RALLY

October 27, 2008 Robert W. Dorsey

Yes, -we'II rally round the flag, boys,
Rally once again
Shouting the Battle Cry of Freedom.

The Union Forever!
Hurrah boys, hurrah!

These words were penned in 1862 to rally the Union in a desperate struggle—and literarians were in the thick of history-making events. 1862 was epic in literature with the publication of *Les Miserable;* and it was the year that the Literary Club closed-up shop.

The composer *of Rally Round the Flag* was George Frederick Root, not to be confused with Charlie Root, pitcher for the Chicago cubs, who, seventy years later, served up George Herman Ruth's "called shot" home run in the third game of the 1932 World Series. The Cubs, then as now, could not rally round the flag, and the Yankees swept the series. Banners were flying that day at Wrigley, but not as abundantly as they flew there recently.

Americans have always been flag wavers, but the practice has waxed and waned with the national mood. The U.S. was in the grip of the Great Depression when the Babe's blast occurred, and flags were not as important as putting food on the table. With the coming of World War II, every household searched for a flag to wave, but still not as exuberantly as we wave them today. As a young lad, my duty, on each national holiday was to place our eight small flags across our front porch and at the comers of our modest front yard—and I did so with enthusiasm. But, as soon as the sun went down, I gathered up the 48 star emblems and carefully rolled them up until the next holiday. To fly them everyday would have been unseemly. However, during the Cold War, as Pax Americana blanketed the globe, the stars and stripes—and Mohammed Alt—became the most recognizable images in the world.

During the Viet Nam era, flag sales plummeted and burning flags seemed more popular than saluting them. Sales picked up with the first Gulf War and ballooned after 9-11 when every house, hat, vehicle, and lapel flew a flag. Chinese manufacturers could not keep up with demand. As is the American Way, if something is good, then bigger is better, so huge flags fly at the New York Stock Exchange, Super Bowls and NASCAR events. A company called Superflag emerged and the owner, Ski Demski, created a 255 by 505 feet banner, which was draped on Hoover Dam.

The origin of flags is murky. Vexillogists cite the use of placards of wood and metal in ancient Egypt. I believe the beginning was a Neanderthal's hanging the rear quarters of a wild boar on a pike, topping it with a skull of an adversary, then claiming dominion over all he could see. Surely a bigger Neanderthal with a bigger pike knocked down the first pretender and claimed the territory. Thus the practice of glorifying the capture of the enemy's standard.

The bible makes several mentions of standards, usually in warlike contexts. In the book of Numbers, "The Israelites set out for the first time at the command of (the Lord by) Moses. The standards of the camp of Judah set out company by company." Jeremiah later said, "Declare among nations and proclaim, set up a banner, do not conceal it." Interestingly, the largest modem flag that I encountered in my readings is in Israel, an astounding 2165 x 330 feet.

Roman legions carried small flags called vexillums. Mediaeval monarchies created standards, merging symbols of church and state. The British became the champion flag wavers as they spread the Union Jack over the globe. That stately banner epitomized the notion of combining religious and political symbols on one flag by uniting the crosses of St. George and St. Andrew on the royal ensign or jack. That same imperial symbol flew over the American colonies for a dozen decades before the restless colonials began designing their own. The New England Pine tree flag appealed to heaven, while South Carolina went the other direction with a rattler saying "Don't tread on me." Even as the revolution was unfolding, components of the British ensign appeared in iterations of American flags suggesting ambivalence about remaining in the empire. In John Trumbull's epic painting of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, flags in the background incorporate segments of British banners. With the fervor for independence, flags began appearing with various arrangements of symbols. Regiments of the Continental Army came with their hand-stitched banners. Thirty flags survive from the Revolution. Four were captured by the British on Long Island and sent back to a manor house where they rested until recently when they were auctioned to an unidentified American for 14 million dollars. The English seller magnanimously stated that the flags really belong in the United States— as he hurried to his counting house.

On June 14, 1777, the Continental Congress decreed that the flag of the United States shall have 13 stripes, alternate red and white, with a canton of 13 white stars on a blue field. This edict still left a lot to the imagination of seamstresses, and numerous iterations followed. Francis Hopkinson, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, is credited with design of the first generally recognized American flag. From the outset, it was to be the people's flag without religious or ruling class symbols. The Betsy Ross story gained credence, when in 1870, her grandson, William Camby, came with a paper to the Pennsylvania Historical Society. However, no verifiable evidence has ever been found. In 1814, lawyer and poet, Francis Scott Key, composed the words of the Star Spangled Banner during British bombardment of Fort McHenry. Ironically, the text was set to an English tune, John Stafford Smith's, *Anacreon in Heaven.*

As the country grew, the flag changed, but no dimensional standards were established until 1912. Our literarian, William Howard Taft, as U. S. President, fixed the proportions as one unit to 1.9. The date of his presidential order was October 29, perhaps intentionally honoring The Literary Club's founding date. Our Club crest, which Taft knew well, is topped by a red, white and blue swallow-tail streamer.

Let's return to 1862, that fateful year for the United States, literature, and our Club. The most long-lasting literary accomplishment was *Les Miserable,* described as a great Gothic Cathedral of a book. Victor-Marie Hugo, a prolific writer, lived under several flags. *Les Mis* was published in Brussels. Always challenging misplaced authority, Hugo was exiled from France at one point and lived under the Union Jack in the Channe.1 Islands. Most *of Les Mis* was written on Guernsey. Hugo advocated a united Europe and surely would have welcomed today's blue banner with the circular star pattern. Translated versions *of Les Mis* became popular with both sides in our Civil War, as soldiers, probably including literarians, read it during long boring periods between battles. Our forebears in the Club were fascinated by Hugo. In 1887, Charles Greve wrote a winsome budget piece entitled, *Les Miserable After Hugo.* Job Stevenson, a member elected in 1875, provided the photo portrait of Hugo that has hung in the Club's many locations, and has graced our reception room here since 1930. Look at the portrait and you see the conscience of a nation.

1861 and 1862 saw the exodus of club members to arms. Mythology has it that with the news of the firing on Fort Sumter, the club meeting was adjourned and members began drilling as a unit called the Burnet Rifles. Their wives and sweethearts created the company flag for them to carry into battle. As with most myths, it is part truth. In fact, the Bumet Rifles, initially called the Bumet Artillery Company, was named for the group's organizer, Robert Bumet, a West Pointer. Notables such as Rutherford B. Hayes and John Pope, who became generals in the Union Army, joined the Rifles. Indeed, in his diary entry for April 20, 1861, just seven days after Sumter, Hayes cites drilling with the company. Though they never fought as a unit, fifty-one members of the Club served, with six— or— seven reaching the rank of general. Historian, John Diehl, has chronicled several in past papers. I shall discuss one, George B. McClellan.

Whereas most literarians engaged the war's western campaigns, George B. McClellan went east. His is a controversial story. Second in his class at West Point, cited for bravery in the Mexican War, he was an accomplished engineer and a pretty good writer. McClellan crossed the Atlantic to study troop movements in the Crimean War, after which he published the *Armies of Europe.* Later, he came to Cincinnati as President of The Ohio-Mississippi Railroad. Of course, he was invited to the Literary Club and became a member in 1861— sort of. Almost immediately, at the outbreak of war, he was called to Washington, and had not yet gotten around to paying his five-dollar dues or signing the Club constitution. Many years later, Club Historian, Eslie Asbury, contributed McClellan's dues and he was officially added to the Club roles.

Following the disaster at Bull Run, chaos prevailed. Appointed Major General of the Army of the Potomac, McClellan took the flag and marshaled all his engineering and organizational skills to create defenses for Washington and to shape up a demoralized army. Then the 35-year-old McClellan was appointed commander of all Union forces. At the dawn of his epic year, 1862, McClellan, with Lincoln's persistent nagging, undertook planning of the peninsula campaign, a "sharp and decisive action to capture the Confederate Capitol, Richmond, and end the war."

More than 200,000 men clashed in a series of battles that saw scores of regimental, battalion, brigade, and company flags flying, toppled, captured and recaptured. The four month long campaign produced the most savage fighting to date, with both sides rallying round their flags and mounting enormous losses. The practice of capturing flags reached a fever pitch. In the Civil War, half of the Medals of Honor were awarded for defending the flag or capturing the enemy banners. Most troops carried two flags, their country's and their military unit's. Since companies on both sides were locally recruited, supporters in cities and towns proudly stitched their colors, and they were just as proudly carried into battle in the forward ranks. Many flags were cut up at the war's end as souvenirs. Yet many remain in museums and clubs around the country.

A poignant story, occurring in 1863 at the battle of Fort Wagner, is that of William Henry Carney, a member of the famous 54th Massachusetts Negro Brigade. With his dying breath, Carney said, "I did my duty, boys. The flag never touched the ground."

Although McClellan's forces advanced to within four miles of Richmond, he later retreated, and the campaign was a failure. Abe demoted him. But to his credit, Mac later repulsed Lee at Antietam and gave Lincoln breathing room to issue the Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862, to take effect January 1, 1863. Nonetheless, Lincoln considered McClellan both nettlesome and cautious and relieved him of command. In 1864, Mac resurfaced as the Democratic Party's candidate for president with running mate, George Pendleton of Cincinnati. While it seems ludicrous in retrospect that anyone could challenge Honest Abe and his flag-waving campaign of "don't change horses in the middle of the stream," in fact the two Georges, running on an anti-war platform, did rather well, capturing about 45 percent of the four million votes cast. Most people on both sides were sick of the war. If women, who carry the heaviest heartache, had been allowed to vote, the outcome might have been different—and we might have claimed another literarian as president. But, of course, it was not to be. McClellan continued his distinguished engineering career, became governor of New Jersey, and then wrote a book giving his side of the story.

On December 24, 1900 (yes, Christmas Eve), William Cochran presented his Club paper entitled *The Meanness of McClellan,* a scathing rendering of Mac's checkered record in the war, his pettiness, and his second-guessing. Cochran even cited a letter to his wife, in which Mac considered marching on Washington after Lincoln's second dismissal. Obviously there are multiple facets to all historical figures—and, in fact, to all literarians

Back to the Club's closing: By October of 1862, it was evident that the war would be a long slog and Club membership was depleted. The officers took action to wind up its affairs. Reuben H. Stephenson, a founding member, was to resurrect the Club, when, in his judgment it shall be fit. An inventory was made of Club properties, including Benjamin McConkey's large landscape, now hanging over our mantle. There was no mention of the Bumet Rifle's flag. Had it gone to battle? Where was it?

The Club reconvened in March 1864, after a 16-month hiatus. Still no mention of the flag. The mystery continued. Newspaper clippings from the Museum Center's archives, provided by Rick Kesterman, cite, "On October 18,1890, the Club received from Judge Thew Wright, the banner of the Bumet Rifles, a company of members of the Club who, in 1862, went to the front to fight for the Union. The banner, tattered by the ravages of battles, is preserved in the Club-rooms as one of its most valuable and sacred possessions."

In 1895, a reporter wrote that on October 29, at the annual meeting, "the flag of the Bumet Rifles, which military company was formed in April, 1861, was brought from its resting place and unfurled in the hall." However, Es Asbury, longtime Club historian, wrote that the flag never left the hall. How mysterious! As they say in academe, "More research is required."

The flag indeed has icon status whether or not ever shot at in anger. It was probably six feet by six feet originally and then folded and framed in about 1900. Close inspection reveals hand-painted gold stars on a cotton canton, and faded silk stripes. The 35 stars signify the states at the time, including the Confederacy. This past summer, I sent photos to Textile Preservation Associates. Ms. Cathy Hefner responded with the following advice: Remove the flag from exhibit immediately and place it in the care of a conservator for un-framing and flattening. It may be possible to salvage it and restore it to exhibit quality for about $20,000—and a year's waiting time. Obviously no action has been taken. In my fifteen years in the Club, I have not noticed any further deterioration of the flag. But then, I have not noticed any further aging of the Club membership, either.

A wonderful restoration of Civil War colors is the flag of the 10th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, which hangs at the Museum Center. The flag commemorates that unit's several engagements under General William Haines Lytle, including Chickamauga, where the 37-year-old Cincinnatian was killed. The Lytle family once owned the land now occupied by our Club. Had General Lytle lived, he surely would have become a member. He was already a published poet, author of the popular, "Address of Antony to Cleopatra." Three of his family, including our current colleague, Virginius Hall, became members. A reduced photo rendering of the Lytle flag is shown here this evening, thanks to Rick Kesterman. It has, among other symbols, an eagle and a harp, the latter denoting the Irish Brigade. The Lytle flag demonstrates that damaged flags can be saved. We will keep the image in the club for a time for members' viewing.

The significance of flags was evident on April 14,1865, when the Union reclaimed Fort Sumter. General Robert Anderson, brother of literarian, Larz Anderson, had been commander four years earlier when Sumter fell. To celebrate reclaiming the ramparts, General Anderson raised the Stars and Stripes as the band play *Rally Round the Flag.* Had he been there, George Frederick Root surely would have been proud. Although he composed a remarkable 28 Civil War songs, *Rally* was the most popular.

In 1954, Max Shulman resurrected the song as the title for his book that poked fun at American foibles. It became a movie, staring the late Paul Newman. A scene in the book has advertising executives discussing a campaign idea. One says, "Let's fly it up the flagpole and see if anyone salutes."

So, I am flying an idea about our historical banner. Shall we restore the Flag of the Burnet Rifles? A difficult issue. The Board of Management will take the matter under discussion. All ideas are welcome.

We are marching to the field, boys,
We 're going to the fight,
Shouting the Battle Cry of Freedom
And we bear the glorious stars
For the Union and the right.
Shouting the Battle Cry of Freedom!