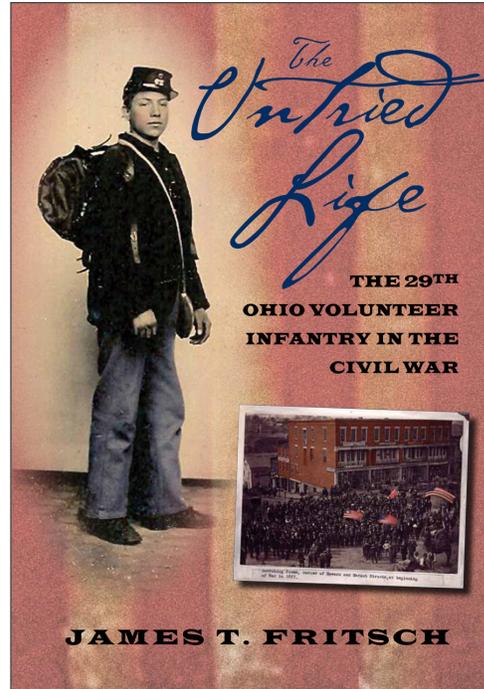


Q & A WITH

## **James T. Fritsch**

AUTHOR OF

### **The Untried Life The Twenty-Ninth Ohio Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War**



*The Untried Life* is a 500-page book that involved fifteen years of research and writing. How did it all get started?

Fifteen years ago I was in Ohio researching ancestors who had served in the Civil War. One of them had served in the 29<sup>th</sup> Ohio. An Akron librarian connected me to John Gurnish, who showed me a letter written by the regiment's first colonel, Thomas Clark, to Sgt. Rollin Jones. The longing Clark expressed that their war always be remembered drew me in completely. I was compelled to learn more about Clark and Jones, which led to more questions, and things snowballed from there.

*What makes the 29<sup>th</sup> Ohio unique?*

The regiment was founded in Jefferson, population 300, in Ashtabula County, Ohio. The village was home to two famous antislavery politicians, Ben Wade and Joshua R. Giddings, and was intimately connected with John Brown. Giddings stated that every soldier in the regiment had been tested on the strength of his antislavery beliefs before he was allowed to enlist. Union soldiers, with few exceptions, were indifferent to emancipation of the slaves. I became curious whether this regiment would fulfill their antislavery mission, and whether the people of the counties in which it was raised would do more than residents of other places to support their boys.

*Economics, culture, politics, propaganda, morality, industrialization, the antislavery, temperance, and Copperhead movements; religion, the draft, the role of women, life at home during the war. You've cast your net pretty broadly, haven't you?*

All of these various issues came up over and over again in the newspapers and in the soldiers' writings. This was first American war that demanded a full mobilization of every citizen including children and the elderly, so the story of the two, home front and battlefield, became one and the same. That has to do with the homegrown nature of raising troops then.

*Your book covers all of the regiment's battles. Were you able to find any emotional responses from the soldiers about their experiences in war?*

Part yes, and mostly no. Sgt. John Marsh revealed his innermost feelings to his sister in a way that is startling. Two soldiers admitted to their parents that they had been afraid in battle. These were the exceptions. You have to keep in mind that deep self-examination did not come along until much later. It was considered improper in that age for a man to unburden himself of his feelings.

*You take readers pretty far into the book before the regiment fights its first battle. Is all of that background really necessary?*

It is to me and it's certainly necessary for an understanding of how this particular regiment was different than others. The story of why, how, and by whom this regiment was founded is unique, and comes directly from the area's practice of antislavery. Giddings and his supporters were blamed by their neighbors for having started the war by their ceaseless agitation, and then letting others do the fighting. The founding of the regiment was a response to that criticism. I didn't think the process of organizing an infantry regiment had been adequately covered elsewhere. The regiment-raising system was confusing and became a war unto itself. I also wanted to get at how an otherwise peaceful people were persuaded that war was not only necessary, but ordered by God. How highly individualistic small-town boys made the transition into army life, and their motivations for enlisting, were necessary parts.

*Every history book has main characters. In your book, who are they?*

I was lucky to find two extraordinary war diaries. Nathan Parmater was a student and part-time school teacher when he enlisted as a private. He was a sociable, highly adaptable young man, and literate. Chaplain Lyman D. Ames was middle-aged and did not make friends easily, which means he was able to observe the regiment from a distance. The war became a test of his religious faith. Enlisted men like Wallace Hoyt, John Marsh, and Elias Roshon all left behind a considerable number of letters. Capt. Josiah Wright, the regiment's first chaplain, Russel Hurlburt, and several anonymous soldiers wrote extensively for their local newspapers. Dozens of other soldiers and officers have their say

in the book when the time arrives for them to speak. John W. Geary who commanded the regiment's division through most of the war looms large, as does the regiment's best-loved figure, Col. Lewis P. Buckley. An Ashtabula County woman named Helen Wheeler wrote a series of letters to the local newspaper describing the horrid conditions in the army hospitals around Washington. She decided to do something about it, and she did. We hear her words, and those of several other women.

*You traveled extensively while putting the story together. What was that like?*

Getting one's hands on documents when I began research required going to where they were housed. I've explored the regiment's home neighborhoods because I wanted to see the look of the country in which they grew up. I have been every place the regiment had been in their journey through both theaters of the war; some places I visited several times. The book is done but I'm still traveling to satisfy my own curiosity. Nathan Parmater carved his initials in rocks above the Potomac and in the top of the Tennessee state capitol building. I'm still looking for them.

*One of the themes of the book that comes up frequently is that of change—in the regiment, in Akron and Jefferson, and in the nation. You said you spent fifteen years researching and writing this book. Were you changed by the process?*

Well, I was in my forties when I began research, and I'm now in my sixties, so there is that. The Civil War was an especially melancholy time. After fifteen years of daily immersion in those times, it is impossible to escape the sense of sadness that pervaded every aspect of life. I'm more somber than I was.



**James T. Fritsch** devoted fifteen years to researching the story of the Twenty-Ninth Ohio Volunteer Infantry. He lives in Arizona with his wife Gayl.

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### **The Untried Life**

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