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In Their Own Words

A book by Jim Dohren '66 lets readers walk in the shoes of Civil War soldiers.

By SARAH (ZELLER) JULIAN '07

Retired history teacher Jim Dohren '66 is still working to make history come alive for those around him.

After receiving a collection of letters written during the Civil War from a family member, Dohren spent several years studying and researching the correspondence. In September, he released *Letters from a Shoebox: The Civil War Correspondence of John Huffman, David Huffman and William Bowman* through Sunbury Press.

Dohren and his wife Susan (Parker) '66 reside in Downers Grove, Ill., where he spent most of his education career teaching American history and government to junior high and middle school students.

The book includes 22 transcribed letters in addition to context and meaning behind their words. The letters offer insights into the daily life of military campaigns and life on the home front. In addition to letters from three soldiers writing home, the book includes correspondence from five young women who anxiously await news from the battlefield.

While compiling his book, “I became more and more attached to the writers, so that by the time I completed my manuscript I had become quite fond of them, wishing in some magic way I could meet them,” Dohren said.

Brothers John and David Huffman, schoolteachers who enlisted in the 85th Indiana Volunteer Infantry, eventually join the Army of the Cumberland and Sherman’s March to the Sea, writing letters from places along the march. William Bowman, who enlisted in Ohio’s 126th, is an orphan farm boy who joins The Army of the Potomac and is captured during battle, spending months in Confederate prisons.

The replies from home are written by the Huffman brothers’ sisters, sister-in-law and a young friend. They are filled with concern for the soldiers, plus news of sickness and death, joys and sorrows, romance and other poignant activities of everyday life.

The letters revealed some surprises for Dohren. He discovered a child born out of wedlock, a topic often skirted around by the letter writers, which he confirmed in a U.S. Census document listing the child as “illegitimate.” In addition, he realized the camp where Bowman was imprisoned was the infamous Andersonville Prison, where wounded and starving prisoners suffered in inhumane conditions. “I can still remember the visceral shock to learn this. I’d known about Andersonville Prison for decades, of course, as most Americans who know about the Civil



The above photo graces the cover of Dohren’s book, which vividly depicts the lives of Civil War soldiers in their own words.

War do,” he said. “Through the reading of his disability pension records, I learned that William was never the same afterwards.”

Although he’s worked on and off with the project for about 30 years, the letters remained fascinating, Dohren said. “No matter how many times, and it has to be dozens, I re-read the letters and my transcriptions, edited my work and did more research, the letters never became tedious or repetitive nor the characters stale,” he said. “Each time I uncovered some new facts, some different thoughts, some additional nuances in the letters and the research, even in the letter writers themselves.”