

Hartley's Two Colonels

Howard Borchard

In reviewing Hartley's veterans, it appears that there have been only two with the rank of Colonel.

Colonel Erwin B. Messer

“Colonel Erwin B. Messer was born in Vermont in 1838 and died in Hartley in 1916. By 1857, he had moved to Illinois. Several years later he and his twin brother enlisted in Co. F 37th Illinois Volunteers Infantry Division of the Union Army. Erwin was named Company Commander. His company fought in the battles of Pea Ridge and Prairie Grove, Arkansas in 1862. Pea Ridge was considered a pivotal battle of the Civil War. He then went to St. Louis and from there to the Battle of Pilot Knob in Missouri. His next battle was Vicksburg. After the fall of the city and its surrender by General Pemberton, he then went to Yazoo City, Mississippi, and remained there until 1864 when the Union forces burned most of the buildings in the city.

During the summer of 1863, while he and his twin brother were in Vicksburg, their aged father paid them a visit. Unfortunately, he was taken sick and was treated by the army physicians. He recovered sufficiently to return home, where he died shortly after his arrival in Illinois.”

(From O'Brien and Osceola Counties History by Peck and Montzheimer, 1914)

“In 1865, he raised another company in Chicago and was promoted to Lt. Colonel. This company, part of the 156th Regiment of the Illinois Volunteers, was the last Union regiment to leave Chicago before the war ended.

His wife, Eliza, made three journeys into the field with her young and dashing officer husband. Officer's wives often followed the armies. She was with the Union forces in Dalton, Georgia when General Lee surrendered.

After the war, Colonel and Mrs. Messer lived in Chicago for several years and then moved to Hartley where he operated a hardware store until his death in 1916.”

(From *The Greeley Daily Tribune*, March, 18, 1938)

Erwin, commonly referred as Colonel Messer, was in business for many years with his son, Jay. They sold hardware and in later years sold farm machinery and had a franchise for Buick automobiles. They built the Messer Block, as it was named, on the west side of Main Street with offices on the second floor including offices for Doctor Sherbon.

The building exists today and is easily identified as it has Messer and Son etched in the concrete at the top of the building. Colonel Messer operated the business until his death in 1916 and his son Jay, managed the business until 1932.

Colonel Marvin Kruse

Hartley's other Colonel graduated from Hartley High School and then received a degree in engineering from Iowa State University in 1933 along with an R.O.T.C. Army Reserve Commission as a Second Lieutenant.

During World War II he served five years active duty. Three years of those were spent in the South Pacific Islands. Most of his active duty years were devoted to command of troops in the 43rd Engineer Regiment and the 864th Engineer Aviation Battalion. He utilized his engineering expertise by building roads, airports, hospitals, and water supply facilities.

In August of 1942, the Japanese landed at Milne Bay in New Guinea where he was stationed. American forces met the Japanese forces at the most southern part of the island and turned them back. The Battle of Milne Bay was the first time Japanese ground forces had been defeated. Colonel Kruse always felt it was the turning point of the war in the Pacific.

He was decorated with a Silver Star and a Bronze Star medal. He returned from active duty in 1946.

(Information provided by LaVonne Hansen)

He spent his working years with Kruse, Cate and Nelson Engineering at Spencer.