

Author's note: Truman Head was not my ancestor. My Civil War ancestor was Henry Head of the 104th New York Volunteer Infantry; Truman Head was his father's first cousin. However, Truman never married and had no children. With no descendants to honor him, I am proud to help keep his memory alive.

- Alan Head



**Truman "California Joe" Head  
Company C, First U. S. Sharpshooters**

"Old Californy," as he was sometimes known, was born Truman Head in Burlington, Otsego Co., New York in 1809. He left home young – legend had it that he courted a young lady but was vetoed by her father, and left town with a broken heart. Later newspaper accounts say that after leaving home he made his way south, making a living as a trapper and bear hunter in Florida, Arkansas, and Mississippi over a twelve-year period.

In 1849 Truman joined the gold rush, heading to Trinity County, in northern California, to secure his fortune. He established himself in Morrison Gulch, a minor tributary of Coffee Creek, where he and fellow prospectors William McKeag, John Baugh, and Homer Jackson spent the summer of 1850 seeking their fortune with varying degrees of success. When the snow came, their situation rapidly became untenable, and they were forced to retreat back to Shasta for the winter. Truman remained in California throughout the 1850s, although little record of his activities remains. He apparently was moderately

successful in his prospecting activities, and also acquired a reputation as an expert marksman – bear hunting with the muzzleloaders of the day not providing many opportunities for second shots.

When war broke out, Truman decided to see if his talents could be turned to the advantage of his country. He traveled the Panama route – a luxury which was likely not available to him when he originally headed west. After a steamship passage from San Francisco to Panama City, on the Pacific coast, he would have traveled across the Isthmus on the Panama Railroad to Aspinwall to board a steamship for the Atlantic leg of the journey. He arrived in New York City aboard the S.S. North Star on August 24, 1861. Truman's stated intent was to join a California Brigade that his old friend Colonel Baker was raising in Philadelphia, but upon meeting with the Colonel he determined that the situation did not suit him. When he expressed an interest in sharpshooting he was referred to Colonel Hiram Berdan's sharpshooters, who were then encamped at Weehawken, New Jersey.

Before leaving Philadelphia, he took his remaining gold dust to the mint and exchanged it for a mint certificate. He left the certificate with a local innkeeper for safe keeping, and signed a will designating that, in the event of his death, the amount was to be used for the support of the widows and orphans of his regiment. The value of this bequest was later stated in press reports to be \$60,000. Truman then proceeded to Weehawken, where he demonstrated his skills and earned a place in Company C of the 1st U.S. Sharpshooters. He signed the muster roll for the company, which was originally raised in Michigan, but he did not formally enlist until September 14, 1861, when the regiment was at the Camp of Instruction near Washington, D. C.

While encamped outside Washington, Truman purchased a Sharps rifle for himself; Colonel Berdan had been fighting to get appropriate target rifles for his Sharpshooter regiments, but they did not receive their government-issued Sharps rifles until the following May, and only after a personal intervention by President Lincoln. Newspapers of the day paid tribute to his marksmanship, but it was his gruff appearance and eminent quotability that made him the darling of the travelling press. They

dubbed him "California Joe," and exhausted their stores of poetry attempting to describe him: "He is past 50, but looks a score of years younger. He stands as straight as an arrow, has an eye as keen as a hawk, nerves as steady as can be, and an endowment of hair and whiskers Rubens would have liked for a patriarchal portrait." His enlistment papers record his height at 5 feet 7 inches, about average for the time period.



*Truman Head with Col. Hiram Berdan*

The first widely distributed stories about him began to circulate during the siege of Yorktown, Virginia – a battle in which more than one publication credited him with “the first Rebel slain” in the siege. A large cannon (a 32 pounder) had been brought to the field of battle by the Rebels, and Joe and some comrades were ordered to silence it. They found positions between the lines, and when morning came, Joe watched as the gun crew began to prepare the weapon for loading. As a cannonier cautiously approached with a swab-rammer to clean the barrel, Joe noted the ornament on the man’s cap that would serve as his target:

“...keeping a bead drawn on the doomed man, he allowed him to creep forward, raise the rammer, push it into the gun, and then, as he was about to withdraw it, the marksman touched his trigger, and the first victim of Yorktown fell, pierced directly through the brain.”

The swab remained in the barrel, and for the remainder of the day Joe and his companions picked off any rebel who attempted to remove the swab. Reliable sources credit Joe with fourteen rebels slain in the course of the day.

Another tale describes how “a small mounted party, led by an officer wearing a white shirt” ventured outside the rebel fortifications. Joe commented that he was “best at a white mark.” He quickly aimed and fired, and the man in the saddle fell to the ground, apparently dead.

Also at Yorktown, Joe had his first close call. As one account quotes him;

“On our outposts we had a sharp skirmish; the enemy’s ball struck the iron band of my rifle, as I was kneeling in a rifle-pit. It struck close to my face, threw fragments of iron and lead into it, and my nose and face bled from the concussion; it was more a shock than a wound, as the injury is a mere scratch. It will not keep me from duty a single day. The ball broke the band of my rifle, but did not injure the shooting of the barrel.”

A reporter who was present when Joe returned that day noted that “it made him look bloody and grim, as he stood gesticulating, joking, and relating the day’s adventures by the ruddy light of the camp-fires, amid a crowd of admiring comrades,” while noting that he had only returned because he was out of ammunition and was “afraid his rifle was wounded.”

Another story came from the vicinity of Richmond, Virginia:

“Our General was to-day near one of the bridges, giving directions about the work. A rebel sharpshooter had been amusing himself and annoying the General and other officers by firing several times in that direction, and sending the bullets whistling several times in unwelcome proximity to their heads.

‘My man, can’t you get your piece on that fellow who is firing on us, and stop his impertinence?’ asked the General.

‘I think so,’ replied Joe; and he brought his telescopic rifle to a horizontal position.

‘Do you see him?’ inquired the General.

‘I do.’

‘How far is he away?’

‘Fifteen hundred yards.’

‘Can you fetch him?’

'I'll try.'

And Joe did try. He brought his piece to a steady aim, pulled the trigger and sent the bullet whizzing on its experimental tour, the officers meantime watching through their field glasses. Joe hit the fellow in the leg or foot. He went hobbling up the hill on one leg and two hands, in a style of locomotion that was amusing. Our General was so tickled – there is no better word – at the style and celerity of the fellow's retreat, that it was sometime before he could get command of his risibles sufficiently to thank Joe for what he had done."

Around August of 1862, Joe began having difficulty with his eyes due to frequent use of the telescopic sight attached to his rifle. He was sent to the hospital to recover, but by October he had presumably become weary of forced inactivity – a condition that his active life left him unaccustomed to. The doctors, assuming that his condition was temporary, seemed more interested in returning him to duty than in his discomfort. Joe determined to take his appeal to the highest authority in the land, and boldly addressed a letter to President Lincoln:

Mr. Lincoln: – I have done some service to the country, and my eyesight is ruined doing duty. I would like to be discharged.

California Joe.

Mr. Lincoln promptly replied with a letter thanking him for his service, granting his discharge, and authorizing his transportation home at the government's expense. It was a letter that Joe treasured, and exhibited to his friends with pride years later.

After his discharge, Joe returned to Philadelphia to retrieve his fortune before returning home to California. Shortly afterwards he took up employment as a watchman at the Custom House for the Port of San Francisco. In his capacity as an employee of the Custom House, he was frequently mentioned in the local press as a participant in opium seizures – the drug was a legal but highly-taxed commodity, and avoiding the 100% duty made smuggling highly profitable.

In the official history of the sharpshooters, Captain Francis D. Sweeter paid tribute to Joe. In addition to his position in Co. E of the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters, Sweeter was a Boarding Officer at the San Francisco Custom House during Joe's employment there, and noted that he was "always the same old California Joe, and went by no other name, except upon the pay rolls."

Joe died at the German Hospital in San Francisco on Wednesday, November 24, 1875, after a lingering illness. His obituary noted that “California Joe, the famous sharp-shooter, is no more.” On Saturday the 27th, his body was transported from Gray’s undertaking rooms to the GAR plot at Mountain View Cemetery. Military honors, including a 21-gun salute, were provided by a detachment from the San Francisco Cadets, Company H, Second Infantry, led by Corporal P. Hanna. On January 31, 1933, for unknown reasons, he was reinterred at the San Francisco National Cemetery at the Presidio.

