

Wausau had a role in Civil War

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We don't know much about Burton Millard.

We know he was a Wausau politician, community leader and businessman in the region's early days, assuming leadership roles in the 1850s and '60s, all before his 33rd birthday.

We also know that he died at the age of 34, in the woods or fields of Virginia.

We know that 150 years ago tomorrow, he was called to serve in the War Between the States, which began with a Confederate Army attack on Fort Sumter in Charleston, S.C.

And we know that Millard was the first Marathon County man killed in that war.

Did he ever meet another Wausau man, Caster Fenhaus, a Prussian immigrant who also served in the Civil War and still has relatives in Marathon County? What did Millard do and where did he go during his 11 months of service before he died? Was he killed instantly, or did he, like many Civil War soldiers, succumb to an awful death of amputation, infection and disease?

We'll probably never know the answers to all those questions. But we know that he was among 620,000 Union and Confederate soldiers whose lives were taken in a war that deeply divided the country — a war that began April 12, 1861, when Confederate Brig. Gen. P.G.T. Beauregard ordered his canon to open fire in Charleston Harbor.

Wausau enlists

When Beauregard's batteries opened fire, Wausau had been in existence for little more than 20 years. Millard, a New York native, was 24 when he came to Wausau in 1852 and opened a machine shop as loggers began clearing the expansive woodlands along the Wisconsin River.

According to the Marathon County Historical Society, Millard was elected Marathon County sheriff in 1854 and served through 1855. In 1856-57, he served as Marathon County coroner and was elected in 1858 to the state

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COURTESY MARATHON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Prussian immigrant Casper Fenhaus fought for three years in the Civil War before he settled in the Wausau area.

War

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Assembly.

"In the early days, with the small amount of people here, it seems (Millard) was quite an influential man in the city considering his elected posts," Marathon County Historical Society Librarian Gary Gisselman said.

After the Fort Sumter attack, two Wausau residents took to the streets with a fife and drum and broke news of the battle. Millard and five other Wausau-area men enlisted in the U.S. Army on May 1, 1861, and he was assigned to the Fifth Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry Regiment as a commissary sergeant.

They were part of a stunning local commitment to the war effort. Marathon County, which included the area that is now Lincoln County, was home to 2,892 residents in 1860, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Fully 10 percent of the county's population — 286 residents — served in the Civil War, according to Louis Marchetti's book on Marathon County's history, published in 1913.

According to a 1937 edition of the Wausau Record-Herald, 360 Civil War veterans are buried in Marathon County — and the newspaper named all of them.

Millard's isn't among those names. On April 7, 1862, Millard was serving on picket duty — essentially standing watch — at Lee's Mill, Va., when a Confederate bullet crashed into his body.

He's buried in Virginia today, the first Marathon County casualty of the war.

Settling down

Jerry Kluetz, 68, of Weston grew up hearing stories that Caster Fenhaus, his great-great-grandfather, fought in the American Civil War. But it wasn't until Kluetz was married and began talking to family members who live in Springfield, Ill. — Abraham Lincoln's hometown — that he began researching his family lineage.

Fenhaus emigrated from Prussia with his family as

a 13-year-old in 1854 and settled near Milwaukee. He joined the first regiment of the Wisconsin Volunteer Cavalry in 1861 and fought in 60 battles or skirmishes during three years, according to a 1927 story published in the Wausau Record-Herald about his death at age 86.

Fenhaus had a startlingly important role in the war. He was a scout for famed Union Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman, the eventual commander of the entire U.S. Army, and belonged to the unit that captured Confederate President Jefferson Davis.

After the war, Caster Fenhaus settled in the town of Berlin, northwest of Wausau. Kluetz said he doesn't know why Fenhaus chose to come to Marathon County, but Fenhaus quickly became a local leader. Fenhaus was a prominent farmer, school teacher and postmaster who eventually moved to Wausau, where he was involved with St. Stephen's Church.

Kluetz admitted that he wouldn't know much about the Civil War if it weren't for his family connection. Though his great-great-grandfather has been dead for 83 years, Kluetz has a sense of pride in his family history.

"It means an awful lot to have someone fighting for our cause and for what we believed in," Kluetz said.

Fenhaus is buried in a mausoleum in the Pine Grove Cemetery in Wausau. A local post of the Grand Army of the Republic, comprised of former Civil War veterans, erected a monument in the cemetery with the GAR badge carved in its granite. The monument is surrounded by the weather-worn graves of six Civil War veterans.

Kluetz said he is disappointed that the Civil War hasn't been featured much on television shows or in the media as the anniversary approaches. Kluetz said he sometimes questions if Americans will ever completely overcome prejudice and racial intolerance that was rampant during the slavery era, but thinks significant progress has been made.

"The fact we elected a black president, I think Mr. Lincoln would be happy," Kluetz said.