Bob Younger: My Most Unforgettable Character

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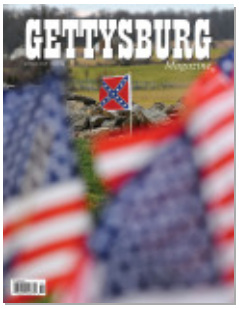

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Bob Younger

My Most Unforgettable Character

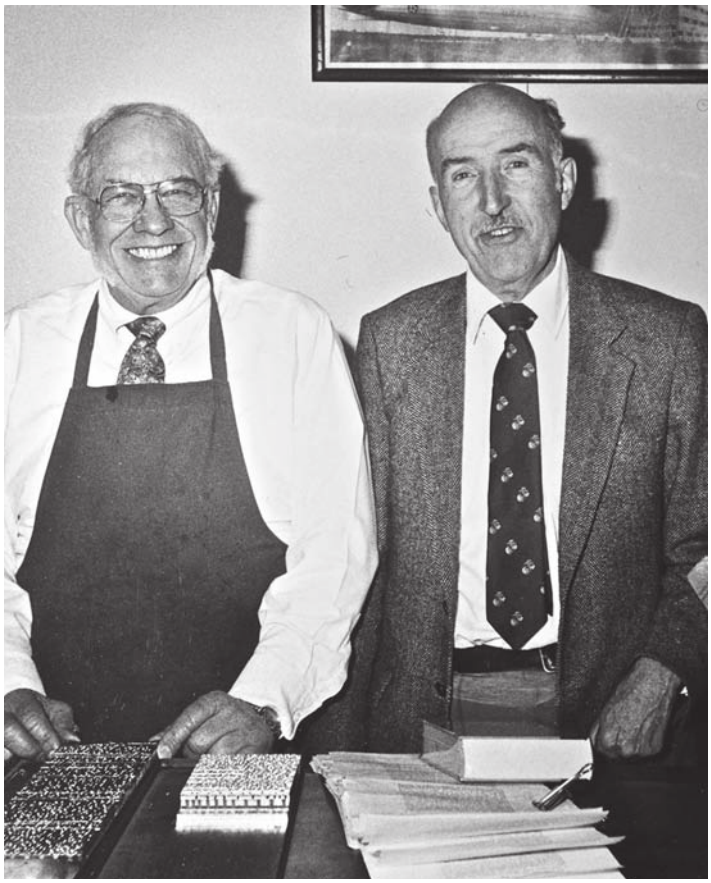
SONNY FULKS

Historian, publisher, businessman, curmudgeon, and mentor—Bob Younger wore all those hats with his own particular style while leaving his own particular impression on me and on the Civil War community.

In my forty-plus years of Civil War study, I've learned at the feet of the best—Ed Bearss, Shelby Foote, Bud Robertson, Bob Krick, and Wiley Sword. I've read Bruce Catton, Douglas Freeman, Glenn Tucker, and Harry Pfanz. I've tramped the battlefields with Jerry Russell and listened to interpretations from Dennis Frye, Marshall Krolick, Thomas Cartwright, and William Frassanito.

But the man I've learned the most from—about books, publishing, history, and the business of history—was the man whom those close to him in the Civil War industry have often referred to as simply "Sweet Ol' Bob," a term that made *Gettysburg Magazine* founder Bob Younger literally see red. More about that later.

Younger owned the well-known Morningside Bookstore on Oak Street, in Dayton, Ohio, for many years, publishing, selling, and shipping books with his wife, Mary. And he ran the business as he damn well pleased, which he told me more than once, including the first time I met him, in 1987.



Younger with historian and friend Ed Bearss, sharing a laugh, circa 1988. Courtesy of Sonny Fulks.

Through a mutual acquaintance, I called Bob one Saturday afternoon and said that if he was open, I'd like to stop by and buy some books.

"Suit yourself," he said over the phone, abruptly. "I may sell you a book, or I may not."

His answer, his tone, took me totally by surprise. At the time, I too was working in retail and was unaccustomed to the Youngers' apparent axiom that the seller, not the customer, was always right. I was soon to learn firsthand.

Later that afternoon, I stopped by

with my wife and knocked on the door to the shop. It was locked. After several seconds, the latch slid open, the knob turned, and the door opened. And there was Bob Younger. He was a powerfully built man with a red face and wispy gray hair that he combed over to one side, and he wore one of those Greek-looking captain's hats like the Skipper used to wear on the old *Gilligan's Island* television show.

"C'mon in," he said. "This is all there is."

I introduced myself, offering my hand, and told him that he had been referred by a mutual friend whom Bob often hired to do photocopy work for his publishing business.

"You know anything about history?" he asked, serious as a judge.

"I've read Catton and *Civil War Times Illustrated* for years," I answered. "I like Civil War history, and I have three Union veteran ancestors. Yeah, I know a little about history."

He shrugged and turned to walk back to his desk, an enormous mess piled high with order forms, legal pads, and books, all lit by an ancient Tiffany lamp. He slumped down in a chair even bigger than the desk, one of those old rocking desk chairs with a high back and squeaking castors; folded his arms over his chest; and watched me intently as I searched the shelves that extended from the floor to the fifteen-foot-high ceiling.

After a few minutes, I shared that I was looking for a good read on Gettysburg, something a little more in depth than *CWTI*. "This is all you need," said Younger, picking up a book from the pile on his desk and tossing it at me. His action startled me, and I barely caught the hardbound book with a gray cover and Union and Confederate flags on the spine. It was a copy of Glenn Tucker's *High Tide at Gettysburg*, written back in the fifties and reprinted by Morningside Books in 1983.

"Is this better than Bruce Catton?" I asked naively.

"Give me the damn book," said Younger. "And there's the door. You asked me what to read, and I told you. I'm not here to give reviews."

"Wait a minute," I challenged. "Roger Pelham (the mutual acquaintance) told me you were a good guy to buy books from. What the hell . . . ?"

"Roger sent you?" he asked, softening. "Alright, twenty dollars for the Tucker, and it's a good read."

"Can you suggest a couple more?" I offered. "I drove an hour to get here, and I want to make the most of my time."

He reached up and pulled two books down from the shelf behind his desk, a copy of *How the North Won*, by Herman Hattaway, and *Campaigning with Grant*, written by staff member Horace Porter.

"Here," he said. "Bring these back when you get done with them and tell me what you think. Then we'll talk more about books. Right now I'm closing for the day and going to get a cup of coffee. He grinned mischievously and walked me to the door."

And that was my introduction to Bob Younger, a man whom I would recognize for years afterward as being what *Reader's Digest* used to write about, who might well be the most unforgettable character of my adult life. I indeed read the books, Tucker, Hattaway, and Porter; and in time I returned for a subsequent visit, carrying the latter two.

"Well?" asked Younger.

"Liked the Tucker book. The Hattaway book rambled a good bit, and Porter wrote like a lieutenant colonel. Tough read," I said, looking him in the eye as I handed him the books. He smiled, and I knew from his expression that he had offered me the books as a test.

"I can't argue with that," he admitted. "Sold a lot of 'em over the years, though. But there's better books."

And with that, Bob Younger and I became friends on the basis of honesty over what we knew and didn't know and over matters on which we agreed and disagreed, often for the sake of a good argument, on topics from cars to cameras. At the time, I was working at a photo retail store in Troy, Ohio.

Over the course of the next five years, I traveled the country with Bob when he took his books on the road for Jerry Russell's annual spring and fall roundtable field trips—to Gettysburg, Antietam, Manassas, Chattanooga, Shiloh.

Through Bob, I got to meet the cream of the crop of historians and writers, none better or more likable than venerable Ed Bearss, marine veteran, author, and historian emeritus for the National Park Service.

I listened to opinions during long rides in Bob's Chevy Suburban on everything from disposable di-

Jerry Russell (*left*) and Bob Younger during a Russell tour to Fort Donelson in the early 1990s. Courtesy of Sonny Fulks.

apers to democracy. I ate with Bob in great restaurants, as well as in roadside bean stands. I learned trade and business secrets that have stayed with me for years and that have served me well, always told in the form of some parable that only made sense to Bob. But I also learned early and often that what Bob believed on any topic was all that mattered.

He delighted in telling stories about growing up in rural Missouri and any connections to the more famous Younger name of Old West fame. There were tales of back-alley experiences during his days as a struggling student at the University of Missouri. And I had my chain pulled so many times with Youngerisms that in two lifetimes I could not remember or share all the wisdoms I heard from Bob.

"Never trust a man that drives a Buick," because Bob's father got swindled one time by a man who drove a Buick.

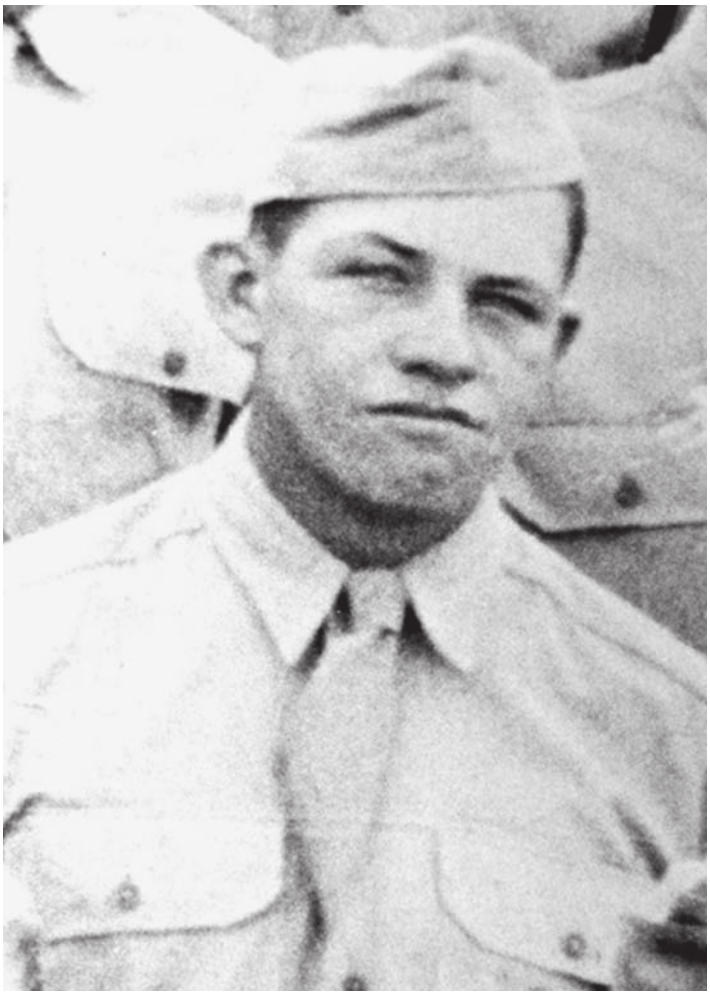
"Always trust a farmer that has picked corn on the ear stored in a crib," because that man is efficient, doesn't spend money foolishly on fancy equipment, and always has cash to pay his bills.

"Never trust a lawyer that graduated from anyplace but Ohio State University or Stanford." Your guess is as good as mine.

"Bob was the most independent, opinionated man I ever met, because he could afford to be," said longtime friend Roger Pelham, for years a respected member and businessman in the Dayton community. "Bob worked hard as a printer for all those years at the McCall Publishing Company, saved his money, and was smarter than a lot of others, who

cashed their weekly check on Friday and headed to the bar."[1] Bob was smarter because he cashed his check and went to the liquor store instead, and then home. Cheaper that way. In his day, Bob was known to tip a few. But after being diagnosed with a heart valve problem in 1978, he quit cold turkey and never touched another drop. But that didn't mean he quit watching others imbibe, while he laughed at the memories.

His opinionated attitude about books and authors came from sound pretense, because Bob Younger was a brilliant historian, even though many never suspected. He never flaunted his knowledge. He educated himself the old-fashioned way. He was a good listener, and he read incessantly. And early on in his Civil War book career, he cloaked himself with other knowledgeable friends and business associates, Tucker and Bearss, for instance. If you asked him, he frequently distinguished between those in it for the money and those in it for the facts of scholarship. He considered Bearss one of the latter.



The man that shot JoJo. Here's Bob as a military policeman during World War II. Courtesy of Sonny Fulks.

"Bob was a fourteen-carat character," says Bearss. "He was a straight shooter, and he didn't like BS artists. If he was your friend, he was your friend."[2]

They became close, personal friends. Bob published Bearss's three-volume set on Vicksburg in 1991 and proudly bragged that Beass's handwritten manuscript went to press without a single correction.

"That's all you need to know about Ed Bearss or an Ed Bearss book," he told me more than once. He delighted in pointing out "fools in the field," one of his special terms reserved for school field trips and unqualified guides waxing eloquent to a group of unimpressed teenagers. I once asked him while he sat in the Suburban at the Virginia Monument on a beautiful April weekend at Gettysburg if he had no interest in hearing what a particular guide had to say about Pickett's charge.

"I'll learn just as much reading the *New York Times* here in the truck," he deadpanned, never looking up. And many days, that's all Bob would do . . . just sit in the truck and gaze out over the fields where history was made. He'd done his homework. He knew. And he often made the nine-hour trip from Dayton just to sit there and recreate the scenes in his mind. Bob loved being at Gettysburg.

"He was an extremely intelligent man, a very well-read man," says longtime Morningside patron Phil Spaugy, who currently serves as the national commander of the North-South Skirmishers Association. "The thing with Bob was he was completely intolerant of those he considered fools. If he liked you, so be it. And if he didn't, well, he made damn sure you knew it. He also threw some great Christmas parties, and I was privileged to attend a few, es-

1 Roger Pelham, in discussion with the author.
2 Edwin Bearss, in discussion with the author.

Staff picture of the Morningside Bookstore crew in the early 2000s. Bob and Mary Younger are seated in the front. Future *Gettysburg Magazine* publisher Andy Turner is standing in the middle of the back row. Courtesy of Sonny Fulks.

pecially the one year when Ed Bearss attended and gave a talk on the Vicksburg Campaign."[3]

He rarely opened up to others. On the Jerry Russell tours, he'd occupy the last seat on the bus and endure the barbs being offered up by Bearss and Russell from the front. He'd bury his head in that ever-present *New York Times* and never look up. When Russell would refer to him as "Sweet Ol' Bob," he'd redden but never reply.

"They say SOB is short for 'Sweet Ol' Bob'," he'd fume. "But I think they mean something else."

He loved children; and every year for Christmas and birthdays, Bob would send a box of books of some kind to my son and daughter. More than once, I've seen him approach a group of students on the battlefield, make an acquaintance, and present a totally dumbfounded adolescent a gift from Morningside. He also loved dogs and always maintained that there was something wrong with a man who didn't. Dobermans were his favorite breed, because he rationalized that people misunderstood them the same way they misunderstood him.

He could be generous to a fault, and his generosity often had some kind of prank attached to it. One hot summer day at Gettysburg National Military Park, personnel were selling the peaches from the battlefield orchard on Emmitsburg Pike to raise money for maintenance. He approached a young volunteer running the cash register and said loud enough for everyone to hear, "Here's a $100 bill. I'm gonna eat some peaches and pay for anyone else that wants to eat some, too. You keep track."

The teenager was speechless, not knowing what to charge for a single peach. Nor did he have change for a hundred-dollar bill. Bob ate his peach, alright, and smiled with amusement as a few others took advantage of his offer. But after a few minutes, he grew bored. "Keep the change," he told the young cashier, and he headed for the Suburban.

3 Phil Spaugy, in discussion with the author.

There was a seldom-seen humorous side to Bob Younger, and he'd spin yarns and laugh over them until he was breathless and red in the face. One of the best was that of his days as a military policeman somewhere in Burma during World War II. His outfit had adopted a wild monkey that lived near the camp as the company pet. They named it JoJo; they fed it; and in time, JoJo became quite trusting. The company latrine was down by a stream; and every morning, Bob would go down there to wash up, brush his teeth, and prepare for the day.

After a while, he began to notice that his toothbrush was beginning to turn brown, a condition he assumed was due to the atmosphere and the intense heat and humidity of the Asian climate. But one morning when he walked down to the river, he found JoJo with his toothbrush, vigorously scratching his backside. Sweet Ol' Bob had a temper and very little patience for matters of questionable hygiene. He took out his service .45 and promptly dispatched poor JoJo. Years later, he laughed about it while lamenting that at company reunions those who remembered always referred to him as "the sonuvabitch that shot JoJo."

When he launched *Gettysburg Magazine* in the early 1990s, he asked me to come on with him as the photo editor of the publication, requesting (in his words) beautiful scenes of the battlefield for covers, inside and out. But that relationship was short-lived. After a couple of years, he took stock of the cost of four-color separations and asked my opinion on using artwork from the Don Troiani prints that he sold in the bookshop as front and back covers. By his logic, it provided color and marketed the prints he was selling, as well. "For an occasional issue," I answered honestly. "But if you do it on a consistent basis, you won't be able to tell one issue from another. They'll all look alike."

Of course, Bob's mind was made up; and not getting the answer he wanted, he promptly dismissed me as photo editor, telling me that my extravagance was going to wreck the magazine . . . and his wallet. He instead hired Andy Turner as the editor of the magazine in 1993 and ruled the budget for the next few years with an iron fist. It was some time before I heard from him again. In 2005, months before he died, he arranged to sell *Gettysburg Magazine* to Turner.

Early photograph of Younger and a very young Bud Robertson, looking over a manuscript. Courtesy of Sonny Fulks.

"Bob was quirky, to say the least," says Turner, who published *Gettysburg Magazine* for five years before selling it to the University of Nebraska Press in 2012. "But what I remember best was his stories. He and I traveled to Charleston, South Carolina, one time for a Jerry Russell conference, and he started telling me a story somewhere in Tennessee. He got interrupted and didn't finish. We went on about the weekend, and on the way home, on Sunday, he finished the story. Funny thing, I looked around and realized we were back in Tennessee and within a few miles of where he had stopped the story on the way down. That was Bob."[4]

After his death in January 2006, one of his former colleagues referred to Bob as "thorny," an apt term given his mercurial temperament and nature. But never has there been a more loyal man to people and causes to which he was committed. And where Civil War history was concerned, Bob's loyalties knew no bounds, just like his opinions. He quarreled for years about the National Park Service and about administration of one national park or another.

His beloved Morningside, the old bookstore that stands now without Bob Younger on the corner of Oak Street, in Dayton, Ohio. Courtesy of Sonny Fulks.

He kept a friendly feud going perpetually with longtime associate Jerry Russell, an Arkansas political consultant and battlefield preservationist. Russell raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for the cause at a time when dollars came hard, and many of them came from Bob Younger.

He was contentious, hardheaded, and totally committed to the Civil War publishing industry in a way that few could rival. Not the biggest, he'd claim, but the most genuine and the one willing to take a risk on a project that others would summarily reject.

In 1989 he published the *The James E. Taylor Sketchbook*, a compilation of pencil drawings of wartime artist James E. Taylor, who accompanied Gen. Phil Sheridan during the Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1864. It was a huge project, an expensive project, and one that the skeptics said would not sell in sufficient numbers to be profitable. Younger didn't care. Rather, he proudly offered it as something never seen previously and as something that would never be seen again. The skeptics were partly right; the book did not sell in record numbers. But it sold enough to justify Bob's faith that the true connoisseur of Civil War art and publishing would appreciate its excellence forever. He showed up on my doorstep one winter evening with a special hardbound

4 Andy Turner, in discussion with the author.

copy that he signed, "To Sonny . . . a great traveling companion and a lot of laughs."

He sold the classics and republished many of them—those authors who were his contemporaries and paved the way for many modern writers that Younger would call "latter day saints." And he recognized and published the work of those he appreciated for their dedication to getting it right, regardless of whether the book would sell or not.

"That's the way it was, going West," he'd say, quoting a line from the old *Death Valley Days* show, when something went contrary to plan.

His personal book collection was fabulous; and even during those years after I left the magazine, he would routinely show up at my office with something from the basement, once with a three-volume set of Douglas Southall Freeman's *Lee's Lieutenants*, because, he said, "You need to have these."

We reconciled during those years, as Bob's health began to decline and he delegated more of the day-to-day responsibilities of Morningside to subordinates whom he trusted, those like Turner, Silas Felton, and others. He would drive up on Saturday afternoons in his old Mercedes and drink enough coffee to float a barge, talking about the old days—one story after another about books and people and trips we'd been on together.

One of his daily routines was to get up before sunup and go to the gym, where he'd jog, or walk, until he was the last one on the track. A knee replacement in 2005 stopped all that, but he was optimistic that a new joint would soon put him back at the top of his game. It never happened. Complications set in, and with them a turn in Bob's spirit. A second surgery revealed a staph infection; and from that point until he passed away, he became, in reality, a "Sweeter Ol' Bob."

He routinely called me to "share some time," and he always made it a point to say, "I want you to know how much I've appreciated your friendship." I knew he meant it, though we never actually patched things up over my views of the magazine that upset him years earlier.

He was moved to a nursing facility in hopes that round-the-clock care that Mary couldn't provide at home would help him beat the staph infection that was killing him. It was a plight in life he detested; but in true Bob fashion, he closed one of our last conversations by saying about it, "Well, that's the way it was, going West."

I spoke to him by phone a week before he died. I offered to come see him, but he wanted none of that. "I'm not much to see," he said. "But it's sure good to hear you again."

And for the last time.

I got the news days later that Bob was gone, and it broke my heart. The man who told the stories, who taught me about ear corn in a crib, about how much money to keep in the bank for the unexpected—the man who shot JoJo—was gone.

It was his wish to be cremated and taken back to the family farm in Missouri, to be put beside his beloved Doberman, Chiang, named (you guessed it) after Chiang Kai-shek. (Bob had to be different, you know.) Someday, sooner than later, I hope to stop by to see if there's grass growing on his grave . . . to see if there isn't a warm spot above his urn. I'd be surprised if there weren't.

I'll smile at the memories, and I'm sure I'll say as I leave, "That's the way it was, going West!"

Sonny Fulks is photo editor and a direct descendent of three Union Civil War veterans. A great-great-uncle, Joshua Kite, served with the Second Virginia Union. And great-grandfather Nicholas Simpson, along with his brother Robert, saw duty in the Battle above the Clouds on Lookout Mountain in November 1863 with the First Ohio Heavy Artillery. Fulks is a graduate of Ohio State University, a former professional baseball umpire, and a lifelong student of Civil War history and Civil War photography. He has two grown children and lives with his wife Mindy in Covington, Ohio.