

THE ELKS IN WARTIME

Ralph Haas

Pennsylvania Elks Public Relations Committee

On the reverse side is a reprint of a 1943 Elk Brochure found among some old papers at the Monongahela Lodge #455. It is self-explanatory and contains some very interesting information about our Order. One of the more unique items has to do with the cartoons submitted by G.I.'s in the "WRITE 'EM A LETTER" Contest; the second prize was won by a soldier named William Mauldin. Bill Mauldin's life was changed forever by this Elks Contest entry... it became the famous "G.I. Joe" strip that ran throughout the world during WW II.

But your Pennsylvania Elks Public Relations Committee wants to give you a little more of the proud Elks past as it pertains to our nation's Veterans; and it begins with our terrible Civil War and a haunting song called by two titles, "The Vacant Chair" and "We shall meet but we shall miss him."

The B.P.O.E. has used this song for as long as any of us can remember, and like other parts of our Ritual and Special Services, it's origins have been forgotten. "The Vacant Chair" actually began at Ball's Bluff, Virginia on October 21, 1861 as a young Army officer tried to save his men in the Potomac River. First Lt. John William "Willy" Grout had been commissioned in the 15th Mass. Inf. at Worcester and this was his first real test under fire, the star-crossed Union assault on Virginia near present day Leesburg. While helping his men in the waters of the Potomac, Grout was

mortally wounded and his death listed as due to "drowning."

Lt. Grout had been expected home in Worcester, Mass. for Thanksgiving, but his return was a much more somber occasion, and it involved nearly everyone in town. However, the Grout family observed the traditions of the holiday and invited a neighbor, Henry Washburn, to be their guest and share their bounty...and their sorrow.

As the Grout family prepared to serve the dinner, Washburn was quite impressed at their insistence on having a complete place setting where young Willy would have been seated.

Struck by the stark symbolism of Willy's unoccupied chair, Washburn did what many of us do under similar circumstances, he wrote a short poem to vent his own feelings and emotions. The local newspaper, also well aware of the Grout family's grief, published Washburn's touching tribute as "We shall meet but we shall miss him" and it somehow made its way to a famous composer, George Frederick Root.

Set to a sadly beautiful tune, and retitled as "The Vacant Chair," Henry Washburn's ode to Lt. Willy Grout soon became one of the more popular songs for both the Union and the Confederacy. It was used at countless funerals and was probably introduced to the B.P.O.E. by Brother Burk, a Major in the Civil War. If you've never heard this song, the PR Committee can get it for your Lodge; played on the same instruments used during the American Civil War.

The B.P.O.E. has been deeply involved in all of America's conflicts since