

# A war, a drummer boy and a search for a grove

By DENNIS ROUSSEY  
(Of the Local News Staff)

Youngsters and music are inseparable, and if Charley King were a young teen-ager today he might be found in his bedroom listening to rock 'n roll on a stereo and rapping out a lively beat to the music with his drumsticks.

But young Charley King of West Chester was of another era in American history. He matched to the beat of a different drummer. In fact, he was the drummer.

Charles Edwin King, the oldest child of Pennell and Adaline Bennett King, was born in April 1849. He was described as "got as other boys" and "a true little hero."

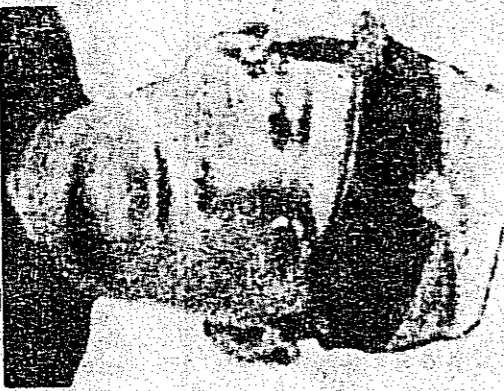
Like Charley, the United States was young in the 1850s and, like kids Charley's age, it was struggling to find its identity. The U.S. was growing and at the same time being torn apart by the secession of southern states. The government wanted to preserve the union and prevent the South from forming its own nation.

Verbal confrontations born in halls of politics matured into deadly conflicts on fields of battle. About a week after Charley's 12th birthday, a civil war erupted following the capture of Fort Sumter in South Carolina in April 1861, and a call to arms was loudly issued north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

CHARLEY KING was 12 years, 5 months and 9 days old when he answered his country's pleas for soldiers. A little more than a year later his patriotism cost him his life. Charley, the Drummer Boy, a youth living out his fantasy of marching with the army, is believed to be the youngest soldier to die from battle-related injuries in the Civil War. He died three days after being shot Sept. 17, 1862, at the Battle of Antietam (Sharpsburg), the bloodiest single day in American history. At Antietam, 26,000 Americans — Northerners and Southerners — became casualties of a nation's struggle to find its identity.

One of the lesser known tales of the well-documented American Civil War is that of the Drummer Boy, Charley King. He was a brave young man, especially considering his tender age, and he distinguished himself by earning the rank of regimental

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CHARLEY KING  
—12 when he enlisted

drum major, a rare accomplishment for a boy his age. He was an American hero, but there are no records of him being decorated for bravery, and the location of his grave is unknown.

To men in the spring of 1861 who answered the call to arms, war was looked upon as a glorious event bathed in brightness of flags, uniforms and adoring citizens. The Drummer Boy and other West Chester and Chester County residents got caught up in the excitement. The volunteers who signed up for a three-month enlistment believed they would put down the rebellious Confederates quickly and return as heroes.

CHARLEY KING could take playing soldier one step further by actually being part of the army.

"So far as Chester County is concerned it is proper to state that no county in the country was more patriotic or prompt to offer soldiers and equip them for the war," W. W. Thomson stated in "Chester County and Its People," a book published in 1896.

When a company of three-month enlistees from West Chester departed in the spring of 1861 for training in Harrisburg, Charley accompanied them as a drummer. Drills and marching were a significant part of army life in the Civil War, and the cadence provided by drummers was important in training men to become soldiers.

According to a Dec. 31, 1861, story headlined "Young Patriotism" in the West Chester Village Record newspaper, Pennell and Adaline King would not permit Charley to leave with the company following his training. The company went off to war and Charley apparently came home to West Chester. But, the war didn't end in the expected three months — the South's stunning victory at Bull Run (Manassas) in the summer of 61 made sure of that — and neither did the Drummer Boy's dream of being with the soldiers.

"HE WAS SO taken with going that his father would very frequently at nights, find him setting up in bed marking time on the head board of his bed," according to the Village Record.

With the extension of war came a renewed request for Union soldiers. The three-month enlistments were expiring and recruits were sorely needed to serve longer terms. Volunteers signed up for three-year stints.

Often, the formation of companies in Union regiments was a neighborhood affair. Volunteers would sign up following emotional, patriotic town-square speeches. One such example is the formation of Company F of the 49th Regiment of the Pennsylvania Volunteers, an infantry unit.

Company F was headed by Capt. Benjamin H. Sweeney, 32, of West Chester, and its contingent of about 80 men included mostly West Chester area residents. Sweeney re-enlisted on July 27, 1861, after completing a three-month tour as a captain in the 2nd Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry. It was Capt. Sweeney who persuaded the Kings of the 160 block of Barnard Street to allow their son to be the Company F drummer boy. Charley enlisted on Sept. 12, 1861, as a "musician."

"WHEN THE NEXT call was made for men," according to the Village Record, "Charley" accompanied Capt. Sweeney's company to Harrisburg. While there he insisted so strongly on following the men to the battle field, that Capt. Sweeney interceded, and with the promise that he would be well guarded, the parents' consent was obtained. He was then made drummer of the company, soon after he was taken as drummer in the band of the Regiment, and now has been made drum-major of the Regiment."

Yielding to their son's enthusiasm and Capt. Sweeney's pledge that Charley would be safe, Pennell, 33, proprietor of a tailor shop in mid-town West Chester, and his wife, Adaline, made a difficult decision in the name of patriotism regarding their oldest child. They must have worried constantly, despite Sweeney's promise and the knowledge that drummer boys were supposed to be protected from battle. Participating in marching drills, attending sick and injured soldiers and performing various chores and errands for officers, it appeared Charley would be in no apparent danger. Off he went with the army — to war.

Following its defeat at Bull Run in Virginia, near Washington, D.C., in the summer of 1861, the Union's Army of the Potomac regrouped and began intense drills to strengthen itself and become a viable fighting unit. From late 1861 until the spring of 1862, the army camped and trained.

THE VILLAGE RECORD, in late December 1861, stated, "Charles King, not quite 13 years of age, is drum-major of the 49th Regiment, now encamped about 10 miles from Washington. We doubt very much, if in the whole army, in the field there is another so young, possessing the rank of drum-major."

The Army of the Potomac had a new plan to defeat the Confederates and put an end to the insurrection. The strategy was to capture the Confederate capital, Richmond, Va., attacking from the Virginia peninsula. To accomplish the goal, the Army of the Potomac was shipped up the James River to the peninsula. What ensued is known as the Peninsula Campaign, a Union failure featuring a series of bloody battles during the spring and summer of 1862 and, eventually, an embarrassing withdrawal of Northern troops.

The 49th Regiment participated in the Peninsula Campaign, including "hard-fought battles of Williamsburg," according to Thomson's book. Inclement weather, long, muddy marches and uncomfortable encampments, in addition to battles with the enemy, made soldier life miserable. But, Charley King endured, and according to a 1862 Village Record article, "In wearying marches by night and day, he never murmured or complained. His mind was beyond his years."

THE FAILURE OF the Union to capture Richmond and topple the Confederate government buoyed the South's hopes of becoming an independent nation. Up until 1862, the South fought on its own soil. But that would change as the South's victories mounted. Gen. Robert E. Lee and Confederate President Jefferson Davis fell an invasion of the North might persuade the United States to give up trying to save the union.

In early September 1862, Lee's Army of Northern Virginia dealt the Union forces another blow, heading them at the second battle of Bull Run (Second Manassas) in Virginia and launching a push northward. After crossing into Maryland, a border state separating the Union and the Confederacy, the next stride north would be over the Mason-Dixon Line and into Pennsylvania, whose rich farmland seemed ripe for the picking by weary and hungry rebels.

By mid-September, the Union army caught up with the Confederates outside of Sharpsburg, Md., near which flowed the quiet Antietam Creek. On Sept. 17, the Brian armies, in excess of 120,000 men, clashed in a one-day blood bath. The death, suffering and destruction were nothing like the glorious visions perceived by the soldiers in early 1861.

THE 49TH REGIMENT, attached to Gen. Winfield S. Hancock's brigade of Gen. William F. Smith's First Division of the VI Corps, commanded by Gen. William B. Franklin, was at the Battle of Antietam. Charley King probably provided the cadence while his comrades pursued the rebels prior to the battle. The 49th, not actively involved in the fighting at Antietam, was fatally close to it.

Serving as a support unit, the 49th was assigned to an area just north of the battlefield's East Woods and within several hundred yards of the famous Cornfield, some of some of the heaviest and deadliest fighting of the war.

Early in the afternoon "Gen. Hancock came back to see just how he had left us in regard to our position," wrote Sgt. Robert S. Westbrook in the "History of the 49th Pennsylvania Volunteers," "and he ordered us to fall back twenty paces out of range, which was done just in the nick of time, for the rebels ran some batteries out and opened fire on us; our batteries shortly gave them to understand that we had come to stay and the rebels withdrew their batteries."

In the battle, bullets and shells filled the air, claiming victims whose units weren't actually fighting.

"GUS HELLER, of Company C, lost a foot on the skirmish line, and Charley King of Company F, was shot through the body and fell into the arms of H. H. Bowries of the Sixth Maine regiment." Westbrook wrote. On Sept. 20, 1862, Charley King, "wounded by shell through the body, died at a temporary hospital nearby."

When the Union army fought at Antietam, the Drummer Boy's father, Pennell, was reportedly only 10 miles away. But he didn't learn about his son's fate until days later.

Pennell King's obituary in the Daily Local News in November 1902 indicated that at the time of the Battle of Antietam he was serving in the emergency corps, a hastily assembled militia formed at the request of Gov. Andrew Curtin to guard Pennsylvania's southern border against a rebel invasion.

Found on other side