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Rebutting the Charge That General Sherman
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the Charge That General Sherman Lied About His Name**

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Ohio History

The Kent State University Press

Volume 115, 2008

pp. 55-79

10.1353/ohh.0.0032

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**"My Father . . . Named Me William *Tecumseh*"
Rebutting the Charge That General Sherman Lied About
His Name**

Carl R. Schenker Jr. (bio)

Rooted firmly in Ohio's frontier history, the name William Tecumseh Sherman is one of the most famous and evocative in all of American history. Who gave it to him, and when? These questions, seemingly simple and perhaps even trivial at first blush, actually pose an intriguing puzzle, the solution of which is well worth attempting. The puzzle: In 1886, Sherman himself stated that "my father . . . named me William *Tecumseh*." It appears that things rested there until 1932. For the last seven decades, however, historians have ignored or disputed Sherman's statement, reporting that, at birth, Sherman was named simply Tecumseh, after the renowned Shawnee leader. By these modern accounts, Sherman did not acquire the name William until age nine or ten, after his father died. Some biographers have seen this supposed name change as a trauma sufficient to cause Sherman to block out or lie about the subject. This essay shows how the historical community first disputed and then largely lost track of Sherman's testimony about his own name, substituting for it a more colorful but apparently erroneous **[End Page 55]** story about a nonexistent name change with necessarily nonexistent consequences. This fresh look at the widely accepted, but doubtful, lore about Sherman's name should vindicate the word of one of Ohio's most famous sons, sharpen our understanding of his formative years, and remind us how readily historians can stumble in trying to recreate the past.

The Disparate Accounts of Sherman's Naming and Their Significance

William Tecumseh Sherman was born in Lancaster, Ohio, on February 8, 1820. In the second edition of his *Memoirs*, published in 1886, Sherman states expressly that it was "my father" who "named me William *Tecumseh*." Notably, from 1864 through 1929, at least fifteen extended chronicles of Sherman's life assumed or stated expressly that he was named William Tecumseh at birth; this author has found no published Tecumseh-at-birth account dating from that period.¹

Over the course of the last seventy years, however, at least six Sherman biographers have ignored or disputed Sherman's account of his own naming and proclaimed that he was named simply Tecumseh at birth. These biographers report that the name William was imposed on Sherman only later, at age nine or ten. When his father died (June 24, 1829), Sherman was informally adopted by Thomas and Maria Ewing and baptized into the Catholic faith (after an infant baptism in the Presbyterian faith). With some variations, four of these biographers give this account of the baptism in the Ewing home: Someone told the officiating priest that the baptismal name was to be **[End Page 56]** Tecumseh. But the priest insisted that a Christian (or scriptural or saint's) name must be used, and seized upon William simply because it happened to be St. William's Day.

The Tecumseh-at-birth biographers and their books include: Lloyd Lewis, *Sherman: Fighting Prophet* (1932); James M. Merrill, *William Tecumseh Sherman* (1971); John F. Marszalek, *Sherman: A Soldier's Passion for Order* (1993); Michael Fellman, *Citizen Sherman: A Life of William Tecumseh Sherman* (1995); Stanley P. Hirshson, *The White Tecumseh: A Biography of General William T. Sherman* (1997); and Lee Kennett, *Sherman: A Soldier's Life* (2001). Tecumseh-at-birth accounts appear in many other places as well. Indeed, the Web site for the important collection of Sherman Family Papers (SFP) at the University of Notre Dame Archives (UNDA) announces to each researcher there, "It was [only] within the fold of the Ewing family at the insistence of Maria Boyle Ewing, a devout Roman Catholic, that [Sherman] received the baptismal name William, having been named Tecumseh after the famous Shawnee chief by his father."²

Similar Tecumseh-at-birth accounts, building on the Sherman biographies, appear in an ever-widening circle of traditionally published works and are proliferating on the Internet as well. This author has not found any modern source taking issue with the Tecumseh-at-birth theory, independent of his research. To the contrary, the Tecumseh-at-birth theory appears to have become the received...

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Carl R. Schenker, Jr., is a lawyer living in Washington, D.C. His wife is a great-great-granddaughter of William Tecumseh Sherman. Schenker is the author of “Grant's Rise from Obscurity,” *North & South*, June 2006. The author gratefully acknowledges assistance in his research from Phyllis Kuhn, assistant curator of the Sherman House Museum (Lancaster, Ohio), Carol F. Swinehart, and archivists at the University of Notre Dame, the Ohio Historical Society, the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, and the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress. Thanks, too, to the following for their comments on earlier drafts: John E. Marszalek, Michael Fellman, Lee Kennett, Charles Bracelet Flood, John Y. Simon, Brooks D. Simpson, William Kevin Cawley, George B. Forgie, Harton Semple, William Tecumseh Sherman Fitch III, and the author's wife, Susan Sherman Richardson.

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