

Transcript
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**Michigan Radio Stateside Interview with Cynthia Canty, Steve Ostrander and Eric Hemenway | Company K**

**Cynthia Canty:** The Civil War saw tens of thousands of Michiganders join up to preserve the Union and to end slavery. But do you know about Company K of the 1st Michigan Sharp Shooters?

It’s Wednesday. Time to talk our state’s history with our partners at the Michigan History Center. With us today, the History Center’s Steve Ostrander. Hi, Steve.

**Steve Ostrander:** Hi. How are you?

**Cynthia Canty:** Always good to talk history. And we’re always happy to welcome Eric Hemenway to Stateside. Director of Archives and Records for the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians. Eric, welcome back!

**Eric Hemenway:** Good afternoon.

**Cynthia Canty:** Always happy to talk with you. Oh, so, Eric who were the soldiers of Company K?

**Eric Hemenway:** Well, Company K was comprised of Anishaanabek from primarily the Lower Peninsula of Michigan. There was a few Yoopers, a few Upper Peninsula Anishinaabek – Ojibwes - but the vast majority of them were Odawa and Ojibwe and some Potawatomi from areas we know today as Cross Village, Good Hart, Saginaw, Traverse City. So, they were from Odawa and Ojibwe communities.

**Cynthia Canty:** And how many are we talking about in Company K?

**Eric Hemenway:** There was 139 enlisted men in Company K and only one Anishinaabek officer; that was Garrett Graveraet.

**Cynthia Canty:** And how did the company get formed? Was there a concerted effort to say “Let’s bring in Anishinaabek soldiers” or was this kind of a self-generated thing?

**Eric Hemenway:** It was a self-generated movement from the Anishinaabek within Michigan. They tried to muster at the beginning of the war, and they were denied. And there was a lot of animosity and lot of discrimination against Native people at this time. And there was a lot of stereotypes that Natives were barbaric, they were blood-thirsty, they cannot be controlled in battle therefore they weren’t wanted. There was a lot of hard feelings left over from the previous war, the War of 1812. And a lot of men in Company K, their Ancestors fought in that war against the Americans.

**Cynthia Canty:** That would make sense. And, Steve, we kind of saw this pattern through the Civil War and subsequent wars, didn’t we? Where there would be soldiers seen as the ‘other’ soldiers of color, Japanese American soldiers in World War II, certainly Native Americans who hit roadblocks when they tried to serve.

**Steve Ostrander:** Yeah, they did hit a huge roadblock, as Eric said. They were basically told that the Army was not accepting any Indians. But by 1863, the Union losses were mounting. The war was really not going that well for the Union. So, they decided to finally give these Native Americans who had volunteered, to give them a chance. They formed up a company, as Eric said, of about 140. By all accounts they were excellent shots. In fact, some of the white soldiers that volunteered for the 1st Michigan Sharp Shooters for the other companies were really not very good shots, but these Native Americans were excellent shots. They were excellent hunters and I think that they had to hit a 5-inch target at 100 yards, or something like that. And all the Native Americans could do it.

So, they formed up. They took their basic training and they did guard duty at the arsenal at Fort Wayne. And finally, in 1863 they were finally allowed to go into action. And they were sent to the campaign in Virginia. The fought at the Battle of the Wilderness and they fought at Spotsylvania.

**Cynthia Canty:** Which were major battles. Eric, Company K became known for using tactics which might be considered standard in modern warfare, but at that time in the 1860s, these tactics were considered unconventional. How so?

**Eric Hemenway:** They used tactics that had been learned from their Ancestors. And these were tactics that the French and British and the Americans would pick up on during the French and Indian War and the War of 1812, the Revolutionary War. And these were tactics of hit and run, of ambushing, of trying to sustain as little damage as possible while inflicting as much damage. So, they would use camouflage. They would not march in a line, straight into the enemy. They would use small units and they were skirmishers, the Sharp Shooters and often they were the tip of the spear, the first going into battle. And they would use a lot of their hunting skills as well, being crack shots, using stealth and using their environment. And one of the accounts noted Company K had these Anishinaabek men - they saw they were wearing these blue uniforms and they would start putting leaves and other camouflage from their environment on their outfits so they would be less visible.

**Cynthia Canty:** So, as we talk about battle - and we’re talking, you mentioned Spotsylvania, the Battle of the Wilderness and then that nine-month long siege at Petersburg, Virginia - Company K really did see some major action. And I am wondering, I thinking of the film *Glory*, which showed us the story of 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, United States first all African American regiment, who went beyond the beyond to show courage and basically got annihilated in an unsuccessful siege of a fort in Carolina. How did the soldiers of Company K comport themselves and what did they do that maybe set them apart?

**Steve Ostrander:** During the sieges of Petersburg, the Union command had the idea to try to breach the Confederate defenses by digging a tunnel. They went as far as they could and then they set explosive charges under there. So, they finally exploded the charges which blew a huge crater in the earth. And then everybody was kind of stunned on both sides, nobody expected this huge explosion and this huge crater that resulted from it. Then the Union command ordered, pretty much, all the troops there to charge and they charged through the crater, which was a deep hole in the ground. And unfortunately, it went very badly for the Union and for Company K, who were involved in the charge. They were like sitting ducks in the crater and the Confederates just rained fire down on them. And they all sustained huge casualties in the crater.

**Cynthia Canty:** Eric, they were singing their death songs?

**Eric Hemenway:** Yes. During the confusion and the mayhem, from what I gather, the - all the African American soldiers and the Native American soldiers were ordered into the crater, the worst possible place to be after the assault. It became essentially shooting fish out of a barrel. And the accounts of the carnage, that the blood was four, five inches deep in the crater. And people were just being slaughtered and in the midst of all this carnage, several Anishinaabek were mortally wounded. And as they were realizing their fate, they gathered in a circle and pulled their blouses over their head and stared to chant their death song. And soldiers on both sides seen this and it’s filtering back to us from different sources of this remarkable feat that is occurring in the middle of battle, that these Native men are singing. It’s their last song on this earth and they know this. And this is an ancient rite that has been passed down from their Ancestors. And I would also like to note that there is a man of particular valor, Antoine Scott, who is in the crater at the time. And he was one of the last to leave the crater. He was from Pentwater, Michigan and he was an Odawa. And he was recommended for the Medal of Honor twice during his service during the Civil War, but never received it. And one of the times he was mentioned for the Medal of Honor was at the crater.

**Cynthia Canty:** Wow. And couple of other names, Eric, that have kind of stood out to us. Big Tom Kechittigo and Garrett Graveraet, what did these two men do?

**Eric Hemenway:** Big Tom was, from my understanding, sort of the muscle of the company. He kept guys in line. There were some disciplinary issues and when there were, they called on Big Tom. Tom could speak some English and the vast majority of Company K could not speak English. They spoke Anishinaabemowin. So, there were some language barriers within the Union. And when there were issues, they called Big Tom. And Tom was noted for his size and Tom would keep people in order. And Garrett is a very interesting character in Company K in the sense that he was the only Native officer, but he also came from a family of somewhat influence. His father was non-Native and he ran a successful business up in Mackinaw. Garrett was a schoolteacher. He taught music in Harbor Springs. And he didn’t have to join up. He had a life that was set up for him, but he decided to join anyway and serve. And he could have served in a non-Native regiment, but he decided he wanted to serve with his Native brethren. That’s what he did, and he died at the Battle of the Wilderness.

**Cynthia Canty:** Steve, I am interested how the soldiers of Company K were received by white Union soldiers throughout the war.

**Steve Ostrander:** Well, I think, unfortunately, they were probably received pretty much like the Black troops of the 54th were received. But there were some notations by officers that noted that they were - they were excellent soldiers. And that they were, you know, very good soldiers. They were good shots, you know. They were sharp shooters and they served bravely. And, I think, that is the story that we want to remember. That they were as good or better than the rest of the troops and they served with bravery.

**Cynthia Canty:** Eric, how many of the 140 made it home to Michigan after the war?

**Eric Hemenway:** Roughly over half. Considering the time, a fair number went back home. But once they returned home, many of them did not receive a hero’s welcome. They were dealing with the same discrimination and the same issues that were plaguing Native communities before they left. I believe that the men of Company K were also fighting for a separate battle, that of equality and that of legal rights. Many of the men who fought in Company K, their communities had just negotiated a major treaty in 1855 with the United States to avoid removal to Kansas. So, only ten years previous, the United States is looking to remove all of these tribes out of Michigan. And they went through these large legal battles and negotiated these treaties to stay in their homelands. And ten years later they are fighting for the Union.

**Cynthia Canty:** Hmm.

**Eric Hemenway:** And I would also like to note that during the time that Company K is in the thick of these battles down at Petersburg and Spotsylvania, there is another war being waged out West against Native people. And in 1864 you have the Sand Creek Massacre, where over 200 women and children are killed by the Union army. And you also have the largest mass execution in United States history in Minnesota with the Lakota Wars, where 39 Lakota men were hung. And so, there’s a lot of moving parts within Indian Country in the 1860s within the United States. And amidst all of this, here’s Company K fighting with the Black soldiers, with the white soldiers, dying with them at these horrendous battles while their brethren out West are having a different war.

**Cynthia Canty:** Is there any monument to Company K in Michigan?

**Eric Hemenway:** Not that I am aware of. There is a 1st Michigan Sharp Shooters monument outside the capitol, but not one for Company K specifically.

**Cynthia Canty:** Sounds like somebody needs to get on that. What a fascinating story. I am so glad you were with us to share the story of Company K of the 1st Michigan Sharp Shooters. We have been talking with Eric Hemenway, Director of Archives and Records for the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians and with Steve Ostrander of the Michigan History Center. Thanks to both of you.

**Steve Ostrander:** Thank you.

**Eric Hemenway:** Thank you.