

## The most Talked About Man in the Country



*E. E. Dummer*

On Friday, May 24, 1861 as the country was rushing into the quagmire that would be the Civil War, President Lincoln received two visitors: a Senator and a New York Herald reporter. Years later the reporter gave this account of the occasion. “. . . as we entered the library we observed Mr. Lincoln before a window, looking out across the Potomac. . . . He did not move until we approached very closely, when he turned round abruptly, and advanced toward us, extending his hand: “Excuse me,” he said, “but I cannot talk.” . . . Then to our surprise the President burst into tears, and concealed his face in his handkerchief. . . . After composing himself somewhat, Mr. Lincoln sat down and invited us to him. “I will make no apology, gentlemen,” he said, “for my weakness; but I knew poor Ellsworth well, and held him in great regard.”

The man Lincoln mourned that day was born Ephraim Elmer Ellsworth, Jr. on April 11, 1837 in Malta, N.Y. to Ephraim Ellsworth and Phoebe Denton Ellsworth. At age 15, he changed the order to Elmer Ephraim, thus sparing countless numbers of post Civil War boys being named Ephraim. Elmer's paternal grandfather, George Ellsworth a Halfmoon resident joined the Continental Army at age 15, in response to Burgoyne's invasion and was present at the surrender after the Battle of Saratoga. His mother Phoebe came from an early Stillwater and Malta family whose descendents still live in our area.

Elmer was born in the Rogers Hotel which stood for many years on the southwest corner of Rts. 9 and 67, site of the present dinner. His father was a tailor, and worked at his trade over the store opposite the hotel, site of the current Pavilion. 1837, the year of his birth, saw a national banking crises which led to a five year depression throughout the country. The tailoring trade was particularly hard hit, as people had not forgotten how to produce "home spun" and Ephraim had to sell oysters on consignment, help others at butchering, and net pigeons in order to feed his family. The family also took in boarders. For the rest of his life Elmer appeared haunted by the poverty of his parents and dreamed of providing them with a life of ease. Three years after his birth, his only sibling, Charles was born.

Around 1850 the family relocated in Mechanicville, an area quickly becoming a transportation and manufacturing center that would have offered a tailor more opportunity than rural Malta. It is also at this time that that some distinct but disparate elements of Elmer's personality began to emerge. On the one hand, he had a tremendous zeal for military pageantry and dreamed of entering West Point. Perhaps tales of his grandfather's role in the American Revolution inspired this ambition. He organized a military company of local boys, "The Black Plumed Riflemen" and led them in drills in the Stillwater area. The drilling seems to have involved gymnastic elements, illustrated by the story of a "human ladder" used to enter the

second story of a village store as a prank. This combination of close order drill and strenuous exercise would later attract Elmer to the Zouave movement and the Black Plumed Knights would not be the last military group that Elmer would train. However, these romantic dreams clashed with the reality of the family's ongoing privation and Elmer's education soon ended when he took a job selling papers on the Mechanicville to Troy train. At age 21 he wrote "My life has been a constant struggle between duty and inclination". For the rest of his short life, he would be torn by the desire for fame and the need of providing a comfortable living for himself and his parents.

At age 15, the pace of his life begins to increase. From his connections on the train, he apparently gained a position with Corless & House, in Troy and a few years later he moved to New York City to take a clerk's positions. Clerking proved to tame for his taste, so he left to join a group of engineers working on the channel at Hell's Gate. In 1854 at age 17, the group of engineers moved to Chicago and, after a short trip to his home in Mechanicville, Elmer went with them.

In Chicago, Elmer formed a business partnership with a man who shared his interest in military affairs. While the business did not flourish, eventually going bankrupt, they were quickly involved with the Chicago Cadets of the National Guard. The National Guard of the 1850's was not affiliated with the government but instead composed of men who enjoyed things that go with soldering. They wore striking uniforms of their own design, practiced intensive drills and paraded in competitions on public occasions in front of large crowds throughout the 1840's and 50's. Each group needed an "expert" on drill and military practices and Elmer quickly filled this role, adopting the honorary title of "Captain".

In the mid 1850's the Crimean War captured the attention of these romantic young men. It was the age of the "Charge of the Light Brigade" where young men wore brightly colored uniforms and charged into sure death for King and Country. The French

versions of these modern knights were called ZOUAVES. The name comes from the Zwawas, a Berber tribe in Algeria who fought the French in the 1830's. Some French troops adopted their dress, tactics and drills and attracted great attention. Elmer met a surgeon who had served in a Zouave unit and received from him a Zouave manual of arms. By 1857, Ellsworth had written a version of that manual and was being addressed as Major. This at the age of 20.

In April, 1859 he became associated with the United States Zouave Cadets of Chicago and quickly gained acclaim at a July 4 exposition which garnered a great deal of newspaper attention throughout the country. This led to an appointment as Assistant Adjutant General of the State of Illinois with a title of Colonel BUT NO PAY. (The dilemma again). His duties brought him to the capital, Springfield, where he met Lincoln and was invited to the house to meet his family, and eventually, to read law in Lincoln's law office.

The next year the United States Zouaves began a tour of the eastern cities issuing a challenge to all comers for drilling expositions. As the Cadets visited Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Albany and Troy national newspaper coverage increased and by the time they reached New York City the excitement level was reaching a fever pitch. After the first drill, the city could not get enough of the Zouaves. The NY Times headlined their story "The Military Furor" and the Zouaves were the darlings of the City. They appeared for a week at Madison Square Garden and were treated at the best restaurants each evening. Boston and Salem insisted on seeing them and were added to the itinerary at the last minute. From there they went on to Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington, appearing in front of President Buchanan on the White House lawn and then on to Pittsburg, St. Louis and Springfield before returning to Chicago.

By the time they arrived back in Chicago they were heroes and were feted at the Wigwam (where Lincoln had been nominated) and paraded through town. Families were naming

their sons Elmer and according to John Hay, Lincoln's private secretary, "His picture sold like wild fire in every city of the land. School girls dreamed over the graceful wave of his curls." Local Zouave companies sprang up in cities throughout the country. **He had become the most talked of man in the Country.**

He resigned from the Zouaves and moved to Springfield where he reported to the law offices of Lincoln and Herndon, ostensibly to study law, but actually to become involved in the presidential campaign. He proved a popular stump speaker, often speaking twice a day. Apparently he didn't read much law, but soon became a favorite in the Lincoln home with the young boys, as well as a trusted aide to the president elect. After the election, as plans were developed for Lincoln to travel by train to Washington, Ellsworth was put in charge of security. As the train approached a new town the following instruction were sent ahead, "The President-elect will under no circumstances attempt to pass through any crowd until such arrangements are made as will meet with the approval of Col. Ellsworth."

Lincoln wanted Elmer to head up an office of militia and made him a Lieutenant in the Regular Army but before this could become effective, the war began and he wanted nothing to do with a desk job. On April 15, Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers and Elmer resigned his commission and went to New York City to raise a regiment of Zouaves from the New York City fire department. Within five days the Fire Zouaves were organized, 1,100 men enlisted, officers elected and Ellsworth named Colonel and by April 29 the Regiment sailed south where they were federalized as the New York Eleventh Regiment.

Events began to swirl out of control quickly and on May 23 Virginia seceded from the Union and the New York Eleventh was ordered to cross the Potomac the following day to take over the City of Alexandria. Leaving an officer in charge of the regiment, Ellsworth took a party of eight, including Cpl. Frances Brownell of Troy with him to seize the telegraph office. On the way the party spotted a large Confederate flag atop the Marshall House, a

prominent local hotel. The flag was so large that it could be seen from the White House and had been commented on by Lincoln. Ellsworth said “Boys, we must have that down before we return.” and entered the hotel, heading for the roof. They reached the roof, cut the flag down and begins to retrace their steps with Brownell in the lead. As they came to the second landing, James Jackson, the proprietor if the hotel appeared with a double barreled shotgun. Brownell attempted to push it aside but slipped and Jackson’s shot hit Ellsworth in the breast, killing him instantly. Brownell recovered and both shot Jackson in the face and bayoneted him resulting in his death.

On the morning of May 24 Ephraim Ellsworth was in the Mechanicville telegraph office in search of the war news when word arrived of the death of his son. Later that day in Troy, Charles Brownell received a telegram saying “Father: Col. Ellsworth was shot dead this morning. I killed his murdered. Frank”. The next day Lincoln penned a letter to the parents which said in part ”In the untimely loss of your noble son, our affliction here is scarcely less than your own.” The New York Times on May 26 said “Never has a man of Ellsworth’s age commanded such national respect and regard in so short a span.”

Ellsworth’s body was placed on a barge and delivered to the White House where he lay in state in the East Room and a funeral service held the following day, attended by the Lincoln family and many cabinet members. Details of the death and funeral arrangements consumed most of the front page of the NY Times in the two days following. The body was taken by train to New York City where 10,000 people viewed it at City Hall and on to Albany where he was honored in the State Capitol and finally on a special train from Troy to Mechanicville (the same train he used to sell papers on) for burial. Among the mourners who brought the body to the cemetery overlooking the city were the Black Plumed Rifleman of Stillwater.