DISPUTE OVER CIVIL WAR BURIALS

By Deb Riechmann July 2, 1992

BOONSBORO, MD. -- There's little doubt that 58 Confederate soldiers were buried in Daniel Wise's well on South Mountain, but how they got there has triggered tales of soldier specters and smelly corpses for 130 years.

In one folk tale, the ghost of a soldier floated up to Wise's cabin one summer evening, saying he was uncomfortable lying face down in the well.

"I have come to have you turn me over. I was the last man and you'll find me on top," the spirit told Wise, according to a story in a book written in 1910 by T.C. Harbaugh. "If you don't turn me, Mr. Wise, I'll haunt you every night till you die."

The soldiers' bones were removed from the well 12 years after the 1862 Battle of South Mountain and reinterred in a Civil War cemetery in Hagerstown. But historians disagree about exactly who was responsible for the unceremonious burial.

Steven R. Stotelmyer, a student of the Civil War's Maryland campaign who has spent three years researching the legend of Wise's well, said he's convinced the farmer wasn't responsible.

Stotelmyer, who recently found the memoirs of Samuel W. Compton, a member of the 12th Ohio volunteer infantry who witnessed the burial, believes a drunken Union detail was to blame.

"Daniel Wise never knew about the legend. He didn't know that he got a bum rap for dumping these guys down the well," Stotelmyer said while sitting on the tailgate of his truck parked down the road from where Union and Confederate soldiers fought the battle on Sept. 14, 1862.

In his memoirs, Compton wrote a detailed description of the chaotic and gruesome scene the day after the battle, telling about graves being dug and medical officers amputating the limbs of wounded soldiers in field hospitals. Meanwhile, thousands of Union troops were leaving the area

for the 10-mile trip to Sharpsburg, the site of the Battle of Antietam three days later.

"On the morning of the 16th, I strolled out to see them bury the Confederate dead," Compton wrote. "The squad I saw were armed with a pick and a canteen full of whiskey.

"The bodies had become so offensive that the men could only endure it by being staggering drunk. They dragged the corpses to a 60-foot well and {were} tumbling them in. What a sepulcher and what a burial! You don't wonder I had no appetite for supper."

Compton's recollection of the drunken burial crew conflicts with the regimental history of the 21st Massachusetts that Charles F. Walcott wrote 20 years after the battle.

According to Walcott, a burial detail, which was having trouble digging graves in the rocky terrain, decided to throw a few bodies into the well. Walcott writes that Wise first stopped them, but then later made an agreement with Union Gen. Ambrose Burnside to bury them in the well for $1 a body.

"There was certainly a well-known tale of Wise putting bodies in the well," said Doug Bast, a historian living in Boonsboro. Bast maintains that Wise had a hand in the burial.

"I don't think Harbaugh {in his 1910 book} would have used Wise's name to make up a whole story," Bast said. "I can't honestly believe in my own heart that Wise didn't stuff one or so bodies down there."

Stotelmyer, 42, who also is a surveyor and engineer in Frederick, has published his research on Wise's well in a book due out in September in time for the 130th anniversary of the Battle of South Mountain.

He said he plans to give any proceeds from the book to the Central Maryland Heritage League, a nonprofit preservation group currently trying to save a parcel of the battleground from encroaching development.

"These 58 men -- their story just stuck in my gut from the beginning," Stotelmyer said. "I think it has something to do with my generation having served in Vietnam.

"To the Confederates, Maryland was a foreign battlefield. We think of MIAs as something new, but these 58 men put in that well were Civil War MIAs."