I have Not got home yet mind that this war is not got along with so esy I am afrade I dont see as it is any nearer closed then it was when it commenced do you what do you think about it here I have been a soldier 3 months to day do you see eny great moove tworge ending the war dont it stand about as it did 3 months a go I tell you what I think there is to much speculation in the thing I wish every offaser had thare little 13 dollars a month and had to cary a Napsack and eat with us and sleep with us then they would not want to keep the thing eny longer then posable it is getting so dark I cannot see the line I will stop and eat my supper then finish I have got through eating and am seated on my nap sack feeling better I suppose you wood like to no what I had to eat for our supper we had coffey good bread fresh beef shugar ant that good enough I say it is we dont have as good as that every day when you come down to fresh meet with out salt or eny thing to eat with it then you can talk but I dont meen to find falt I had not a right to I have gande 10 pound in flesh and am tuff as a bare can eat a horse and chace a rider and come out all rite in the morning.⁷

The end of the year brought the holidays, a poignant time for soldiers longing for home. By that time the 154th New York had moved to the vicinity of Falmouth, and the men were doing picket duty on the banks of the Rappahannock River.⁸ Horace and Alva shared sow pork, dessicated potatoes, apple sauce, molasses candy and "plenty of sugar" for their Christmas dinner. On New Year's Day, the two went to the camp of the 44th New York Volunteers to visit a friend, and Barzilla Merrill used their tent for a little peace and quiet to write a letter. "I want to write a little about Horace and Alva," he told his wife. "They are a couple of first rate boys they both mind their own business....they seem to think as much of each other as two brothers they look fresh and their healths are good they seem contented....I have not had a word of trouble with any one since I have been here and I dont think that Alva or Horace has there is card playing swaring and in fact all kinds of obsene talk going on evry day I have watched the boys some and tried to advise them some and I think they have a mind to be men." Barzilla noted the two young men's tent was near his, and "we borrow and lend and live quite neighborly."⁹

When the 154th went upriver to build roads in preparation for a campaign by the army in January 1863, it seemed as though the regiment finally might see action. But the resulting movement bogged down in a tempestuous storm and turned into the farce known as the Mud March. Alva Merrill described the scene as he and his tentmate floundered in the mire and became separated from their regiment. "Our Company was detailed to help the wagons through," he wrote. "They stoped about 3 o clock in the afternoon to get something to eat when they got ready to start Horace and I was not quite ready so we got a little behind and we had to go just as fast as we could to overtake them we catched up a little after dark and I could have kept up well enough but Horace tuckered out he thought he could not go another step but we got to the woods and made us a fire and went to bed rested good and the next day we was enquiring for the 154 N. Y. but we found it without much difficulty."¹⁰

A few days after returning to camp, Horace had a peaceful encounter with the enemy. "Horace Howlet has been down to the River," recorded Private Marcellus W. Darling of Company

K, "and one of the Rebel pickets come part way over and threw him a plug of Tobacco."¹¹

Perhaps it was sometime during that long winter of discontent in the Army of the Potomac that Howlett composed a poem for his sister. The verses expressed how his yearnings for home conflicted with his determination to do his duty.

Dearest, like the breeze of even
comes the solace you impart
drooping the balm of heaven
on the weary home and hart
home with all its joys is present
when those letters come from thee
household faces bright and present
look with sunny smiles on me

When the cannon thunders near me
mid the clash of sounding arms
comes the tho'ts of home to cheer me
with its dear familiar forms
then I see with eyes enchanted
all the love that closter there
and I face with hart undonted
all the fearful scenes of war

what tho dangers hover round me
with their thousand fierce alarms
homes endearing walls surround the
thou art free from all these harms

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and Ill struggle on with pleasure
while these links are given me
to secure that precious treasure
liberty for me and thee

From your brother Hod¹²

A quiet winter passed. Horace and Alva continued to get along "first rate", Barzilla Merrill noted, and they built a sturdy log hut for quarters. In February 1863 the two asked their home folks to send a box of food and goods--Horace requested a coffee pot. A month later, Barzilla Merrill commented on his son's tentmate with approval. "I would like to say a word with regard to horace Howlett," he wrote. "I have probably seen him evry day since we have been down here and he has proved to be a man throughout he is a man that I respect and love he is a whole harted man and his reputation is good here."¹³

On March 26, 1863, at the 154th New York's camp near Stafford Court House, Virginia, the war changed dramatically for Horace Howlett. That day a comrade of Company K, Private John Adam Smith, wrote in his dairy, "Horace Howlett cut his foot very bad."¹⁴ Barzilla Merrill provided details of the accident a few days later. "Horace Howlett had the luck to cut his foot bad the other day," he wrote. "His axe struck a poll over his head and glanced and struck his foot on the top a little below the instep and made a bad gash I think he wont be able to do duty in the army verry soon."¹⁵

Merrill was right. Howlett remained in the regimental hospital for a couple of weeks. He was vaccinated on April 11 (for what is uncertain), and two days later he was sent to the Second Division Hospital. From there he was ordered to a convalescent camp in May, and while he was there it seems likely he heard about the disaster that befell the 154th New York at Chancellorsville, where almost half the regiment was killed, wounded or captured. Among the slain were Horace's former tentmate Alva Merrill, and Alva's father Barzilla. (When word of the

Merrills' deaths reached Dayton, Horace's mother Betsey composed a heartfelt poem about the tragedy.)¹⁶ By the time the Battle of Gettysburg was fought, Howlett was at the U. S. Army General Hospital in Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, and his father had made the trip to Pennsylvania to visit him. For the rest of the war, Horace would be a supporting player, doing humble but helpful duty far from the front, but he followed the progress of the Union cause with an attentive eye and an ever-stouter resolve to witness victory.

From the Chestnut Hill hospital, Howlett noted the arrival of the human debris from Gettysburg, pondered the prospects of a speedy end to the war as a result of the recent Union victories, and described how he overexerted himself on Independence Day. His letter displayed several characteristics of his writing--a willingness to poke fun at himself, colorful use of slang, and frequently errant spelling.

There was a lot of wounded brought in from the frunt last night nun that I new. There is no furlows granted nor nun discharged take a man with both arms off the Boys say they are going to put hooks on thare arms and make them cary water but I am happy to say thare is bully good news this morning brings the news Vicks[burg] is taken Mead[e] driving the Rebs like all get out....O Shit thare is no use of talking the war is a bout over and I shall have to come home and go to work wont that be to bad after playing of gentleman so long I am a frade it will soil my delicat hands ant you I had a pass for 24 hours on the forth and traveld Philadelphia all over it made me so stiff and lame I did not get over it in 3 days but I am all on the nip cat a gane now.¹⁷

On November 5, 1863, Howlett was transferred to Company H, 3rd Regiment, Invalid Corps, and he was assigned to duty as a cook at an unspecified army hospital in Washington. In a letter to his sister written the following month, he described his duties, voiced concern about his family, and analyzed the political situation, expressing his support for Lincoln and the Republicans.

I am well and tuff as a bare I am Not standing guard as much as I was I am asstant cook in the mane Cook Room Now you nede not say Eat to me I have better living then you can afford with out joking No hotell sets a better table then we do plenty of rost beef potato cabbage butter....my work is Not very hard I have a bout half of the day to my self and all the Night after 6 oclock thare is 22 of us in thare so you see thare is not much chance for getting lonsum I suppose you would like to No what we cooked for dinner one Barrel of beef two barrel potatoes 4 barrel of cabbage so you see it dont take much to run things it takes 22 pounds of coffee for one drowing well let this cook Room go for the present I got a letter from Adaline the same day yours came She said A[ris] had the Dipthe[ria] I am a fraid they all will be sick with it it wores me a great deal it is a bad diseas but all I can do is hope for the best I have made a practiss of letting nothing bother me cince I came in the army but when my folks are sick at home and I far from them how can I be contented I hope they may be spard for I have built a good meny castels in the are what a good time I should have after this war was closed living with my little family in peace once more Sum might call this foolish writing but lett a man go a way from a good home as I have and stay as long as I have and If they dont wont to come back to it they must be [m]ad men....the democrats are very much mistakend when they talk a bout sending all the Republicans home to vote hear is one they did not send home and a stiff one to if Old Abe was running for president I would vote for him if I had to go five thousen milds to do it if it was in my power to do so I wont the democrats to under stand they are plade out and thare is Not meny sound men will open thare head a bout democrats you can find some in the army that clame to be a dem[ocra]t but talk with them they are on the same platform with the Re[bellio]n thare is some copperheads I suppose back thare in the North but thare is no danger of them they dare Not get a way from home and I suppose some of them have dirtyed thare pants before Now for fear the draft might citch them.¹⁸

When the Invalid Corps was reorganized as the Veteran Reserve Corps in March 1864, Howlett became part of the 48th Company, 2nd Battalion. But his duty remained the same, and he observed the rest of the war from his post in the nation's capital. In a letter written after the opening of the momentous spring campaigns, Horace described busy times for the hospital cooks, determined fighting by both sides, the tenacity of Ulysses S. Grant, and the capabilities of black troops, including those slaughtered at Fort Pillow, Tennessee, and the division of United States Colored Troops in Major General Ambrose E. Burnside's Ninth Army Corps.

We have all the cooking we can tend to I am boss cook there is five of us does the cooking we have fed the hull of the wounded that has come to Washington we have got an eating house on six st whorfe and the one hear keeps us a Boffin the war is going on I can hardly tell how it runs but I think it is a bout a draw game so far....the Johnys fight like bricks the prisoners say they will whip us they say we cant fetch men enough to whip them but all we have is thare word for that Gen Grants army is as larg to day as it was when he crossed the Rappedan and he is a fighting Old Bugger if the rebs get much the start of him they have got to get up in the morning to be shure we have lost piles of men but we have got to lose the men as lose what we ar fighting for for my part I want the thing to go on to the end if we cant whip them let them have what they ask for I think this summer will tell whether we can or cannot....I am in hopes the next mooves will proove to be to much for them and up set thare ducks [At] Ft Pillo it seems they ware to meny for us and only look how they surond our men Burnsid's Niggers survive them the same way they take no Prisoners they make a clean sweep whare ever they go let them talk a bout Niggers not fighting they fight good and I had ruther they would fight then fight my self if the men in the north dont like to have them fight I think they had ought to come and lend a hand and get us poor Buggers out.¹⁹

At the end of the bloody summer, Howlett reported good news from the Shendandoah Valley and from Sherman in Georgia, and predicted Grant would soon provide "sturing times"

and break the Petersburg stalemate. "I have an Idea he is gowing to mak the rebs get up and dust before a nother two months rolls round," he speculated. After reporting two of his kitchen comrades were in the central guard house after being arrested by the provost guard for leaving the hospital without wearing the regulation Veteran Reserve Corps jacket, Horace ruminated on the nature of military discipline. "They come down to a fine thing with us felows well it makes but little differance to me I have been with them so long I am getting use to them a little less then a year they have got to domaneer over me and then I am free a gane and perhaps I will now enough to keep my freedom I do not mean to find falt with the military law for thare must have regulation in the army or they could do nothing."²⁰

A month later, Howlett declared himself in good health, well fed, clothed and sheltered, with "Not enough work to do to harm eny one." He realized how fortunate he was--"all soldiers dont have it as light as I do," he admitted. Although Horace Howlett never fired a shot at the enemy during the war, when his chance to hurt the Confederacy came he used a ballot instead of a bullet. He reported his vote, cast by power of attorney, with pride.

Well I have sent my vote home for Old Abe and the union of corce who elce could a union man vote for that is a man. Chapman was hear from versales [a village in the town of Perrysburg, New York, spelled Versailles but pronounced as Howlett phonetically spelled it] I sent it by him to give to [Norman M.] Allen [a prominent citizen of Dayton] to be handed in at the box on election day so you see if I am not thare my vote will be and a little less then a year if my life is spaird old Hose will be thare him self then things must tremble thare [is] not much News from the frunt at present but we are all looking for the fall of richmond before meny weeks rolls a round I think with our men in richmond and Old Abe in the white house this rebellion will be short.²¹

Notwithstanding Howlett's optimism, another long wartime winter dragged by. In its waning days, Horace made sure to witness the spectacle of President Lincoln's second

inauguration on March 4, 1865. That same day he sent a "little scetch of what they went through with" to his sister. "I have not told all for I suppose you will see it all in the paper," he wrote, "and put in better shape then I can do it." But Howlett's account conveyed quite nicely how impressed he was with the ceremony, although he dismissed Lincoln's famous address with a flippant remark.

I would like to have you see what I have seen today I have seen the inaugeration of the president of the united states some thing I never expected to see in the first place I never saw so meny people to gether before take them men wimen and children Black red and all Well I went out on Pa. Avanue and got my back up a ganste a lamp post and made up my mind if thare was eny thing to be seen I was gowing to see it well I stood thare for plump two ours. then I saw the marshals coming a bout fifty I should judg all on horse back with a white scarfe over one shoulder those are men such as congress men and big men of all buisness next came old Abe in his carrage drown by two horses next came the black horse cavelry next was the police force with a band of musick then came a regt of Vetron resurve with a Brass Band next was a Battery of six guns Brass they were polished up to the scratch next was the fire men with thare fire enjion and hooks and lader company and so forth then came a nother Regt of V. R. C. and so forth and so on and the last end of all ware a Nigger Brass Band I should judg thare ware 25 or thirty Brass Bands in all mixed through the Prosesion take it all a round it made quite a show they went from the Presidant house to the capital thare old Abe and I made his inaugeral adress but I mind you did not hav much to do with it then he got in to an open waggon drown by four white horses and went to his house.²²

The pagentry and promise of the inauguration were too soon followed by the tragedy at Ford's Theatre. On April 19, after a funeral service in the East Room of the White House, the remains of President Lincoln were escorted to the rotunda of the Capitol. Among the thousands of mourners who passed by the catafalque the next day to pay their last respects to the martyred

president was Horace Howlett. He wrote with sorrow to his sister of the funeral, and his hope to obtain a memento to remember Abraham Lincoln by.

Yeas we have lost the Father of our country a great and good man has gon I saw him to day for the last time his remains hav lane in the capital since yesterday tomorrow they start for N. Y. I saw the funerall prosession as they past yesterday on Pa. Avanue I had just ben out and got you a paper with the hull proceedings this city has been a gloomy place since the awfull thing occurd....this paper has got a very good picture of him looks a good deal like him and as soon as I can get a potograph of him I will send you one and I shall get one for my self two.²³

With the surrenders, the Confederacy went to Old Foot's prayer meeting (as Howlett put it in an apparent reference to hell), and although Horace continued to feed the wounded and sick at his hospital and the Sixth Street wharf, he was able to write with relief, "I think I shal be able to come home in time of peace."²⁴ And, after he was mustered out at Washington on June 26, 1865, so he did.²⁵

Horace and Adaline Howlett were divorced in 1870, and the following year he married Mary F. Beebe at Harborcreek, Pennsylvania. Three children were born to the couple: Elsie A., William and Lila. The Howletts lived in Cottage, Horace's home town, where he was described as a prosperous farmer. Already hobbled by the right foot he injured during the war, Howlett was further crippled in an accident in 1875. He was attending a soldiers' reunion in Dunkirk, New York, when he was thrown from a carriage and broke his left ankle. The fractured bones knit incorrectly and left his leg a couple of inches shorter than before. By the 1890s, the lame veteran had also lost his left eye, but he hung on for another decade before he died at Cottage on January 12, 1903. A staunch member of the Grange, Howlett was eulogized in resolutions by that organization as a "valued citizen, a man of strict integrity, successful in business, and honored with many trusts."²⁶

Like so many of his generation, Horace Howlett carried memories of the war to his grave, carried scars, carried recollections of the martyred Abraham Lincoln. Unlike most, he carried the remembrance of unforgettable occasions when he stood in the presence of the president he so admired, both in life and in death.

Notes

1. Charles J. Shults, editor. *Historical and Biographical History of the Township of Dayton, Cattaraugus County, New York*. Buffalo: The Hausauer Press, 1901, p. 104; 1860 and 1865 census listings for Dayton, courtesy of Kenneth Kysor, Cattaraugus County Historian, Little Valley, New York; "Family Century Farms," undated clipping from the *Jamestown Post-Journal* containing a history of the Howlett family, which gives Howlett's wife's name as Mary Nash.
2. Descriptive book and muster rolls of Company K, 154th New York, on microfilm from the National Archives; Alva Merrill to My Dear Mother, November 8, 1862. The letters of Alva and Barzilla Merrill are courtesy of Doris Williams of Orange City, Florida, Barzilla's great-granddaughter.
3. Barzilla Merrill to Ruba, October 5, 1862; to my Wife Ruba, October 11 and 14, 1862; to Ruba, November 7, 1862.
4. Alva Merrill to Dear brother and sister, October 22, 1862.
5. Alva Merrill to My Dear Mother, November 8, 1862; to Dear Mother, November 23, 1862.
6. Barzilla Merrill to Miss Barzilla Merrill, November 24, 1862; to Wife, November 11, 1862.
7. Horace Howlett to Dear Brother & Sister, November 30, 1862. The Horace Howlett letters are courtesy of his great-great-grandsons, Douglas W. Johnson of Perrysburg, New York, and Eugene Johnson of North Ridgeville, Ohio, who have my sincere thanks for sharing them with me.

8. For the operations of the regiment, see Mark H. Dunkelman and Michael J. Winey, *The Hardtack Regiment: An Illustrated History of the 154th Regiment, New York State Infantry Volunteers*. East Brunswick, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1981.
9. Alva Merrill to Dear Mother, December 26, 1862; Barzilla Merrill to Wife, January 1, 1863; to Beloved Wife, January 9, 1863.
10. Alva Merrill to Dear mother, January 27, 1863.
11. Marcellus W. Darling to Dear Folks, January 26, 1863, University of Iowa Library, Iowa City, Iowa.
12. Undated. On occasion, Howlett signed letters using the nickname "Hod".
13. Barzilla Merrill to Ruba, January 29, 1863; Alva Merrill to Dear Mother, February 22, 1863; Barzilla Merrill to Ruba, March 8, 1863.
14. John Adam Smith diary, March 26, 1863, courtesy of Georgia White and Donald J. Gould of South Dayton, New York.
15. Barzilla Merrill to Wife, March 29, 1863.
16. Barzilla Merrill to Ruba, April 11, 1863; muster rolls of Company K; Dunkelman and Winey, *The Hardtack Regiment*, p. 62; photocopy of poem, "Composed and written by Mrs Bessey Howlett on the death of Berzillai and Alva Merrill, who died at the battle of Chanslorville in May, 1863," courtesy of William H. Petersen, East Randolph, New York.
17. Howlett to Dear Sister, July 8, 1863.
18. Howlett to Dear Sister, December 28, 1863.
19. Howlett to Dear Sister, May 21, 1864.
20. Howlett to Dear Sister, September 29, 1864.
21. Howlett to Dear Sister, October 13, 1864.
22. Howlett to Dear Sister, March 4, 1865.
23. Howlett to Dear Sister, April 20, 1865.
24. Ibid.

25. *Annual Report of the Adjutant-General of the State of New York for the Year 1904 Serial No.*

39. Albany: Brandow Printing Co., 1905, p. 1154.

26. Shults, *History of Dayton*, op. cit.; "Family Century Farms" clipping; Horace Howlett's pension records from the National Archives; "In Memorium," unidentified clipping with Grange resolutions on Howlett's death.

Illustration, Caption and Credit

Civil War veteran Horace H. Howlett poses with his second wife, Mary Bebee. *Courtesy of Douglas Johnson.*