

Couple Authors Fascinating Civil War History Of 'Fighting McCooks'

by Debra Lawless

A new history of one family's participation in the Civil War has just been published by a pair of long-time Chatham summer visitors.

Charles and Barbara Whalen have spent vacations in Chatham since 1964. During the past 15 years or so the pair has checked into the Chatham Bars Inn, and it was there that Barbara Whalen wrote or edited portions of "The Fighting McCooks, America's Famous Fighting Family" (Westmoreland Press, 2006).

"We love Chatham," Barbara Whalen said during a recent interview over her cell phone. The couple was at that moment traveling from their home in Bethesda, Md., to Chatham, and they were about a half an hour outside of West Point, N.Y., where they planned to spend the night before continuing to Chatham in the morning.

For the first time in many years this trip to Chatham really will be a vacation. On previous trips, "I would be working on the book – in the lounge, the beach, whatever," Whalen says.

"The Fighting McCooks" is about an Ohio family, of whom 17 members fought on 46 western battlefields in the Civil War. The family patriarch was "whiskey boy" George McCook, a "Scotch-Irish" immigrant who was running a whiskey still in the Ohio River Valley. In 1794 he and others refused to pay tax on their stills, and the dispute resulted in The Whiskey Rebellion, eventually quelled by George Washington.

Three sons and 14 grandsons of George eventually fought in the Civil War and became known collectively as "the Fighting McCooks." Among them were three major generals, three brigadier generals, one naval lieutenant, four surgeons, two colonels, one major, one lieutenant, one private and one chaplain. Four died to save the Union.

Although the McCooks were once well-known American figures, the family and its story drifted into obscurity in the "tumultuous" 20th century, Whalen says. "The last [fighting] McCook died in 1927," Whalen says. "The name died out."

The Whalens come from Ohio. Whalen's husband Charles, a retired professor of economics at the University of Dayton, served in the U.S. Congress from 1966 to 1978. While Charles was occupied with state and national politics – then a male bastion – Barbara wrote a weekly newspaper column in the Dayton Journal. Her column was about political personalities seen from a woman's point-of-view, and it was first called "Columbus Coffee Break," and then, when

Charles served in Washington, D.C., "Capitol Coffee Break."

Charles Whalen has authored three books on foreign policy, freedom of the press and the draft. With Barbara he co-authored "The Longest Debate: A Legislative History of the 1964 Civil Rights Act."

It was because of their book on the Civil Rights Act that the Whalens discovered the McCooks.

One day Charles Whalen was thumbing through the card file at the Library of Congress looking for a man named McCullough who played a role in the Civil Rights Act. But while inching through the cards to McCullough, he happened upon McCook. McCook "rang a bell because in Dayton there's a McCook field, a McCook theater," Whalen says. Charles was curious enough to want to know what was in the McCook file, so he requested it be brought out. And it turned out to be 32 boxes of old letters, diaries and newspaper clippings. Charles phone his wife and said, "'We've got our next book.' I said, 'Oh, no, there's not going to be a next book,'" she recalls. But "when I saw the collection I was hooked."

During a month-long stint at the Library of Congress, Whalen Xeroxed the entire collection, which had been put together and donated by Anson McCook's daughter in 1945. She hoped that someday someone might write a book on the family. The Whalens contacted McCook descendants through the McCook House Civil War Museum in Carrollton, Ohio, and received other source materials.

"We thought we knew a bit about the Civil War but we had to go to the Bible," she says, referring to the 122 volumes of Official Reports on the War. They visited battlefields. Charles researched and wrote a first draft of the book and Barbara rewrote it into a narrative form. The project took 20 years as the Whalens worked around other professional and family commitments.

The book is divided into 19 chapters, 17 of which detail the 17 McCooks who went into battle, and another of which details the clan's patriarch. The book is beautifully illustrated with paintings, photographs and maps. Source notes, bibliography and an index follow next.

And what's next for the Whalen writing team?

"No other books," Whalen says. "I'm going to put up my feet and read other people's books." But then, she adds, she would like to write her memoir, "just for the family."

The Whalens will sign "The Fighting McCooks" at Yellow Umbrella Books on Thursday, Aug. 3 from 4 to 6 p.m. For more information call 508-945-0144.