

General John McNulta (Nov. 9, 1837-Feb. 22, 1900)

It was Veterans' Day, Nov. 11, 1979. The place was the pavilion at Miller Park in Bloomington, Illinois. Gathered there were members of the McNulta family and museum staff. The event was the opening of a one-hundred year old "time capsule," a glass jar filled with mementos of the life of General John McNulta, a Civil War hero and citizen of McLean County. Private to General, New York City to Bloomington, cook's mate to successful lawyer; this is his story.

John McNulta was born in 1837, in New York City. At age of 13, he began to travel throughout the southern United States, the West Indies, and Great Britain thanks to a wealthy relative. But two years later, in 1850, John headed west to find his fortune and adventure. He took a variety of jobs along the way to pay his expenses. He raced horses in Indiana and Ohio, was a farm worker, and a cook's mate on a lake steamer. He settled for a while in Attica, Indiana, where he worked as a hotel clerk and learned the trade of cigar-making.

John first came to Bloomington, Illinois, in 1856, while selling tobacco. Three years later, at the age of 22, he returned to open a cigar store. Anxious to improve his future, he began reading law in the libraries of attorneys William Orme and Leonard Swett, contemporaries of Abraham Lincoln. But McNulta's studies were interrupted by the beginning of the Civil War in 1861.

Less than three weeks after President Lincoln's first call for troops, John McNulta enlisted as a private in Company A of the First Illinois Cavalry. He was quickly named Captain, and sent to Alton, Illinois, to serve under Colonel Ulysses S. Grant. McNulta and Grant would become life-long friends. In September of 1861, Company A met Confederate forces at Lexington, Missouri. After a nine day battle, Union forces, including McNulta, were forced to surrender and taken prisoner. Wounded and a prisoner, John sent word home via a reporter from *The Pantagraph* that he was captured but safe and recovering. In November, John was exchanged for a Confederate captain and returned home to Bloomington to rest and recover.

While home, he married his eighteen year old fiancée, Laura Pelton. They would later have eight children. He was sent back to Missouri in command of three cavalry companies and an artillery battery. His task was to counteract guerrilla activity in the area. Missouri was a border state with both Union and Confederate sympathizers and soldiers. It was here McNulta earned the nickname, "Fightin' Captain."

When the First Cavalry was disbanded, John joined the newly formed 94th Illinois Volunteer Infantry known as the "McLean County Regiment" under the command of his friend, Colonel William W. Orme. Again, he enlisted as a private, but was almost immediately raised to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. The 94th was sent to Springfield, MO to train. Many units were still using the old battle tactics of marching and firing in formation. McNulta broke with this tradition and trained his men to fire while lying on the ground and "to use every crook and cranny of the natural landscape" to protect themselves in battle. This training was to prove immensely valuable in saving lives in the coming battles. The 94th was involved in the Battle of Prairie Grove in Arkansas. They marched an incredible 120 miles in 84 hours to reach the scene. McNulta was ill during the battle, but continued riding up and down the lines to encourage his men and urge them to stay low to the ground. Because of his skills and excellent training of his men, only 11 men were killed and 45 wounded in battle from the 94th. In 1863, he was promoted to the rank of full colonel.

Next, the 94th was ordered to join General Grant in the siege of Vicksburg, Mississippi. Here again their tactics proved valuable in winning the battle. In July 1863, McNulta and his men were sent down into Louisiana. There the 94th came under heavy shelling in a battle near Morganza, LA. A twelve pound canon went off near John, causing him to be thrown from his horse. He continued to fight, but sustained injuries to his back and hips which plagued him the rest of his life. But by March, he was back in command in Brownsville, Texas and soon had taken control of nearly the entire Texas coastline. At the war's end, he was promoted to the rank of Brevet Brigadier General, an honorary title noting his "gallant and meritorious service." He went by the title "General McNulta" for the rest of his life.

Back in Bloomington, McNulta returned to the study of law and was admitted to the bar of Illinois in 1866. That same year, he formed a law firm with Lawrence Weldon. In 1868, McNulta was elected to a term as an Illinois State senator. In 1872, he was elected as the first McLean County citizen to the United State House of Representatives.

He was best known in later years for his work as a "receiver." He gained a national reputation as "The Great American Receiver" for his ability to "receive" or take control of businesses that were in financial trouble and put them back on firm ground or find suitable buyers. He was president for the National Accident Association of Bloomington and the Corn Belt Bank for a number of years. He was also elected as a judge in a financial court in the 1880s. John was active in the Republican Party and several veterans' organizations such as the Grand Army of the Republic. He also participated annually in the reunion of his infantry company. It was there, in 1879, that he created that "time capsule." It was filled with newspaper clippings of the company's reunion, badges from his military career, a theatre ticket, a picture of his wife, Laura, and a cigar that belonged to Ulysses S. Grant, who had also attended the reunion. On the bottom of the bottle, he placed a paper directing that the bottle be kept sealed for 100 years.

In 1894, McNulta moved his family to Chicago to be closer to his work as a receiver. In February of 1900, while on business in Washington, D.C., John McNulta died suddenly at the age of 62. His good friend and partner, Lawrence Weldon was with him when he died. He was brought back to Bloomington and was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to four of his children.

By: Mary Kay Zeter, retired Social Studies teacher (grades 5th through 8th) at Thomas Metcalf Laboratory School

Discussion Question: Trace the career of John McNulta...all the various positions he held. How did the experience of each help him in the demands of the next position?