

George G. Carman (1838-1868)

“‘To write, or not to write: whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to sit and scratch your pate in vain for thoughts, or manfully to seize the shears and clip—clip—clip the better thoughts of others?’—is a question for an editor, but not a local editor.”¹

George G. Carman may or may not have lived by his own words. Yet, he is remembered by the words he scripted. Few during his time succeeded in becoming a writer with an established audience, but for Carman—or rather his moniker, Boswell—he was awarded and praised for this achievement.

Carman was not a McLean County native. According to his enlistment record for the United States Civil War, he was born in Casey County, Kentucky in about 1838. Carman did not spend much time in Kentucky, as he later mentions that during his school years, he lived in Indiana.² Following his schooling in Indiana, his obituary states that Carman spent time training as a printer in McLean County. From the same source, it is eluded that sometime during this period, Carman began to succumb to the hardships that followed the profession of being a printer and writer.³ Thus, he chose to abandon that life and follow his passion for theatre, drama, and acting instead. Although his acting career was not long lived, it was said that had he devoted himself to the art, he would have built a high reputation.⁴

Carman returned to writing and editing following his acting stint. He took up a job as an editor and proprietor for the *Fayette County Democrat* newspaper in Vandalia, Fayette County, Illinois. The *Fayette County Democrat* (also known as the *Fayette Democrat*) began publishing in 1860, but it was only shortly after publication in which Carman became acquainted with fellow editors for the Bloomington *Pantagraph*.⁵

After the U.S. Civil War broke in 1861, Carman “dissolved his connection” with the *Fayette County Democrat* and moved to Bloomington where he then began working for the *Pantagraph* as the editor of the local department. He also frequently published editorials in the *Pantagraph* under the pseudonym, “Boswell.” His work for the *Pantagraph* gathered a following for his “brilliant intellect and facile pen.”⁶

During the summer of 1862, President Abraham Lincoln requested an additional 600,000 more men to volunteer for the Union Army and be deployed into the battle. The men of McLean County promptly answered the call.⁷ As a pro-Union Democrat, Carman volunteered for what would become the 94th Illinois Infantry Regiment, or as it was commonly referred to, “the McLean Regiment.” In a matter of 10 days, the Regiment, composed entirely of men from McLean County, were examined, inspected, and mustered in.⁸

¹ Boswell. *The Pantagraph*. July 29, 1862

² Boswell. “Letter from Boswell.” *The Pantagraph*. January 26, 1864.

³ “Obituary.” *The Pantagraph*. May 23, 1868.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Illinois Newspaper Project, https://www.library.illinois.edu/inp/results_full_public_wp.php?oclc=12564061, Date Accessed, July 31, 2021.

⁶ “Obituary.” *The Pantagraph*. May 23, 1868.

⁷ Schreck, Kelsey. “Biography of General John McNulta,” 2011, 2

⁸ J. N. Reece. *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Illinois Volume V. Military and Naval Dept*: Internet Archive. Springfield, IL, Phillips Bros., State printers [etc.], January 1, 1970.

On August 11, Carman wrote that he was going to war:

*“I’m going to war,’ said Boswell, leaning against a lamp post, and looking like a solitary bull frog in a deserted mill pond. ‘Yes, I’m going to war, and have been looking about for a good supply of woolen socks, and I have come to the conclusion: we can’t knit socks; as a nation we don’t understand the art of knitting socks. Our women are heroic: by their deed of valor putting Joan de Arc and Mrs. Mars to shame: we have colonels and majors of the fair sex, and ‘daughters of the regiment’ by hundreds, (wonder if your regiment will have a daughter?) but, can they knit socks?’”*⁹

The 94th Infantry departed Bloomington for St. Louis, Missouri on August 25, 1862 with 945 men. Headed for the Benton Barracks, the Regiment boarded a southbound Chicago & Alton Railroad train from Bloomington. Upon arrival at Alton, the Regiment traveled by steamboat to St. Louis, Missouri to reach Camp Benton. Carman, writing as Boswell, reported back on the trip experience in the *Pantagraph*:

*“Our trip down was a pleasant one, nothing transpired out of the usual order of things...At Alton Mr. H. B. Runyun took charge of us, and landed us safely at St. Louis, about 4 o’clock on Tuesday morning. Runyan is a steamboat and no mistake. We had a very fine moonlight excursion, and the Mississippi reminded me very much of Sugar Creek when it is at its best.”*¹⁰

The 94th quartered at the Benton Barracks for two weeks until September 10, 1862. While at Benton Barracks, Carman wrote to the *Pantagraph* four times in a series dubbed, “Boswell’s Letters” and later, “Letters from Boswell.” In his early letters, Carman reported back in good spirits. In a letter dated August 31, 1862, he told of how the men received their military uniforms and how he had been learning extensively about how the military is organized. In the following letter, dated September 6, he told his readers that his regiment has finally received their guns: “We received our guns to-day—the Austrian rifled musket. A neat, light, elegant, efficient weapon, of a very good size, though not *Ostra-cized*.”¹¹

On September 10, the 94th moved by train to Rolla, Missouri, but Springfield was their final stop.¹² It was in Springfield, Missouri that Carman, and the rest of the men of the 94th, spent the next six weeks learning battle tactics and being drilled in the art of war. In a letter dated three days later, Carman reflected on how civilian reception was different while traveling through Missouri compared to Illinois. According to his recount, Missourians did not display as much enthusiasm for the Union soldiers as Illinoisans did.¹³ Upon reaching camp, Carman described the scenery as a “perfect Arcadia, surrounded by towering hills and gigantic black jacks” and continued to boast that it was a “magnificence scene.”¹⁴

At Rolla, it was reported that the 94th Regiment trained extensively in company, battalion, and skirmish drills. The 94th were considered pioneers in a type of skirmish combat not seen before or yet during the war. Instead of the commonly used line tactics, the 94th Regiment was taught to

⁹ “City and County,” *The Pantagraph*, August 11, 1862

¹⁰ Boswell. “Letters from Boswell.” *The Pantagraph*. September 1, 1862.

¹¹ Boswell. “Boswell’s Letters—No. III.” *The Pantagraph*. September 9, 1862.

¹² *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois Vol. I* (Chicago: Munsell Publishing Company, 1908), 810

¹³ Boswell. “Boswell’s Letters—No. V.” *The Pantagraph*, September 18, 1862.

¹⁴ Boswell. “Boswell’s Letters—No. VI.” *The Pantagraph*. September 19, 1862.

lay down while shooting and reloading in order to increase their aim precision and also to protect their bodies from projectiles.¹⁵

*“The best work of a critic or public journalist,” said Boswell, “is to expose the follies and vagaries of mankind in a mild, conciliatory manner: never mistaking spleen for wit, nor gall for sarcasm. You should endeavor to make this a feature of your paper.”*¹⁶

Carman’s writing style was anything but conciliatory. Often blunt, sarcastic, taking a mocking tone, and sometimes harsh; he never suppressed his opinions and feelings. However, at times his editorials were poetic—nearly Shakespearian in nature, grasping to capture the “beauty of thought” and pondering the familiarities of life.¹⁷ In a letter dated October 1, 1862, Carman described the autumn day in elegance, comparing the sky with Greek mythology and painting a vivid portrait of how the hills framed the camp:

*“This is a gorgeous October day. Indeed I might say it is exuberant [sic]. Centuries of dead autumn spirits have arisen from the past, clothed in the poetry of Helicon, the beauty of Hebe, the cloudless purity of Italy, the classic richness of Greece, the aroma of Lallah Rookh and Aurora Leigh, and the black haws and grapes of Missouri, and infused them all in this one October day. On either side of our camp, except the east, west and south, waves a sea of red shumaks [sic] of deepest carmine tint, which variegate and fluctuate to the gentle dalliance of the breeze, like a peacock’s plumage in a storm, or New York stocks on Wall street [sic]. Beyond this dense, green foliage of the mighty forest rises high, presenting a landscape picture of dreamy. Oriental beauty—sweet as a paragraph of sighs set in a quotation of kisses.”*¹⁸

The peaceful autumn did not last long. Six days later, Carman reported of an illness sweeping through the camp that he had caught. The “fever nager” (or fever n’ ager/ager, was a colloquial term for malaria) caused Carman and fellow men in the company to come down with an “ague,” or chills, fever, and sweating.¹⁹ All symptoms would recur at regular intervals. Carman described his symptoms as “...forced to march to the arctic regions,” “...you are in the hottest corner of the Southern Confederacy, and your head is a battle field [sic], and Richmond, and Corinth, and Vicksburg are all taken three or four times, and the rebels are marching rapidly on Washington.” “When this delightful feeling passes you find yourself in a most refreshing perspiration, which leaves you in a condition to receive your usual rations of quinine.” He finishes by warning the readers if they experience similar symptoms, they too have the “fever nager.”²⁰

Malaria was common amongst Union troops, with 224 out of every 1,000 Union soldiers receiving a malaria diagnosis.²¹ Fortunately, in 1861, surgeon William H. Van Buren, discovered quinine could be used to prevent and treat malaria. Although scarce in the South, Carman stated

¹⁵ J. N. Reece. Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Illinois Volume V. Military and Naval Dept: Internet Archive. Springfield, IL, Phillips Bros., State printers [etc.], January 1, 1970.

¹⁶ Boswell. *The Pantagraph*. July 23, 1862.

¹⁷ “Obituary.” *The Pantagraph*. May 23, 1868.

¹⁸ Boswell. “Boswell’s Letters—No. X.” *The Pantagraph*. October 8, 1862

¹⁹ Farmer, John Stephen. *Americanisms, old & new: a dictionary of words, phrases and colloquialisms peculiar to the United States, British America, the West Indies*. (London: Thomas Poulter & Sons, 1970), 9.

²⁰ Boswell. “Boswell’s Letter No. XI.” *The Pantagraph*. October 13, 1862

²¹ Reilly, Robert F. “Medical and surgical care during the American Civil War, 1861-1865.” in *Baylor University Medical Center Proceedings*, vol. 29, no. 2, pp. 138-142. Taylor & Francis, 2016.

that he was able to get his ration of the drug, and in a later letter tells he is completely over his “fever nager,” but afflicted with something worse: “I have entirely recovered from the ‘fever nager,’ (thanks be to quinine) but am terribly afflicted with—promotion.”²²

The days leading up to the 94th's first battle, the Battle of Prairie Grove on December 7, 1862, were tense. Confederate troops suddenly started to concentrate south of Springfield, Missouri and soon surrounded General James Blunt's forces in northwest Arkansas with the intension to annihilate the Union presentation. Upon receiving dispatch, the 94th Regiment was ordered to go backup Blunt's troops. They marched through the day and into a rainy and muddy night. Boswell described the conditions faced that damp night of December first: “Last night we slept (of any one of us did sleep) on a pile of rails, without tents, while the rain was intense. We have a few crackers in our haversacks and are waiting patiently for the commissary team and further orders.”²³

The 94th Regiment marched a total of 120 miles in 84 hours in order to reach the battle. Carman reported that his battery rushed up a hill upon reaching the battle front, “expecting a big fight,” only to be faced with an empty corn field. The Regiment made their stand at the top of this hill, and finally were fixed into position mere hours later. The 94th Regiment, reported by Boswell, was stationed on the left of the Confederate troops, with the 20th Wisconsin on the right, and the 19th and 20th Iowa along with the 37th Illinois and 26th Indiana in the center. The 94th Regiment held the left, which covered a road that led to Fayetteville.²⁴ This road was crucial as the Second Division was traveling down it to provide assistance. This battle is where the 94th's unique skirmish drill proved its value. The men maintained a long irregular line in which they took “advantage of every stump, fence and irregularity of the ground,” and they maintained “so destructive a fire that no troops could be brought against them without being cut into pieces.” They were able to maintain such steady fire that the Confederates were unable to push forward. In the end, the Confederates retreated during the night, leaving the Union forces victorious on the field of battle, and the Second Division was successfully received.²⁵

Without a doubt, many locals back home in Bloomington read the update from Boswell with pride in their hearts. Yet, some locals began to doubt Boswell had even participated in the battle, as rumor spread that Boswell had “shown the white feather” and had fled.²⁶ A subsequent report published in the *Pantagraph* stated that Carman was indeed sent away from the battle, though not in an act of cowardice, but rather on orders as a brigade printer.²⁷ The news eventually reached Carman, who addressed the rumors in a letter published February 9, 1863:

“In regard to myself, I have but few words to say. The time has not come for me to deny the charges against me. I shall do that on many occasions, ere this war is ended. In the meantime, let the editorial corps of the Statesman, and other of the same caliber feed and grow fat upon the slander—with the consoling truth staring them in the face... There is a long account to be settled

²² Boswell. “Boswell's Letters—No. XII.” *The Pantagraph*. October 18, 1862

²³ Boswell. “Boswell's Letters” *The Pantagraph*. December 1, 1862

²⁴ Boswell. “Letter from Boswell,” *The Pantagraph*, December 25, 1862.

²⁵ J. N. Reece. *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Illinois Volume V. Military and Naval Dept*: Internet Archive. (Springfield, IL: Phillips Bros., State Printers, 1901), 406.

²⁶ “A Word About Boswell.” *The Pantagraph*. January 16, 1863.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

with some men after the war. And if I pray that my life may be spared through the strife, it is that I may have a hand in the settlement.”²⁸

In the summer of 1862, President Lincoln had threatened the Confederates with an ultimatum – return to the Union and keep slavery, or on January 1, 1863, he would free all slaves from rebellious states. The Confederacy did not comply. So, on January 1, Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation.

News of the proclamation reached Carman by the third of January and in typical fashion, he responded to the news by declaring it was “as good for the Union cause as a hundred new regiments.”²⁹ He echoed Lincoln’s reasoning for the emancipation: “Destroy it [slavery] and treason will die—protect it, and for years to come rebellion will spit its venom in the face of its nourisher.”³⁰ In his next letter, Carman continued to reflect on the effects of slavery. He argued that the South has just as many natural resources as other Northern states. But why, he questioned, is there such a societal discrepancy between the two? He answered his own question directly, “It can be accounted for in no other way than the universal indolence growing out of the institution of slavery.”³¹ Carman backed his claim by saying it was not natural for a person who accumulated wealth from the “unrequited labors of others” to use that wealth to hold power over those who unwillingly have no wealth or education. He claimed by doing so, it made the person “mentally lazy and lymphatic” because their “ambition is killed.”³²

Carman acknowledged that his opinion may be “anti-democratic,” and he may be labelled an “abolitionist,” but sharply retorted that anyone not willing to be called an abolitionist “...stay at home and scribble insipid, stupid editorial for the *Statesman*.”³³ Carman, however, did not receive being called an abolitionist well, as reported in his letter dated September 11, 1864. He declared he was not an abolitionist, but rather for George B. McClellan and the Chicago platform. He listed the reasons he was in favor of McClellan: first, McClellan was a “war man” and had great fame and nomination due to his service. This undoubtedly meant McClellan would never betray the Union; second, because McClellan ran on a platform of peace and Carman described himself as a man of peace. Finally, and most notably, Carman supported McClellan because he would not be a tyrant like Lincoln.³⁴

The 94th was awarded time away from the war from March 31 to June 3. During this break, the *Pantagraph* published that Boswell was in town on a “flying visit” and was well and favorable. After recuperating, the 94th returned to Rolla, Missouri and continued to drill and train until they were ordered to join General Ulysses S. Grant in the siege of Vicksburg, Mississippi. The 94th dug trenches and captured rifle pits (fox holes) to aid in the battle.³⁵ In a letter dated June 20, 1863, Carman predicted the Union’s eventual July 4 siege and capture, writing, “Vicksburg will be taken.”³⁶

Upon the surrender at Vicksburg, the Regiment was ordered on an expedition up the Yazoo River. Carman reported that it was his regiment’s most successful expedition. They were able to

²⁸ Boswell. “Letter from Boswell.” *The Pantagraph*. February 9, 1863.

²⁹ Boswell. “Letter from Boswell.” *The Pantagraph*. January 20, 1863

³⁰ Boswell. “Letter from Boswell.” *The Pantagraph*. January 20, 1863

³¹ Boswell. “Letter from Boswell.” *The Pantagraph*. February 9, 1863

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Boswell. “Boswell Comes out for McClellan.” *The Pantagraph*. September 24, 1864

³⁵ *Brief Historical Sketch 94th Volunteer Infantry Folder 1 MCMH Archives*

³⁶ Boswell. “Letter from Boswell.” *The Pantagraph*. July 1, 1863

capture Yazoo City, take prisoners of war, and release the enslaved population there.³⁷ In September, the Regiment scouted in the swamps outside New Orleans, producing little results. Carman referred to New Orleans as “a very loose place” and reported that the South has been “slandered.”³⁸

Following New Orleans, the 94th Regiment left for the Rio Grande with the intent of reaching Brownsville, Texas. Carman was anything but impressed: “The Rio Grande is about the only grand thing down here, (and it is a grand humbug).”³⁹ Upon reaching Brownsville in October, Carman described the area as “. . .homogenous, heterogeneous, and oleaginous. . .Mexico and America are merged.”⁴⁰ The 94th’s duties tapered off while in Brownsville, many men finding their days there monotonous. In Carman’s words, “now, the truth is, we have had, and are having the quietest, dullest time in the world here. . .”.⁴¹

The lull provided Carman the time to begin editing a newspaper, *The Loyal National Union Journal*. The first of eight issues was published March 5, 1864. The opening paragraph boldly states the intention of the publication: “We have started a paper which shall be devoted, so far as we can make it, to the interests of the army, the people, and the election of Abraham Lincoln to the next Presidency of our noble Republic.”⁴² Similar to his “Letters from Boswell,” *The Loyal National Union Journal* provided updates from within camp – what the soldiers were up to, gossip, and words of encouragement. The paper, also like Boswell, provided details concerning the weather, the local landscape, the local Mexican population, and women. Lastly, as its opening statement suggests, the newspaper was committed to providing a political agenda that was very pro-war, anti-slavery, and for Lincoln.⁴³

The Loyal National Union Journal published their final issue less than three months later on May 21, 1864, without making any mention that it would be the final publication. There is no definite explanation on why the paper ceased publication after only three months, but there are two likely possibilities. The first feasible reason the publication ceased could be due to the 94th Regiment’s withdrawal from Texas in July 1864. However, the more plausible explanation lies with the editor.

Carman contracted tuberculosis and was discharged from service in June 1864.⁴⁴ Carman made no mention of his illness in any letters or editorials. By December 1864, Carman had returned to Illinois and was delivering lectures on Mexico and the Mexican people.⁴⁵ In the last rediscovered “Letter from Boswell” dated December 28, 1864, Carman was in Decatur, Illinois residing in a boarding house. His disdain was obvious:

“Must men continue to suffer double martyrdom at the cost of seven dollars per week? Is it strange that the world is filled with hasty, and unhappy marriages—with husbands and wives

³⁷ Boswell. “Letter from Boswell.” *The Pantagraph*. August 5, 1863

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Boswell. “Letter from Boswell.” *The Pantagraph*. February 26, 1864

⁴⁰ Boswell. “Letter from Boswell.” *The Pantagraph*. January 26, 1864

⁴¹ Boswell. “Letter from Boswell.” *The Pantagraph*. July 4, 1864

⁴² “The Union Journal.” *The Loyal National Union Journal*. March 5, 1864.

⁴³ Marten, James. “For the Army, the People, and Abraham Lincoln: A Yankee Newspaper in Occupied Texas.” *Civil War History* 39, no. 2 (1993): 126-147.

⁴⁴ J. N. Reece. *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Illinois Volume V. Military and Naval Dept*: Internet Archive. Springfield, IL, Phillips Bros., State printers [etc.], January 1, 1970.

⁴⁵ Unknown Author. “Boswell’s Lectures.” *The Pantagraph*. December 9, 1864

struggling in the grip of poverty? Not at all. Man is willing to meet any fate under the promise of escaping from boarding house life."⁴⁶

No further writings or records have been rediscovered from Carman following this period, but from his obituary, it is gathered his disease started to take a toll on his body; "...he worked, when he could, at the case, wrote much, and for a short time last summer was associate editor, but found that his strength was not equal to the arduous duties."⁴⁷ The obituary tells that in the winter of 1867, Carman had given up the hopes of making a recovery and spoke freely of his imminent death and his regrets; "...he said that his only regret was that he could not live longer to do more good than he had done, and see the fulfillment of some of the aims for which he had spent his whole life preparing."⁴⁸

George G. Carman passed away calmly at the young age of 29 on May 19, 1868.⁴⁹ His funeral gathered those who knew him well and others who respected the work he had accomplished. Although young with the promise of fame, Carman was laid to rest at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. "*And so he lived—and thus he died.*"⁵⁰

By: Kate Bass, 2021

⁴⁶ Boswell. "Letter from Boswell." *The Pantagraph*. December 31, 1864

⁴⁷ "Obituary." *The Pantagraph*. May 23, 1868.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ *McLean County Cemeteries, Bloomington Township, Rural Cemeteries and Old City Cemetery*, 28.

⁵⁰ "Obituary." *The Pantagraph*. May 23, 1868.