

Pride For Magnolia In Sarepta

Mississippi's pride and devotion to the Magnolia, with its lustrous green leaves and beautiful, white flower, can be traced back more than 150 years. One of the earliest examples of that devotion comes from Calhoun County.

Jimmy Ball, of Calhoun City, recently shared with me an excerpt from Jim Noles' book, "A Pocketful Of History" – a collection of stories related to the design selection for each of the state quarters in circulation. The Mississippi chapter is entitled "Steel Magnolias" and it wasn't too far into the reading before I realized exactly where Noles was going.

It was the spring of 1861 and Mississippi had just three months prior become the second state to secede from the union as the onset of the

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Civil War was undeniable. Companies of troops began coming together all over the state to prepare for the fight.

In the small town of Sarepta, in northern Calhoun County, dozens of farmers, tradesmen and laborers gathered and elected John M. Lyles as their commanding officer. The group settled on a nickname that demonstrated the pride Mississippians had in the fragrant white blossom – the Magnolia Guards.

They joined the 17th Mississippi Infantry Regiment at Corinth and were redesignated "Company K." They were soon on their way to Virginia where they would get their first taste of many battles to come at the famous Bull Run.



The next memorable fight came at Ball's Bluff near Leesburg where Colonel Winfield Featherston said the 17th "reserved their fire until within the most effective range; then pouring it in with deadly effect and rushing forward...without a single halt or waver, until the enemy was literally driven into the river."

The Magnolia Guard of Sarepta helped to capture more than 300 Union sol-

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diers in one of the "most resounding Confederate victories of the war."

The Magnolias would next charge Malvern Hill during the Seven Days Battle outside of Richmond. Close to one-third of the Mississippians were killed or wounded from the "bloody cataract of shell, grape canister, and minie balls" they were showered with by the enemy.

Then came Sharpsburg and Fredricksburg where the Magnolias were once again "in the thick of the fight."

It was at Gettysburg where the Calhoun Countians met their fiercest battle. "Fighting like demons," Noles said they charged into a peach orchard held by Federal troops, only to be heavily out-manned upon penetration. The 17th was forced to retreat that day, headed south under the leadership of Gen. Robert E. Lee where they next took up arms in the Battle of Chickamauga, a Confederate victory.

The bloodiest battle still lie ahead. In November of 1863, the Magnolias were among the troops attacking Fort Sanders near Knoxville.

Ignoring snipers and cannon fire, the Mississippi troops hacked and twisted their way through 150 yards of a tangled abatis. Upon clearing the abatis, the regiments paused only momentarily to regroup before rushing across a patch of open ground toward the fort.

Then they were met by "a six-foot-wide, 10-foot deep ditch, fringed with a network

of wire. Beyond it rose the fort's icy parapet, some 12 feet high. Undaunted, the regiments poured into the ditch, bridging it with their bodies as best they could."

Union troops slung axes, rocks, sticks and anything else at the Mississippians while sharpshooters fired away as well.

"Nowhere in the war was individual example more splendidly illustrated than on that fatal slope and in that bloody ditch," said Confederate artilleryman Edward P. Alexander.

More fighting followed at Wilderness, Spotsylvania Courthouse, Cold harbor and in the Shenandoah Valley. By the time Lee surrendered at Appomattox, the Magnolia Guards had been reduced to seven men – Aaron B. Carter, Henry Calvin, William Greer,

Aaron Phillips, George Tankersly, Jonathan D. Williams, and Kirk H. Chilcoat.

Clifton C. Valentine, a member of the Mississippi Division of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, put together a limited edition book a few years ago entitled "To See My Country Free," which featured the pocket diaries of Magnolia Guardsman Ezekiel Armstrong, Ezekiel Miller and Joseph Miller.

The story of the valor exuded by the Magnolia Guard from Sarepta is another example of why Mississippians take such pride in their "Southern Heritage," ancestry, and the beautiful Magnolia.

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