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January 30, 2007

**AWOL for 20 years, Hoosier battle flag is back**

By Vic Ryckaert  
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A Civil War battle flag stolen more than 20 years ago was returned to the Indiana World War Memorial on Monday, thanks to the keen eye of an auctioneer and a group of FBI agents who track down stolen relics.



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Inside, a flag's many fights: A map shows sites of several historic battles where the flag of the 25th Indiana Volunteer Regiment flew. A5 - Jeri Reichenadter / The Star

The flag of the Evansville-based 25th Indiana Volunteer Regiment disappeared from the memorial about 1985 and had hung in a bank lobby in Fremont, Ind., since 2000. It was rediscovered in September after the bank went out of business.

"The flag has had some damage, but it is in excellent shape for where it's been and what it's done," said Brig. Gen. J. Stewart Goodwin, executive director of the Indiana War Memorials Commission. "The important thing to us is it's back home."

The regiment's flag, valued at \$60,000, was hoisted high as Hoosier blood spilled in Civil War battles at Shiloh, Vicksburg and Atlanta. After the war, it became federal government property and eventually ended up in the war memorial, stored with other flags.

Indianapolis' FBI office includes one of the 12 agents in the country who specialize in investigating art crimes. The Art Crime Team was created in 2004, after looting at the Iraq National Museum in Baghdad.

The team has recovered more than 850 stolen art pieces and antiques from around the world valued at \$65 million.

The FBI's team has recovered works by Rembrandt, Picasso and Matisse. The team has recovered other stolen historical relics, including a Colt revolver that once belonged to President Theodore Roosevelt and an American Indian war bonnet that belonged to the Taos Pueblo.

"There are all kinds of people out there that want to have a one-of-a-kind of anything," said Keith L. Lourdeau, special agent in charge of the Indianapolis FBI office. "It is really my profound pleasure to formally bring the flag back to the war museum."

The FBI art team is trying to track down the people who stole the flag, though no arrests have been made. The bureau did not release details of its investigation Monday.

Art crime "is a very serious problem because of the cultural value of these items," said Gavin A. Corn, a Department of Justice trial attorney in Washington, D.C., who prosecutes art thieves. "These are things that are absolutely irreplaceable."

At the time of the flag's theft, in the 1980s, security at the Indiana World War Memorial was lax, Goodwin said, and someone was able to walk off with it. At least two other Indiana battle flags remain missing.

"The flag was misappropriated," Goodwin said. "My speculation is that sometime between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, somebody borrowed this flag for Veterans Day or for a Civil War re-enactment, and for some reason it did not come back."

**Where has the flag been?**

After the Civil War, the 25th Indiana Volunteer Regiment flag was turned over to Gov. Oliver Hazard Perry Morton.

After the Indiana World War Memorial was built in the early 20th century, the flags went there, according to Brig. Gen. J. Stewart Goodwin, executive director of the Indiana War Memorials Commission. The 25th's flag was still at the memorial in 1985, according to an inventory list. It was not listed in a 1995 inventory, Goodwin said.

Officials believe it hung in the First National Bank of Fremont, Ind., since 2000, until the bank closed and its assets were scheduled for auction. An auctioneer contacted authorities about the flag.

After repairs, the flag can return to display at the Indiana World War Memorial, 431 N. Meridian St. Hours to see exhibits are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday. There is no admission charge.

**About the 25th Indiana Volunteer Regiment**

- Organized at Evansville and mustered Aug. 19, 1861.
- Moved to St. Louis on Aug. 26, 1861, then to Memphis, Tenn., and then into battle.
- The regiment lost seven officers and 81 enlisted men in battle. Additionally, three officers and 270 enlisted men died as a result of disease.

-- Eunice Trotter

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Goodwin said today's controls over artifacts are much more stringent. Nothing leaves the museum these days without a signed receipt, he said.

The blue silk flag with hand-painting and an embroidered gold eagle resurfaced in 2000, when the First National Bank of Fremont hung it in a display frame in its lobby.

Cincinnati auctioneer C. Wesley Cowan, who stars in "History Detectives" on PBS, helped liquidate the bank's assets and discovered the flag in September.

"This was a purely innocent thing," Cowan said. "The bank wasn't hiding it; they just didn't know."

Cowan notified the bank's holding company of the find and alerted federal and state officials. The FBI is not disclosing how the bank got the flag.

The 6-by-6.5-foot flag hung in the bank for years, even though the law says a private company or individual could never own it. As is the case with all stolen artifacts, the bank's creditors will not be reimbursed for the flag's value, officials said.

"It is important to be careful when you purchase these items. You want to know who owned them before you," said Bonnie Magness-Gardiner, manager of the FBI's art theft program in Washington. "It's very important to know when you are buying something that it is not stolen."

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