

MEMORIES OF FORT SNELLING IN CIVIL WAR DAYS¹

A child's memories are usually made up of fleeting impressions of scenes and events that possess some personal connection or appeal supplemented by details and stories furnished by older members of the family; so while they convey in some measure the influences and atmosphere of the times to which they refer, they should not be trusted as accurate historical accounts.²

My father, Thomas McLean Newson, in 1854 founded and edited the *Saint Paul Daily Times*, the Republican organ of the city, in which for seven years he determinedly espoused the stand of the eastern abolitionists, somewhat to his own detriment and danger. It was to be expected then that, when the Civil War broke out, he would apply for admission to the Union army. Unfortunately, a slight shortening of one leg due to an accident in boyhood caused him to be refused. Thereupon, he sold his farm home at Lake Como and his newspaper and joined the volunteers, at that time camped on the plains outside Fort Snelling.

He was assigned to the commissary department with the rank of captain, and when mustered out at the close of war, he was brevetted major. He had hoped to be ordered south to New Orleans, but the outbreak of the Sioux in 1862 caused the government to detain several regiments in Minnesota to protect the settlers in isolated communities and on the frontier, and his regiment was one of those or-

¹ A paper read at the Fort Snelling session of the twelfth state historical convention held under the auspices of the Minnesota Historical Society on July 14, 1934. *Ed.*

² These recollections of a Minnesota childhood during the last years of the Civil War were written at the request of an army surgeon, who felt that they gave certain pictures of historic Fort Snelling not recorded elsewhere.

dered to the scene of the massacres. I have heard him describe his march through the desolated towns and villages, the burned homes, the scattered household goods, and the heaped-up mounds of mutilated bodies of men, women, and children. His regiment was finally stationed at St. Cloud, and the family, consisting of my mother and three little girls, was sent for. My only recollection of the journey is of the old stage and the narrow swinging leather seat without a back, upon which we children sat. The time seemed interminable and we reached the hotel in the dark and cold of evening.

At St. Cloud another little sister was born, and in mid-winter father was ordered to Fort Ripley. The family carriage, drawn by the team, Prince and old Gray, was hung round with army blankets. On the floor was a feather bed on which mother sat with the baby in her arms and my sisters Hattie and Nellie and myself beside her. Each was provided with a hot brick. Shut from us by a blanket curtain, on the front seat were father, who drove, and Uncle Charles Brower, father's secretary. Part of the way through the country infested with bands of hostile Indians we were escorted by twenty cavalrymen. Later we went on alone through a cold old-fashioned Minnesota winter with much snow. When, stopping at midday for rest and refreshment, we entered a pine shack heated by a glowing cast-iron stove, red-hot in spite of the zero weather outside, the bottle of brandy and milk that we had with us for an emergency burst, and we discovered that the baby's cheeks were frostbitten.

My next vivid memory is of being awakened at night at Fort Ripley by much commotion and gun shots and hearing father tell mother that a sentry had fired at an Indian sneaking up the embankment of the fort. The garrison had been aroused in time and if an attack had been planned by the enemy it was rendered futile. The word "Indian"

still recalls my shivers of terror, for we children could not help hearing the many stories of massacres and thrilling escapes.

Then at last we were ordered to Fort Snelling, where father was commissary to the end of the war. His children's pet name for him was "Old Commissary." Our quarters were in the south row, allotted to the officers. They were flimsy wooden structures heated by stoves, with no conveniences, and as was everything else about the fort, highly insanitary. We were next to headquarters, the commandant's house. General Robert N. McLaren was a stern, soldierly man and we children were properly afraid of him. Nevertheless it was on the great, round, wooden bastion, a famous lookout that projected from the back of his house and over the precipitous cliff and the narrow stream marking the confluence of the Minnesota and the Mississippi rivers, that we played with his children. From this bastion guns were trained upon representatives of the Sioux and Chippewa tribes encamped upon Pike Island, or, as we called it, Grape Island, below, compelling by this measure a treaty of peace between the two tribes. On this great, sunny, outdoor playroom we children romped and received lasting impressions of river and rock, little understanding the heartache everywhere present in the fort. For during these two winters that we lived at the fort, at least one out of every family was down with typhoid, and there were few families, officers' or privates', but lost one or more from the dread disease. Our own Uncle Charlie succumbed to it.

Before marching to the front the volunteer regiments were encamped on the prairie outside the gates, about where the polo grounds now are. The two sides of the fort, the south and west sides, were inclosed by a high stone wall, one end of which the old gray Round Tower marks today. The other two sides were protected by the unassailable steep

bluffs, the whole constituting for those days a most remarkably strategic location for a fort.

All the children were forbidden to leave the fort inclosure unless in the care of an orderly, and especially were we forbidden to attempt to climb down the dangerous rocks below the bastion. This prohibition, strange to say, was impressed firmly on my mind by the disobedience of one boy who later become a famous physician. Teasing my little sister, he threw her beloved doll over the railing, but her tumult of grief and anger so affected him that he clambered down, unheeding our cries, rescued the doll, and returning made all the amends in his power. The soldiers were kind to us and gave us fine sport, in winter guiding our sleds down the snow-clad steeps, and in summer helping us gather flowers and wild grapes abundant everywhere. Every morning that was pleasant we went out to dress parade, held about ten o'clock on what is now the lawn in front of the commandant's house and the officers' quarters, and amused ourselves naming those we knew, as the blue columns marched and countermarched to the strains of the war-time music. In the evening the lowering of the flag at the sunset gun gave us an especial thrill, markedly so when our littlest sister was playfully shut in the box at the foot of the flagpole.

The fort was of course under martial law, and soldiers were punished in peculiar ways for infringements of the rules. Even our childish minds were moved to sympathy as we murmured among ourselves and pointed to the unfortunate boy in blue who marched under guard up and down the main walks with his head and arms thrust through holes in a barrel bearing in huge letters the words, "I Was Drunk Last Night." We understood the nature and object of the guardhouse, and the threat of being sent there was sufficient to keep the most mischievous in order.

Some mornings we stood watching the soldiers open bar-

rels of flour—a most exciting pastime—for frequently I saw ferocious rats as large as half-grown kittens jump into the faces of the soldiers, who muttered unpleasant things about the government even as they released their rat terriers upon their prey. Such conditions coupled with patriotic eloquence finally induced the powers at Washington to grant to Captain Newson the permission and wherewithal to build a decent warehouse for the food supplies. Sometimes at the opening of barrels of brown sugar we demanded our share, great lumps of luscious sweetness that one never sees now. Again, when the barrels of highly spiced pickled tomatoes were uncovered we tried to discover which of us as champion could swallow the most peppery without winking. Hard-tack we munched at our children's tea parties and thought life full of joy in a fort in war time, although we partly understood the anxiety on the faces of those who daily surrounded the bulletins of the latest disasters, and we wondered curiously why some, women especially, broke down and ran sobbing to their quarters.

In the summer evenings in the family carriage we drove through the country lanes about the Twin Cities, but we little ones looked forward with ill-concealed excitement to reaching the great iron gate of the fort after nine o'clock, for then it would be closed and the armed guard would be pacing his beat before it. We heard the sentry's challenge, "Halt, Who goes there?" and father stepping forward, said "A friend, Captain Newson." "Advance, Captain Newson, and give the countersign"; and once I heard it—"Red Dog."

In our play about the parade ground we often watched with frightened delight the two captive Indians, leaders in the Sioux War, each dragging a cannon ball chained to his left leg, while under guard he swept the walks. Medicine Bottle was a coarse, brutal creature who often showed to visitors his arm tattooed with the symbols indicating the

men, women, and children he had scalped, about fifty in all. Shakopee, or Little Six, was interesting and intelligent. When after many delays and reprieves the orders for their execution came from Washington, the two were finally hung. The gallows was erected outside the fort on a little knoll, commanding a view of the hills across the Minnesota River and Pilot Knob, now the Acacia Cemetery. All the children of the garrison, save only ourselves, were allowed to be present at the hanging. However, I recall most distinctly that from some vantage point I saw in the distance the crowds, the scaffold, and the swinging bodies. I listened with eagerness as my father recounted to my mother a dramatic incident connected with the event. As the black cap was about to be drawn over the head of Shakopee, a railway whistle woke the echoes along the bluffs and the first train of cars pulled into Mendota. With a tragic gesture of dignity the chief raised his arm and pointing across the river said, "As the white man comes in, the Indian goes out." The next moment the trap fell.

But if our lives flowed on with the simple activities that marked childhood in those days, history was making rapidly, and one morning there came a strange cry ringing loud in our ears, "Lee has surrendered." And we loved the sound of the queer word "Appomattox." We young things were immediately set to work cutting in two the long tallow candles then in use, and in the early spring night we helped to light and set them in the small window panes of the house. I have been told that both St. Paul and Minneapolis were thus illuminated, and that there was not a farmhouse or settler's home in the ten miles of open country between the two cities that did not show its patriotic rejoicing in this way. The bands, the shouts, the cheering troops! A perfect tumult of joy swept the fort, very little of which the childish minds comprehended, but they enjoyed the excitement.

Then comes my first great party with grown-ups. The new commissary warehouse had been finished, and in the clean vacant lofts we had played up and down the long dim stretches. The completion of the building was to be celebrated by a social gathering and a dance, and the enormous upper story was decorated with flags and bunting, and insignia and implements of war, and from the crude rafters swung immense oil lamps. Through the whole length of the room on one side ran rough board tables holding the banquet. At intervals down their length were huge dish-pans of army baked pork and beans, whole hams and beef tongues, flanked by great dishes of doughnuts and enormous pots of coffee that all army people considered the finest ever brewed. Keeping these rations company were cakes and pies and other delicacies that the officers' wives had for days been preparing for this event. I was allowed to be present during my father's speech of greeting, in which he commended the improved sanitary conditions and welcomed the gay company to the rather unique entertainment. Very vivid indeed is my memory picture of the brilliant gathering—the blue coats, crimson sashes, and gold shoulder straps of the officers; and the *Godey's Lady's Book* styles of the flounced hoop skirts, the short sleeves, and low-cut bodices of their ladies. I see my father as he stood addressing them, and conspicuous among the many were a couple that I knew, a General and Mrs. Thomas—he, tall, distinguished, dark, with moustache and goatee of the period, and she, not as tall as his shoulder, her hair in long ringlets on her white neck, her dress, a pink *barège* flounced to the waist, leaning upon his arm in the most languishing way. And then, just as the band strikes up and the dancing begins, for me the scene fades, for I am sent home, protesting, on the shoulder of a faithful orderly. The next day I delight in boasting to my playmates that I was the only child present at the beautiful party. Very soon after

the close of the war the new warehouse was burned down. I think the fire was supposed to have been the work of an incendiary.

The sad aftermath of battles was sweeping through the fort. My mother had lost two brothers; one with his colors in his hand had fallen in a charge at the head of his troops at the battle of Ball's Bluff. I remember her weeping as she opened the package of his few possessions, his sash, his housewife with its pincushion, some bone carving of his leisure hours. The other brother had died of typhoid at Fort Snelling. In spite of the surrender of the southern armies, all was anxiety and uncertainty when the whole country quivered under a new and appalling disaster.

It was customary for an orderly to appear every morning at nine at each officer's quarters with the countersign of the day. This was in a three-cornered note sealed with red sealing wax bearing the government stamp. My mind is particularly clear as to this, for we children were shown what it was and most sternly forbidden to touch it under any circumstances, or dire would be the results. And under certain conditions, the results were dire in those days. This particular morning father had gone out to dress parade. As usual the orderly tapped on the door of the living room where were my mother, my little sister, and myself, and entering and laying the countersign in its accustomed place on the corner of the mantelpiece, he turned to my mother with the words: "Mrs. Newson, did you know that President Lincoln had been shot?" The newspaper had not yet reached us. Mother, exclaiming, "My God," sank sobbing into a chair. So great was her grief that my small sister, frightened at she knew not what, began to cry too, and I, as ignorant as she of the meaning of it all, shook her, saying harshly, "Stop it, stop it." Then even we little ones felt the pall over everything—flags at half mast, streamers of black crêpe on the left arm of every officer, martial order

ignored as groups of men stood excitedly discussing the tragedy, officers meeting one another and breaking down. We wondered to see men cry and no one call them "cry babies!"

Soon there came marching back the remnants of the gallant regiments of Minnesota that had shown their mettle on many battlefields and at Little Round Top at Gettysburg. They were to be mustered out at Fort Snelling. I have heard my parents tell of the mingled joy, suspense, and heartbreak of those scenes, but only the excitement of marching columns affected us children.

One more event from the past in our life at the fort flashes out with startling clearness—the visit to the Northwest of General U. S. Grant. On the great day within the fort along the officers' row all the families were gathered, the children as near the drive as possible. At last, sitting on the back seat of an open landau, was the general! We knew him from his pictures; stocky, in the familiar broad-brimmed hat with its gold cord and tassel, the crimson sash, and the gold epaulet on his blue coat. The carriage stopped at the commandant's door and the famous guest was escorted through the spacious hall to the great bastion at the rear, where the ladies of the fort had prepared for his coming. The children, of course, were not present at the reception, but afterwards, believe it or not, I drank out of the same barrel of lemonade that General Grant was served from.

"The dark backward and abysm of time" engulfs the land of recollection and I see no further pictures of that distant day. Changes for the betterment of the fort have swept most of the old landmarks away. No more do wagons and buggies and carriages and carts rock and slip dangerously down a steep dirt and rocky road on one precipitous bluff to be ferried leisurely over the Mississippi, and then climb laboriously with panting horses the difficult winding

way on the other side to the gates. No more do the red men in gorgeous blankets come, single file, to barter furs at the sutler's store or complain of unjust agents to the "White Fathers." No more do men in blue with the soldier's visor present arms or deploy over the green that stretches out under the shade of elm trees now more than a half century old. The children of today scarcely understand the words in which we recall these times and these events, and we, the children of the years gone, find in the old fort only the ghosts of her departed glories.

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