

A Profile of Walter William Gorthy (1882-1930)

MISSAUKEE PIONEER

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Walter Gorthy (1844–1930)

[Walter Gorthy appears briefly in newspaper accounts and Fred Hirzel's notes, but Hirzel wrote no profile of him. Yet the colorful details of his life sketch a notable narrative that's worth telling.]

Walter William Gorthy was born 24 October 1844 in Lancashire, England; he immigrated as a toddler with his parents in 1848. His younger brother Orlando was born in New York. At age 6, in 1850, Walter's family was living in Carlisle, Lorain County, Ohio.

In 1860, as the Civil War approached, Walter was 16 and living on the family homestead in Victor, Clinton County, Michigan.³³ In August of 1862, when Walter was 17 (he later claimed to have been 14 and lied about his age), he enlisted in the Union army.³⁴ He enlisted at St. Johns, Michigan as a Private in Company G, 23rd Infantry.

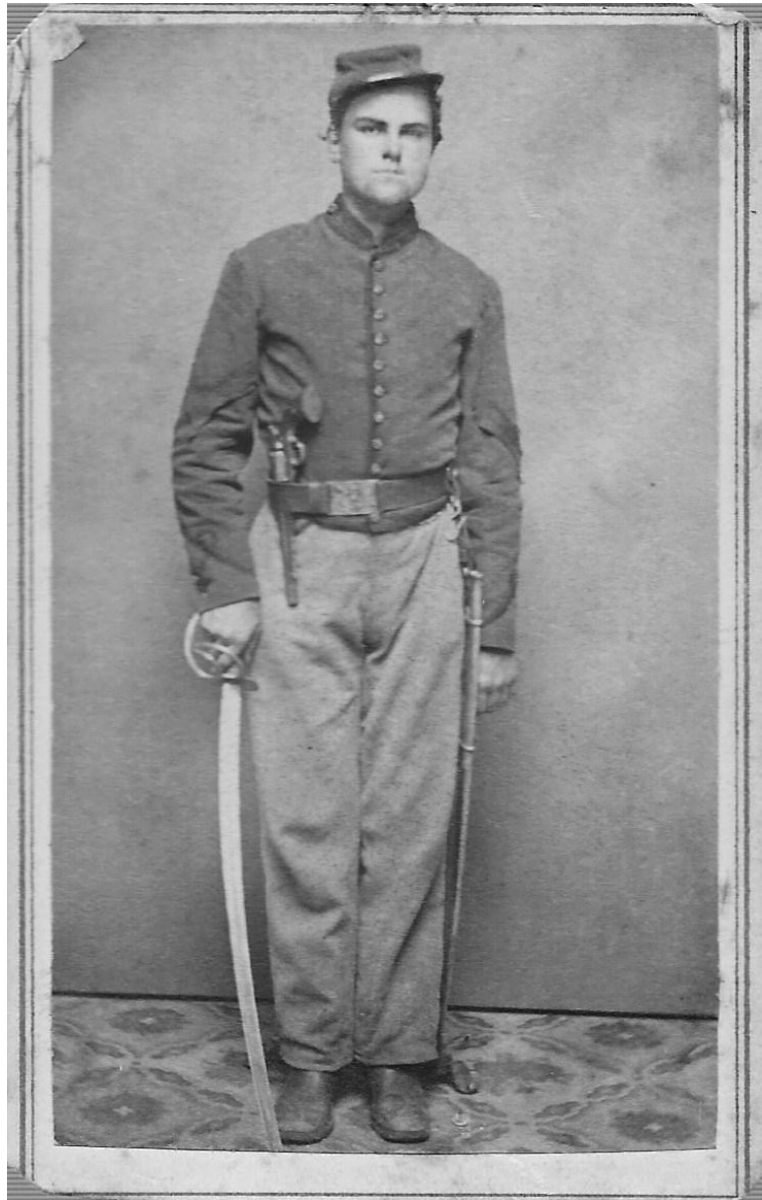
He was in the East Tennessee campaign under Ambrose Burnside, and at the siege of Knoxville in late 1863, Walter contracted and survived typhoid fever.³⁵

He helped capture Atlanta in July 1864. He served under William Rosecrans, William Tecumseh Sherman, and George Thomas. He served Thomas in the battle of Nashville in December 1864, going from there with Thomas to Washington DC.

During his three years of fighting, Mr. Gorthy was never wounded, though balls passed through his clothing, some grazing his flesh.³⁶

Black Horse Cavalry

By 1865, as the war was closing, Walter transferred to the Black Horse Cavalry, serving as an orderly at the



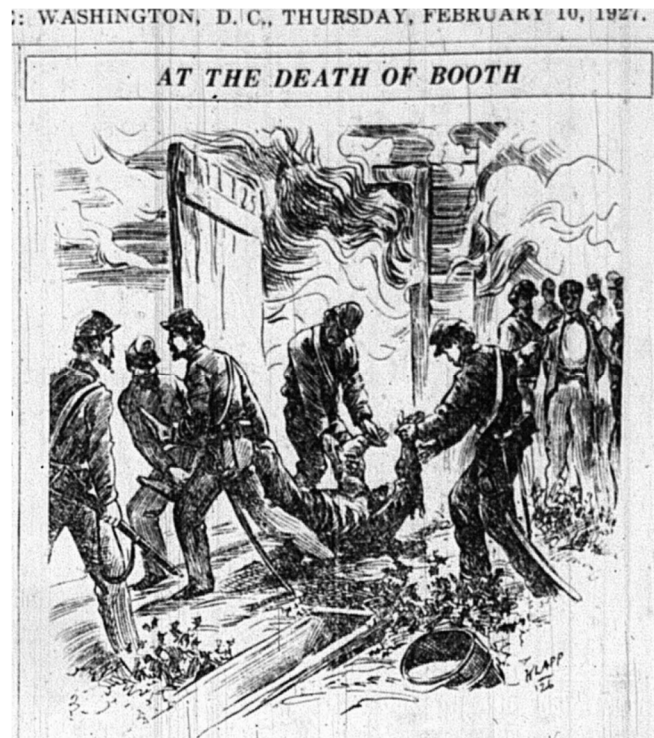
³³ 1850 & 1860 US Census

³⁴ Gorthy recounted his military history in a profile written for the military newspaper *The National Tribune*, the forerunner of *Stars & Stripes*, in the 10 February 1927 issue, page 6.

³⁵ *Grand Rapids Press*, 13 Sep 1927, page 18

³⁶ *Cadillac Evening News*, 26 April 1930, p1

Provost Marshal's headquarters in Washington DC.³⁷ General Lee surrendered to General Grant at Appomattox, Virginia on 9 April 1865. Five days later, Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in DC. Gorthy was one of 49 men who tracked down the assassin, John Wilkes Booth. Walter claimed he was included because he happened to know Booth by sight. The night of the assassination, 14 April 1865, Gorthy was dispatched with two messages, one for the fort on the Potomac River and the other for the guard at the Anacostia Bridge. "I mounted my horse and sped toward the fort, delivered that message, and then galloped for the bridge. Had I been 15 minutes earlier at the bridge, I would have intercepted Booth, as he crossed just that much sooner than I arrived."



After some weeks of pursuit, Booth, who was famously injured in his leap to the stage from Lincoln's box, was cornered in a barn in Port Royal, Virginia on 26 Apr 1865. Booth's companion surrendered, but Booth refused, threatening to fight his way out, so the barn was set on fire to flush him out. The soldiers were ordered to take him alive. Gorthy claimed to have been standing next to Sgt. Boston Corbett, and they could see Booth moving about amongst the burning hay through the slats of the barn wall. Believing Booth to be heavily armed and about to attack, Corbett shot through a knothole in the barn siding, hitting Booth in the neck. Booth was dragged from the flames and died a few hours later on the porch of the house. Gorthy said, "Booth was well equipped to fight for his life, having two large navy revolvers and an eight-shot carbine, with plenty of ammunition for all his

weapons."³⁸ Corbett was threatened with a Court Martial, but the team likely received some amount of reward money. Walter mustered out of the military on 28 June 1865.³⁹

Life after the War

When the war was over, he returned to his parents' farm at Victor and remained there two years.⁴⁰ In 1866, at age 22, Walter married 19-year-old Psyche Cecilia Murray. They had a son born in Clinton County. They moved to work in the pine woods and mills. They had two more sons in Oakland County, but they divorced before 1874.

In 1874, the 29-year-old Walter married 16-year-old Jane McCormick in Grant, Clare County, Michigan. Together they had eight children. The first two were born in southern Michigan, but the third and following were born in Stittsville, Missaukee County, starting in 1879. Walter's brother Orlando C.

³⁷ Designated on his pension records as 243, Co. 1 Battn V.R.C.

³⁸ *National Tribune*, 10 February 1927, page 6

³⁹ *History of Shiawassee and Clinton Counties, Michigan*, page 84

⁴⁰ *Cadillac Evening News*, 26 April 1930, p1

Gorthy was appointed the first Postmaster of Norwich/Stittsville on 28 Mar 1879.⁴¹ They operated a saw mill in Stittsville for many years.

By 1881,⁴² Walter set up some portable sawmill equipment, being engaged that fall by J.H. Moores at the lumber camp that would become Moorestown. Walter produced for Moores thick planks to be used as rails for a horse-drawn railway, used to haul logs through the snowy woods. The wooden rails were not entirely successful, however, especially after a steam locomotive was employed upon them. The wooden planks were soon replaced by iron rails, which were difficult to acquire and place but much more effective as a railroad. Walter continued to saw lumber for the growing Moorestown in 1882.⁴³

Legal Troubles

On 26 November 1890, Walter was appointed Postmaster of the Stittsville Post Office.⁴⁴ But by 1892, complaints about his loose operations arose. He was accused of allowing his young children to play with the mail, and of allowing the handling of mail by people who were not sworn postal clerks. The result was an investigation, which found the Postal accounts were about \$41 short. Bondsmen who had insured his operation, namely John Cockerell and N.J. Rumsey, were called upon to make up the difference.⁴⁵ The bond holders, who seem to be Gorthy's personal friends, did not press charges,⁴⁶ but the Federal Postal Inspector was less amenable. Deputy United States Marshal Brewster traveled from Grand Rapids to Stittsville to arrest Walter on December 24 for embezzlement. He was taken to Commissioner Haskins in Cadillac and bound over for trial in the US Court. He returned home to await trial.⁴⁷ The outcome of the case remains unknown. Eugene Liddle was appointed Postmaster on 30 Dec 1892,⁴⁸ but Walter appears to have continued as Vice Postmaster until August 1893.⁴⁹

In April 1893, Gorthy was noted in the paper for buying himself a speedy "three-year old colt."⁵⁰ That same year, at age 48, Gorthy began receiving his military pension for his Civil War service.⁵¹

In 1897, Walter and Jane had their youngest child, Hellen, but the infant lived only a few weeks.

On 7 December 1897, Walter was arrested in Lake City for selling liquor without a license. Rumor had long suggested that "the thirsty in Stittsville could buy something stronger than tea," and at the Stittsville Thanksgiving Day dance, evidence was obtained.⁵² Sheriff Tennent sent John Conway to the Stittsville dance entirely to see if Walter would sell him liquor. Walter did sell him a couple pints of watered-down whiskey, which Conway drank a bit, treated some of his fellows, and brought the rest back to the Sheriff. That was enough to cause the arrest.⁵³ WJ Roche paid the \$100 bail and Walter was

⁴¹ Appointments of U. S. Postmasters, 1832-1971, page 324 (1879)

⁴² *Lake City Journal*, 04 Oct 1881, page 1

⁴³ *Lake City Journal*, 4 April 1882

⁴⁴ Appointments of U. S. Postmasters, 1832-1971

⁴⁵ *The Plain Dealer*, 21 December 1892

⁴⁶ *Detroit Free Press*, 12 Dec 1892, page 11

⁴⁷ *Grand Rapids Herald*, 24 Dec 1892, page 5, and *The Plain Dealer*, 28 Dec 1892, page 1

⁴⁸ Appointments of U. S. Postmasters, 1832-1971

⁴⁹ *The Plain Dealer*, 9 Aug 1893, page 1

⁵⁰ *The Plain Dealer*, 26 Apr 1893, page 5

⁵¹ *Detroit Free Press*, 24 Mar 1893, Page 1; US Veterans Administration Pension Payment Cards

⁵² *The Plain Dealer*, 8 Dec 1897, page 1

⁵³ *The Plain Dealer*, 15 Dec 1897, page 1

free until his circuit court trial in January.⁵⁴ On January 5, 1898, Gorthy's trial defense was that Conway had asked for the liquor pretending to be sick, and Gorthy had borrowed the liquor from yet someone else as a gesture of good will. He was acquitted with a hung jury, with 7 to convict and 5 to acquit.⁵⁵

Walter and Jane appear together a couple years later in the 1900 Census in Missaukee. Walter was about 55 years old.

In 1903, Walter again found himself in legal trouble. The *Grand Rapids Post* had reported Gorthy's arrest for defrauding the US government, but the local Missaukee paper suggested accusations were exaggerated.⁵⁶ As a Notary Public, Gorthy had been helping others secure their pension paperwork. To save himself a four-mile trip, Walter had signed the name of his friend John Cockerell to an affidavit in a pension case. The affidavit was accurate, and Walter fully assumed that Cockerell would have happily signed it had he been present. Somehow, the pension department in Washington took notice and launched an investigation, eventually asking the US District Attorney Covell to issue a warrant for Gorthy's arrest. Deputy Marshal Edward O'Donnell arrested Walter in Stittsville and brought him before Commissioner Haskins in Cadillac on Friday, 13 February 1903 for arraignment. The *Post* reported that the bail was set at \$500, which Gorthy could not pay and so was expected to remain in Jail until the trial, but the local paper noted Walter was back home Saturday, the next day. He and other witnesses were to appear in Grand Rapids on March 3. A month later, Walter was indeed escorted in March by Under Sheriff Doyle to Grand Rapids to be delivered into the hands of the US Marshal.⁵⁷ Gorthy was convicted, yet it wasn't until early May that he was sentenced. The offence was considered slight, and Gorthy paid a \$50 fine and returned home promptly.

Later that same year, a Stittsville bartender named John Farrell shot an unruly patron in the neck, and the man eventually died of his wounds. At the trial in November 1903, Walter Gorthy was one of a fifteen witnesses called to testify.⁵⁸ Ferrell was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to a minimum of 7.5 years, and then taken to Jackson prison⁵⁹

Sunset Years

In 1907, Walter was noted in association with an insurance co-operative called the Michigan Benevolence Association in Moorestown.⁶⁰

Around 1910, Walter sold his interest in the Stittsville sawmill to his brother and moved to Jennings to work for the Mitchell Brothers.⁶¹ Walter and Jane appear together, living in Jennings, in the US Census in 1910, with Walter being about 65 (but claiming to be 61).

Almost a decade later, in 1919, Jane died at age 62. They had been married 45 years.

A 75-year-old Walter remarried a year later, to Mary Ann Rowland on 12 July 1920, also age 75. Mary Ann had been married to a Civil War vet, William F. Cline, but he died in a hunting accident in 1881,

⁵⁴ *Detroit Free Press*, 15 Dec 1897

⁵⁵ *The Plain Dealer*, 12 Jan 1898, page 1

⁵⁶ *The Plain Dealer*, 18 Feb 1903, page 1, quotes the *Grand Rapids Post* story and then corrects the details.

⁵⁷ *The Plain Dealer*, 25 Mar 1903, page 8

⁵⁸ *The Plain Dealer*, 4 Nov 1903, page 1

⁵⁹ *The Plain Dealer*, 11 Nov 1903, page 1

⁶⁰ *The Indicator*, Vol. XXXIII, FH Leavenworth Publishing, Detroit, 20 Mar 1907, p131.

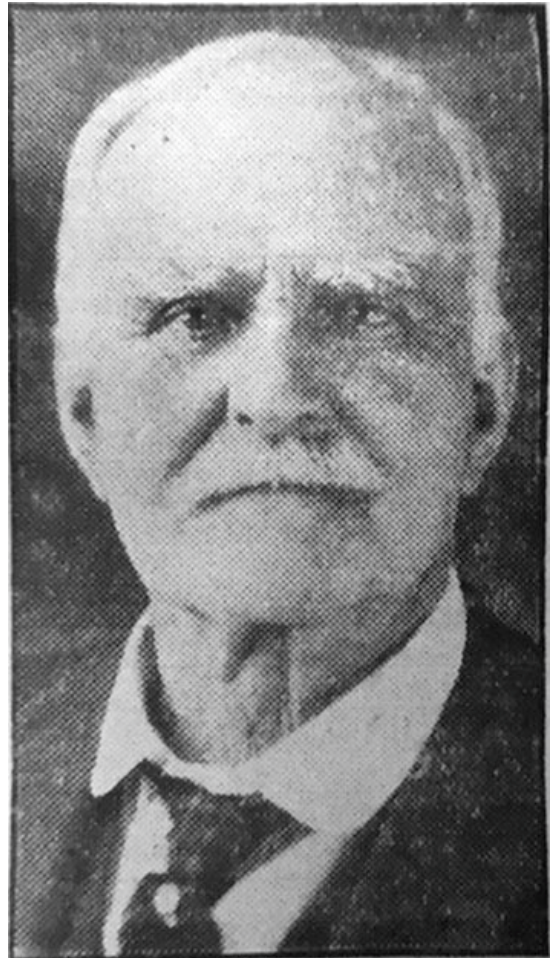
⁶¹ *Cadillac Evening News*, 26 April 1930, p1

leaving her a young widow with two daughters. She remarried John E. Cockerell (one of Walter's friends and postal bondsmen), and they had two more kids. Cockerell died in 1905, leaving her widowed again, at age 59. She was single for about 15 years in the interim, before marrying Gorthy.

The next year, in 1921, he bought a lot in the former boom town of Jennings.⁶² This was right around the time many of the homes of Jennings were placed on trucks and relocated to Cadillac. Around 1922, he and Mary Ann moved to 1002 West Division, Cadillac.⁶³

In May 1926, newspapers noted that Walter Gorthy was he last surviving member of the posse that had captured Booth.⁶⁴ In 1927, Gorthy was featured in the *National Tribune*, a paper for Civil War veterans (which became the *Stars & Stripes*), in a piece on being "At the Death of Booth."⁶⁵ The story was picked up in various papers. That September, Gorthy attended the GAR National Encampment in Grand Rapids, giving him another chance to tell his story to the press.⁶⁶

Mary Ann and Walter lived together for ten years, dying a month apart in the Spring of 1930. Although in generally good health, a sudden heart attack while sitting in a rocking chair at his home in Cadillac was the cause of death. Mary Ann had been confined to bed for several weeks and Gorthy's sudden death has aggravated her illness. She died a month later. Gorthy's death was noted with a substantial obituary in the Cadillac paper⁶⁷ and even a mention in the New York Times.⁶⁸



⁶² Gorthy bought Block V, Lot 5, of the Mitchell Bros. plat of Jennings from Frank Teufel for \$110 (*Missaukee Republican*, 21 Apr 1921).

⁶³ *Cadillac Evening News*, 26 April 1930, p1

⁶⁴ *Port Huron Times Herald*, 24 May 1926, Page 16

⁶⁵ Gorthy, Walter, *National Tribune*, 10 Feb 1927, 6:4, "At the Death of Booth"

⁶⁶ *Grand Rapids Press*, 13 Sep 1927, p18

⁶⁷ *Cadillac Evening News*, 26 April 1930, p1

⁶⁸ New York Times, 1930 April 29, "Wilkes Booth Captor Dies." Articles also ran in the *Leelanau Enterprise* and *Unionville Crescent*.

At the Death of Booth

National Tribune (aka, Stars and Stripes), 10 Feb 1927, page 6

AT THE DEATH OF BOOTH

Walter W. Gorthy, 1002 W. Division St., Cadillac, Mich., is among the last of the small group of soldiers who ran Booth to his death. Comrade Gorthy enlisted Aug. 12, 1862, when he was less than 14 years of age in the 23rd Mich.¹ At the closing of the war, he was transferred to the Provost Marshal's office at Washington.

On the night of April 14, 1865, the night that has gone down in history as one of the most tragic in American annals, Orderly Gorthy was at his barracks on duty with his detachment. About 9 p.m. came the stirring and sad message, "The President has been assassinated!" and a few moments later, the details of the assault came slowly filtering in over the camp telegraph.

"I knew the actor, Booth, by sight," said Comrade Gorthy, in telling of his part in the subsequent drama, "and for that reason I was selected as one of the posse to pursue the murderer. I was given two messages—one to the fort on the Potomac River and the other to the guard at the Anacostia Bridge. I mounted my horse and sped toward the fort, delivered that message, and then galloped for the bridge. Had I been 15 minutes earlier at the bridge, I would have intercepted Booth, as he crossed just that much sooner than I arrived. The war was about closed, and restrictions on the movements of civilians had been modified to allow them free movement across the borders of the Capital.

Hunted for Days

After Booth had shot Mr. Lincoln and had halted on the stage to deliver his valedictory shout of "revenge for the South," he rushed out the back stage door and mounted his horse which had been held for him by a negro boy. It was found later that he cracked a bone in his leg when he jumped, and this hampered him in his effort to escape.

"For several days, the city seethed with the search for Booth, for it was believed he couldn't have got very far on the night of his flight. Finally, an Army intelligence officer, Col. Blake, a Lansing, Mich., man, deduced that he could follow the approximate route taken by Booth, and a pursuit detail was formed from members of the 16th N.Y. Cavalry together with four troopers of the Black Horse Cavalry, one of whom was Comrade Gorthy.

"The trail led to the home of a farmer named Garrett, south of the Rappahannock River in Virginia. Garrett was called to the door and asked where Booth and his supposed Confederates were hiding.

"In the barn,' was the reply.

"The building was surrounded, and the officer in charge went to the door and called on Booth to surrender. Booth, from the sanctuary of the haymow, answered that he would come out if given a chance to fight for his life. He was given 10 minutes to come out before the barn would be set on fire.

¹ Walter William Gorthy was born 24 October 1844 in Lancashire, England; he immigrated as a toddler with his parents. He would have been 17 in August 1862.

After the period of truce had expired, the torch was applied, and the burning hay soon illuminated the interior of the building, and Booth could be seen through the cracks in the walls.

Wounds Fugitive

One knothole, larger than the rest, furnished a direct view for comrade Gorthy and Sergt. Boston Corbett, his comrade. Corbett declared that, despite their orders to take Booth alive if possible, in his judgment, the men would be saving their own lives if they shot Booth.

“‘When the flames get too close, Booth is going to fight,’ Corbett declared,” according to Comrade Gorthy, “‘and I am going to shoot first.’ Accordingly, Corbett raised his carbine and fired thru the knothole, hitting Booth with the first shot. Booth was removed from the burning barn to the porch of the farmhouse, where he died several hours later.

“Booth was well equipped to fight for his life,” said Comrade Gorthy, “having two large navy revolvers and an eight-shot carbine, with plenty of ammunition for all his weapons.”

WASHINGTON, D. C., THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 1927.

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Walter W. Gorthy Obituary

Cadillac Evening News, April 26, 1930 – Saturday, Page 1

WALTER GORTHY

DIES SUDDENLY

WAS LAST SURVIVOR

OF GROUP WHO CAPTURED

J. WILKES BOOTH

WAS CIVIL WAR VETERAN

Walter Gorthy, 83, last survivor of the group which captured John Wilkes Booth, assassin of Abraham Lincoln, died Friday at 9:30 p.m. He had not been ill and a sudden attack of heart trouble was the cause of his death, Coroner Carrow decided. Mr. Gorthy was sitting in a rocking chair at his home, 1002 West Division street, when death came.

Mr. Gorthy was one of four troopers of the famous Black Horse Calvary which for some soldiers of the 76th New York calvary, under command of Colonel Baker (of Lansing), Army intelligence officer, composed the party searching for Booth after the assassination. The trail led to the home of a farmer named Garrett south of the Rappahannock river in Virginia. Garrett informed the party that Booth was in the barn. That building was surrounded and the officer in charge went to the door and called on Booth to surrender. Booth, from the haymow, answered – he would come out if given the chance to fight for his life. He was given ten minutes to come out before the barn would be set on fire. After the period of truce had expired the torch was applied and the burning hay illuminated the interior of the building and Booth could be seen through cracks in the walls. On knothole, larger than the rest, furnished a direct view for Comrade Gorthy and Sergt. Boston Corbet, his comrade. Corbet is the man who shoot Booth, according to reports on the affair.

Mr. Gorthy was born in England, coming to America with his parents, when two years of age.

They first located in New York City, then went to Ohio, to Lansing, then on a farm in Clinton county, and then the father homesteaded a piece of land near Victor where the family worked until the father and mother died a few years after the close of the Civil War.

Walter Gorthy had to “fool” the enlisting officers about his age, telling them he was 18 years old, in order to get in to the Union ranks. He was in the East Tennessee campaign, fought at Knoxville, helped capture Atlanta, served under Burnside, Rosecrants, Sherman, and Thomas; he was in the battle of Nashville, going from there with Thomas to Washington and later to camp four miles out from Riley, N. Carolina. He was there when Johnston surrendered to Sherman and Lee to Grant, ending the war.

During his three years of fighting, Mr. Gorthy was never wounded, though balls passed through his clothing, some grazing his flesh. He was sick but once and then with typhoid in a hospital in Knoxville.

When the war was over, he returned to the farm at Victor and remained there two years. After that he worked in the pine woods near Clare, later in the mills, then heard the farm call again and eventually bought a saw mill at Stittsville, which he and his brother operated for 25 years. He sold his interest to his brother, moved to Jennings, worked for Mitchell Brothers for 12 years, and came to Cadillac eight years ago.

Mr. Gorthy was a member of the G.A.R.

Surviving relatives include Mrs. Gorthy, formerly Mrs. Mary Cockrell, to whom he was married nine years ago; and several sons by his first wife. Walter of Pontiac, Nathan of Detroit, and Henry of Montana are expected here soon. Mrs. Gorthy who has been in poor health for the last couple of years, was not able to give further information on Mr. Gorthy's children today. She has been confined to bed for several weeks and Mr. Gorthy's sudden death has aggravated her illness. Funeral arrangements will be announced after the sons arrived.

CADILLAC, "CITY OF QUALITY,"

THE WEATHER
Fair and colder.

*Cadillac
Evening News*

CA

NEWS AND MARKET, 49TH YEAR
SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 1917

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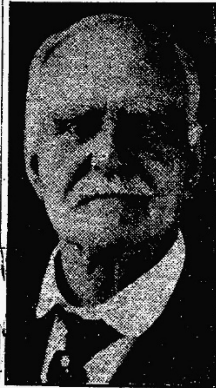
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Civil War Vet Dies



Walter W. Gorthy, prominent G. A. R. member who died suddenly at his home on West Division street last night.

Mr. Gorthy was a private in Co. G, 23rd Regiment, Michigan Infantry and in the 243rd Company, First Battalion, Veterans Reserve corps.