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Joy Sparrow with the book 'Sparrows' Nest of Letters' that she worked on.

Local author wins history book award

By Wade Allen

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There's nothing like hearing tales about Confederate soldiers in the Civil War direct from the writings of people who experienced the era.

That's the philosophy of an 80-year-old Gastonia woman who decided to put letters faded with age to good use last year by compiling them and publishing a book.

"Sparrows' Nest of Letters," edited by Joy Sparrow, documents the treasured correspondence between many of her family members who lived through the war, including two men in her late husband's family tree — The Rev. George A. Sparrow and his father, Maj. Thomas Sparrow, who both served with the Confederacy.

The letters are personal, often eloquently written, and reveal insightful details into how the two men survived and managed to re-build their lives after the devastation of war.

Among people to whom the book is dedicated is Joy Sparrow's late husband, Thomas Glenn Sparrow. Maj. Sparrow, who died in 1884, was his great-great-grandfather; the Rev. Sparrow, who died in 1922, was Thomas Sparrow's great-grandfather.

The book contains more than 100 letters with photographs sprinkled throughout.

Readers take a virtual journey into the documented history of the two men. Among events discussed: the Rev. Sparrow's years as a teenage soldier to a country preacher and Maj. Sparrow's account of the battle of Fort Hatteras, where he narrowly escaped death but became a prisoner of war.

Almost garbage

The letters were destined to be shared with the world. They survived two house fires — one in 1931, and another 30 years later. Somehow they remained intact even after her husband almost sent them to the garbage in 1968

WANT TO PURCHASE THE BOOK?

Copies are available through the Belmont Historical Society; at Park Road Books, 4139 Park Road, Charlotte; or by contacting Joy W. Sparrow directly at 704-865-3050. She sells the books for \$20 per copy.

while setting up an insurance business.

"He was cleaning out a desk and he tossed them in the trash can, and my mother was there helping him and she said, 'What are you throwing away, Tom?' and he said, 'Just a bunch of trash.' She pulled them out of the trash can and there was over 100 letters, the first one was dated 1856," Sparrow said. "He was interested, and he brought them home when mother discovered what they were. He said, 'You read these' and I did, and I knew they were valuable and they should be shared."

At the time, taking on the task of piecing them together for publication was not possible. Sparrow was consumed with building a life for her family, raising her two sons and working a job.

But one day, she decided that the project could finally take flight. And about a year later, she was autographing copies of the published work.

Learning from history

Joy Sparrow is a grandmother of four. She's always enjoyed learning about Civil War history and said, despite the hardships her husband's family faced, there were bright spots in their lives as evidenced by some of the letters.

"There's nothing like reading it from somebody who was there, a firsthand account. You just learn so much about how they lived back then, how hard they had to work. But in spite of that, they seemed to be happy in spite of their hardships. They did have some happy times. Of course, during the war there weren't many happy times, but they were able to

overcome their trials and tribulations," Joy Sparrow said.

After the war, the Sparrows, like many families in the dissolved Confederate forces, were left without basic necessities and forced to rebuild their lives from scratch.

"They didn't have anything — no money, no home, no furniture," she said. "The towns that were captured, they really had it hard."

Before the war, Maj. Sparrow worked as a lawyer. He attended what is now Princeton University, and his family had wealth.

Recognition of the work

On Oct. 20, Joy Sparrow was awarded the Willie Parker Peace History Book Award at a ceremony in Mooresville. The accolade is presented by the North Carolina Society of Historians, Inc., and Sparrow said she was thrilled to receive the nod to her work.

She doesn't claim to be an author and said she'd never put together a book before and doesn't plan on doing it again.

But the stories contained within the paper covers had to be told and she feels good knowing that the book is out there for others to consume.

She had help from many people while working on the project, including Janice Currence, of Gastonia, who was Sparrow's secretary and typist. Sometimes the letters were difficult to understand, so many an hour was spent examining them. Sparrow spent about a year on the project and now travels to libraries and other venues reading sections of the book.

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