

“Battles Long Ago”

A Hoosier Civil War Veteran and His Memoir of Service in the Western Theater

GEORGE P. CLARK

The author of this memoir, Louis Bir, was a prominent businessman and community leader of New Albany, Indiana, at the time of his death, at the age of 80, March 6, 1923. Like so many soldiers of the Civil War, he was still a green teenager when he enlisted in Indiana's 93rd Infantry Regiment in 1862, but very much a seasoned veteran when he returned home at war's end in 1865. There was little to keep him in the farming community where he was raised, the namesake of his French immigrant father, but there was much to attract a clever young man who

George P. Clark is professor emeritus of English, Hanover College, Hanover, Indiana. He is the editor of "Through Indiana by Stagecoach and Canal Boat: The 1843 Travel Journal of Charles H. Titus," *Indiana Magazine of History*, 85 (September 1989), and has contributed to *Traces of Indiana and Midwestern History*. He writes:

"For courtesies and permission to edit and print the manuscript, I am indebted to the late Mrs. Robert Zoeller, great-granddaughter of Louis Bir, to her daughter, Marilyn Wellons, and to Vicki (Mrs. Robert) Blemker, Bir's great-great-grandchild. Mrs. Blemker offered her full cooperation and has supplied much useful information, including photographs of the young corporal (mispelled long ago: "Lewis" Bir) and of the aging veteran and his family in his 60th year. My heartfelt thanks to Lynn Ruef, manager, Betty Menges, assistant manager, Cynthia Forman, and others of the Indiana History Department of the New Albany-Floyd County Public Library for their many courtesies. Thanks also to Dawn Bakken and the editorial staff of the *IMH* for their scrupulous attention to the production of this article. Finally, I am most grateful for the unfailing encouragement and assistance of my wife, Shirley Ellen Clark, without whom I would have been unable to complete this project."

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The tombstone of Louis Bir père in Floyd County, Indiana. A French immigrant, he died when his son and namesake was only seven years old.

Courtesy George P. Clark

had witnessed the expansion of Ohio River commerce during the war. In those years New Albany, just below the Falls of the Ohio and only a dozen miles from his birthplace, had become a major supply and ship-building port and the second-largest city in the state. And Bir recognized it as a still-important riverine commercial center where he could exercise his industry and shrewdness in establishing a business of his own. Success was not to come quickly, however, to a landless veteran, soon married and with children, but with little grammar school education.



By his 60th year, Bir was a prosperous New Albany businessman with an extended family. From left to right: Louis Bir, grandson Harry, wife Sophia, son E. M., grandson James, and daughter-in-law Nellie.

Courtesy Vicki Blemker

There is no information available about his immediate postwar years, but his later career in business argues that he was industrious and acquiring capital in New Albany. In *Williams' New Albany Directory For 1871-72*, one finds Louis Bir as the proprietor of one of the city's several dozen bakeries serving its more than 15,000 citizens. Ten years later he was well established in New Albany as the owner of a sawmill that processed lumber rafted downriver from West Virginia and Kentucky. Raised in the heavily wooded hills above the city, he had observed as a soldier the importance of the lumber industry in supplying material for camps and fortifications. And back home he noted the many mills providing lumber for the shipbuilding that flourished on the Ohio River waterfront. A brief, unpublished note, "History of Bir Lumber Co. 1883 to Present [1954]," written by his grandson, Harry E. Bir, chronicles Louis's success in business as he became sole owner of Bir Lumber Company and diversified into real estate and the important glass-making industry in New Albany. His obituary noted his wartime service and

observed, "He was widely known here, and was considered one of the city's most substantial business men."¹

Louis Bir's account of his Civil War has been preserved by his descendants in its original form as 39 loosely bound manuscript pages pencilled many years after the war on the backs of 8 1/2" x 11" printed business forms at hand in his office. In 1961, a typescript in solid capital letters (to avoid capitalization problems) was made by Mrs. Harry E. Bir, wife of a grandson of the author. About 30 years later, Bir's granddaughter, Jeanne Bir Needham, typed the document with largely conventional spelling and punctuation. In recent years the manuscript, in family possession, has deteriorated somewhat. Missing text has had to be supplied from the 1961 typescript.

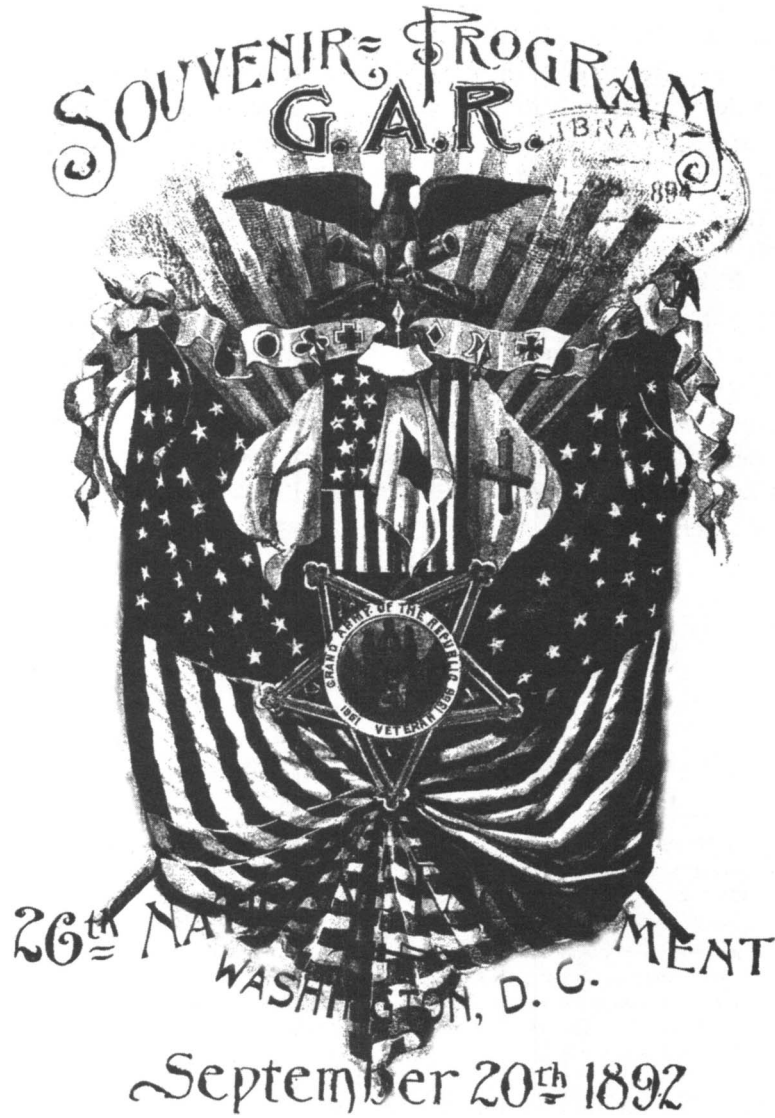
Bir wrote fluently with little self-correction. The greatest problem in bringing his writing to the printed page is his disregard for the niceties of spelling and capitalization. Totally faithful reproduction of his spelling seems hardly possible. It is no revelation that most soldiers, North and South, had minimal writing experience. The value of Bir's memoir is that even though composed many years after the war, it presents with fidelity the experiences and attitudes of a youthful volunteer from southern Indiana who participated in several significant contests of the Civil War, including the Siege of Vicksburg and the Battle of Nashville.

Bir carefully notes the place and date of garrison assignments and "Expeditions" against the cavalry of Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest, the *bête noire* of the Union Army. He uniformly identifies units involved and the names of their commanders, and offers details of troop movements by land and water. He names some fifty towns and villages and battlefields scattered among the nine states of the Western Theater where he soldiered. And he gives these details with the immediacy one might expect in an account fresh upon the experience of battle.

Bir, an active member of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR, the Union Veterans' association), attended its Twenty-sixth National Encampment at Washington, D.C., September 19-23, 1892. His experience there may have inspired his writing.² Interspersed in his memoir

¹*New Albany Weekly Ledger*, March 7, 1923, p. 8

²Bir probably also attended the Twenty-ninth National Encampment at Louisville, Kentucky, in 1895.



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A souvenir program from the 1892 national GAR encampment that Bir attended in
Washington, D.C.
Courtesy George P. Clark

are numerous notes to himself such as “Here Relate the Incident of Camp duty” and asides such as “This is a Little Side Show now and you Fellows out to tell on me for this.” They clearly indicate that Bir did not consider this manuscript complete, for many experiences remained to be narrated. The scattered hints are persuasive that he intended oral delivery of at least a part of his memoir, for as an active member of the local GAR post for many years he would have had numerous occasions to speak.³

Bir’s specific recall of so many historic events is certainly due to the deep impression they made upon him. But it also seems probable that his narrative is enriched not only by years of exchanging yarns with his buddies at the New Albany Post of the GAR, but also by reading magazine and newspaper accounts by other veterans, and possibly the books of leaders North and South in immediate decades after the war.⁴ Bir is not known to have kept a diary of his wartime experiences or to have done other writing.



³James H. Madison has written informatively on the significance of the GAR in the lives of aging veterans. Madison, “Civil War Memories and ‘Partnership Forgittin’,’ 1865-1913,” *Indiana Magazine of History* (September 2003), 207-208.

⁴For example, U. S. Grant’s *Personal Memoirs*, 1885; W. T. Sherman’s *Memoirs of W. T. Sherman by Himself*, 1891; Thomas Jordan’s *The Campaigns of Lieut.-Gen. N. B. Forrest and of Forrest’s Cavalry*, 1868; John B. Gordon’s *Reminiscences of the Civil War*, 1903; James Longstreet’s *From Manassas to Appomattox*, 1896; the compilation *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 1887; W. H. Terrell’s *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Indiana*, begun in 1866; and perhaps the *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*, begun in 1880.