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## LESTER'S SURRENDER at MURFREESBORO

WALTER N. TRENERRY

AT THE BEGINNING of this century, on April 5, 1902, an aged semirecluse died in Geneseo, New York. The local papers gave few lines to his passing and said nothing of his military career, while in Minnesota, the state he had served, a forty-year conspiracy of silence remained unbroken.<sup>1</sup> Mention of his name to any Minnesota Civil War veteran after 1862 would probably have been met with a snort, a contemptuous look, and some choice soldier's profanity.

This man was Henry Clay Lester — once the captain of Company K, First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, and later the admired colonel of the Third Minnesota. As a stocky,

handsome, black-eyed young fellow of twenty-nine he had set bravely off to war with the First Minnesota in June, 1861. Less than a month later, on July 21, he received his baptism of fire at Bull Run where, unlike many, he did not run away. Liked by his superiors and commended to Governor Alexander Ramsey, he was promoted to a colonelcy before the end of the year. His military future looked bright. Yet on Sunday, July 13, 1862, he surrendered his troops to the Confederate general, Nathan Bedford Forrest, at Murfreesboro, Tennessee.<sup>2</sup> The act is unparalleled in Minnesota's military history, and it cast a permanent shadow, not only on Lester, but upon the lives of his fellow officers and the men he commanded.

THE THIRD MINNESOTA, which had been formed during the fall of 1861 with Lester as its first colonel, was encamped at Murfreesboro in July, 1862, as part of the Twenty-third Brigade assigned to guarding a supply depot and to keeping open the

<sup>1</sup>Death certificate, New York State Bureau of Vital Statistics; *Fredonia* (New York) *Censor*, April 9, 1902; *Livingston Republican* (Geneseo, New York), April 10, 1902.

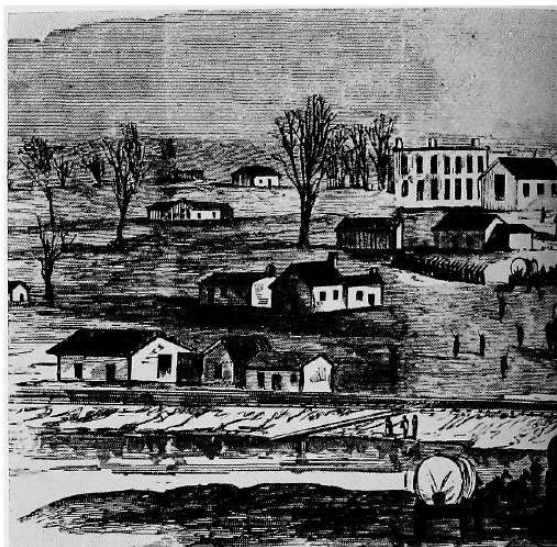
<sup>2</sup>William Lochren, "Narrative of the First Regiment," in *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:3, 14 (St. Paul, 1890); C[hristopher] C. Andrews, "Narrative of the Third Regiment," in *Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:149; United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, series 1, vol. 16, part 1, p. 268, 792-797.

Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad for the planned invasion of eastern Tennessee. Under Lester's command the Third rapidly became a model of discipline and efficiency. Officers went to tactical school; enlisted men drilled—even in wet weather, when the manual of arms and marking time were practiced under cover; a bakery and a bugle band appeared; company officers reported morning roll calls at daylight and in person; headquarters tent buzzed.<sup>3</sup>

The men seemed to love it, for they spent their own pay for white cotton gloves and strutted happily in review before Andrew Johnson, military governor of Tennessee, who thought they looked like regulars. The colonel's reputation soared. One of the officers recalled him as "a courtly gentleman, the best disciplinarian and drill master I ever knew." His bearing "inspired his officers and men with unquestioning faith in his courage, ability, and experienced judgment."<sup>4</sup> Yet beneath the polished surface, there were vague indications of trouble.

When General Thomas T. Crittenden arrived on July 11, 1862, to take charge of the entire Murfreesboro district, he was disturbed to notice feuding officers, missing guards, absent plans, and other shortcomings. Later he reported that he had "found things negligently and loosely done at the post." Lester had been in temporary command of the brigade during the two months before Crittenden's arrival. A week earlier John G. Parkhurst, the lieutenant colonel of the Ninth Michigan, which was the Third's sister regiment, had written that "we are looked upon with envy and jealousy by the Col. . . . of the Minnesota Regt."<sup>5</sup> This friction may have had great historic importance, but nothing more can be learned than the fact that it existed.

ON SUNDAY morning, July 13, 1862, the components of the Twenty-third Brigade slept. Five companies of the Ninth Michigan, eighty men of the Seventh Pennsylvania Cavalry, and eighty-one men of the Fourth Kentucky Cavalry were stationed on the



MURFREESBORO, Tennessee, in 1862, as s

Liberty Turnpike three-quarters of a mile east of Murfreesboro. One company of the Ninth Michigan was at the courthouse in the town, guarding some prominent civilians who had been arrested when it appeared that local citizens had shot some federal soldiers.<sup>6</sup> A mile and a half north on the Nashville Turnpike were nine companies of the Third Minnesota and two sections—sixty-four men and four guns—of the First Kentucky Artillery. Company C of the Third was away patrolling the railroad.<sup>7</sup>

At 4 A.M. the raid came. Under Forrest's

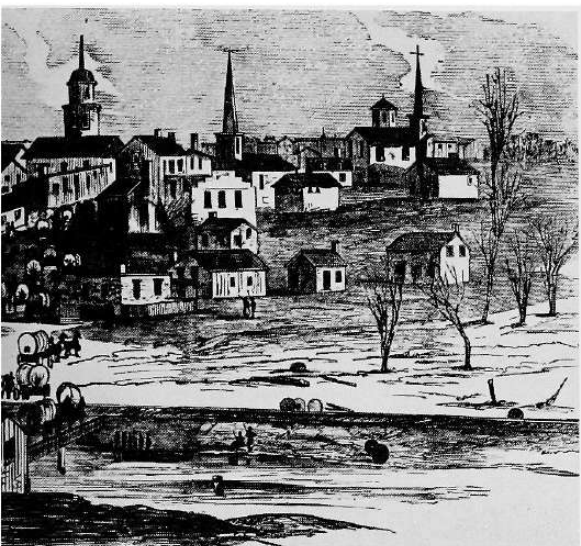
<sup>3</sup> Andrews, in *Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:149.

<sup>4</sup> Andrews, in *Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:150; *Seventh Annual Re-Union of the Third Regiment, Minnesota Veteran Volunteers, September 11, 1890*, 20 (Minneapolis, 1890); *Twenty-Ninth Annual Re-union*, 9 (Minneapolis, 1913). Proceedings of the reunions of the Third Minnesota Volunteers, published from 1886 to 1931, are in the Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>5</sup> *Civil and Indian Wars*, 2:118; John C. Parkhurst to Helen M. Starr, July 3, 1862, John G. Parkhurst Papers, in the Michigan Historical Collections, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

<sup>6</sup> In 1924 a Confederate veteran stated that Forrest had received an appeal from the families of these prisoners, asking that a raid be made on Murfreesboro to set them free. See William H. King, "Forrest's Attack on Murfreesboro, July 13, 1862," in *The Confederate Veteran*, 32:430 (November, 1924).

<sup>7</sup> Andrews, in *Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:151–158.



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command the First and Second Georgia and the Eighth Texas Cavalry with some Kentucky and Tennessee detachments — fourteen hundred men, Forrest claimed, although the Minnesotans said there were no more than eleven hundred — fell on the camp of the Ninth Michigan.<sup>8</sup>

The Third Minnesota awoke to the din of shooting and hollering. Lester put his regiment in battle formation with two artillery pieces and crews on each flank. Twenty men and the civilian teamsters stayed behind as camp guards for the sick and convalescent. Mounting his horse, the colonel marched his men about a half mile toward Murfreesboro and stopped. One of the men said that he seemed “*excited*, but in no degree to alarm us.” When the artillery com-

<sup>8</sup> *Civil and Indian Wars*, 2:120.

<sup>9</sup> William D. Hale to his parents, July 22, 1862, William D. Hale Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society; War Department, *War of the Rebellion Records*, series 1, vol. 16, part 1, p. 799; *Civil and Indian Wars*, 2:118.

<sup>10</sup> *Third Annual Re-Union*, 20 (Minneapolis, 1886); *Thirty-Ninth Annual Reunion*, 6 (Minneapolis, 1923); Andrews, in *Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:153.

<sup>11</sup> *Pioneer and Democrat* (St. Paul), July 26, 1862; War Department, *War of the Rebellion Records*, series 1, vol. 16, part 1, p. 805; Andrews, in *Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:153.

<sup>12</sup> Andrews, in *Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:154.

mander asked what should be done next, Lester replied that he “would halt in the old field on our left and wait for orders.” None were forthcoming, however. Colonel William W. Duffield, the brigade commander, was badly wounded and taken prisoner early in the action; General Crittenden had been captured in his hotel room — probably with local collusion.<sup>9</sup>

After nearly four hours of waiting, the men of the Third Minnesota saw a Confederate force heading for their camp. Lester refused to defend it or to let anyone go to its aid. He stood “mute” or explained that he would not “divide his forces under the circumstances.” So the Third stood by and heard Forrest’s men take their camp; it required three cavalry charges to overcome the thin line of defending teamsters, sick, and convalescent. A little later, at about 8 A.M., the Third easily repulsed a head-on attack by a Georgia cavalry detachment — the only time any rebels came within shooting distance.<sup>10</sup>

The colonel then moved his regiment a little nearer town. One of the men in Company I heard him say “Keep your line well dressed, boys, it is the best marching you have ever done.” At length they stopped and stood, waiting to be ordered into action, watching supply dumps burn, hearing their Michigan comrades fight for their lives. A Michigan courier fought his way to the Third to ask for help. Lester had him arrested as a spy. A second managed to crawl through and received the same treatment. Finally a disgusted Minnesota volunteer risked a sortie to the Michigan camp and came back saying that the Ninth needed help fast. No help was sent. Lester’s officers protested. He only replied, “We will see.”<sup>11</sup>

At noon the Michigan, Kentucky, and Pennsylvania troops which had done all the fighting were forced to surrender. The Third Minnesota moved some five hundred yards back from town to the Murfree farm where it sat again and ate a leisurely lunch, including blackberries which the men picked and coffee served from the company kitchens.<sup>12</sup>

About 1:30 a group of rebels, waving a truce flag, approached. They had with them Lieutenant Henry M. Duffield, now a prisoner, who brought a request from his wounded brother, the brigade commander, to see Lester. With an adjutant, Lester rode about a mile and a half to Oaklands, the beautiful home of Dr. James Maney, which was serving as Forrest's headquarters. There, after taking a drink of good Kentucky "fighting whiskey" (the adjutant's term), Lester and Forrest conferred with the captured Colonel Duffield.<sup>13</sup>

Lester's official report said that Duffield had told him it was useless to hold out because he was outnumbered. A rumor later spread through the Third Minnesota that in fact Duffield had said "*to hold out if possible. Lester only wished to know the rules in case of surrender!!*" Earlier in the day Forrest had written to the colonel of the Ninth Michigan: "I must demand an unconditional surrender of your force as prisoners of war or I will have every man put to the sword." He was supposed to have said the same to Lester. The threat flatly violated the laws of war. It was pure bluff—as the Minnesota colonel should have known.<sup>14</sup>

Whatever may have been said, Lester made a "discouraging" and "dispiriting" report upon his return to camp and would not talk of anything but surrender. He would "listen to no remonstrance" and said curtly that "the time was up and we must hurry and make a decision."<sup>15</sup>

The officers took a vote; they wanted to fight. Lester—so nervous that he sent out another flag of truce while he and the officers were talking—insisted on surrender; he forced another vote by ballot which resulted in a six to three decision to capitulate.<sup>16</sup>

At this point the colonel had 514 men under arms in a position which cavalry could not easily attack; each rifleman had sixty rounds of ammunition; each artillery piece had thirty-four rounds left. The Confederates, armed with pistols and shotguns, had no artillery. Yet, as a disgusted corporal from

Nininger wrote, "*our officers surrendered us amid the tears and curses of the men.*"<sup>17</sup>

IF HENRY LESTER, the man responsible for the ignominy at Murfreesboro had been someone else, it might be enough to simply say he was a coward. But that was not the case. He had a good military record and was a bear cat for drill and discipline. He had performed a spectacular military high jump—from captain to colonel—less than a year before. What happened?

Lester was born at Williamsburg, New York, in 1831. As the third of Ebenezer and Abenath Lester's ten children, he probably received no excessive mothering. In 1846 he entered Hamilton College at Clinton, New York, and was graduated in 1850 with an excellent record. Some time later he studied law and was admitted to the New York bar. He sounds a little like a stuffed shirt, but there is evidence that he really was not one. In his college years he belonged to Psi Upsilon fraternity, and during his brief army career he seems to have liked parties—even at the homes of Confederate sympathizers.<sup>18</sup>

In 1857 he settled in Winona where, the following year, he became clerk of the district court. Although he was admitted to the Minnesota bar, he never practiced. The census of 1860 shows him to be a bachelor, living in Winona's first ward, owning real

<sup>13</sup> Andrews, in *Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:154; Mary B. Hughes, *Hearthstones*, 9 (Murfreesboro, Tennessee, 1942); *Seventh Annual Re-Union*, 16.

<sup>14</sup> *War Department, War of the Rebellion Records*, series 1, vol. 16, part 1, p. 805, 807; Hale to his parents, July 22, 1862.

<sup>15</sup> "Statement of Facts Concerning the Surrender of the Third Regiment," an unsigned, undated manuscript in the Hale Papers; *Pioneer and Democrat*, July 26, 1862.

<sup>16</sup> "Statement of Facts Concerning the Surrender of the Third Regiment."

<sup>17</sup> *Civil and Indian Wars*, 2:116-124; James M. Bowler to Lizzie Caleff, July 19, 1862, James M. Bowler Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>18</sup> United States Census Records, 1850, Chautauqua County, in the office of the New York State Bureau of Vital Statistics, Albany; Winton Tolles, dean of Hamilton College, to the author, August 1, 1963.



property estimated at a value of \$3,800 and personal property worth \$1,000.<sup>19</sup>

At the outbreak of war in April, 1861, Lester headed a public rally in Winona to encourage enlistments; within ten days, on April 29, he was mustered in as captain of Company K, First Minnesota. Here he was "efficient, and very highly regarded," and a surgeon described him as "a gentle, scholarly man, thoroughly conscientious in performing his duty, and withal not ambitious."<sup>20</sup>

Lester's appointment to the command of the Third Minnesota has elements of mystery. Governor Ramsey had been considering Stephen Miller and Napoleon J. T. Dana—both political bigwigs. As a mere clerk, not in St. Paul's inner circle, Lester was not a likely choice for this juicy plum. When Ramsey offered him the command, Lester is said to have had scruples about accepting, and a friend called him "surprised and stunned. He hesitated what to do, and it was only on my urgent advice that he decided to accept."<sup>21</sup> Nearly all official correspondence on the matter has simply vanished, raising the suspicion that some of his former friends—possibly including Ramsey—sought to destroy any evidence they once thought him qualified.

<sup>19</sup> Henry C. Lester, certificate of admission to the Minnesota bar, August 31, 1857, in the office of the clerk of the supreme court, State Capitol, St. Paul; United States Census Records, 1860, Winona County, in the Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>20</sup> Andrews, in *Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:14; Daniel Hand, "Reminiscences of an Army Surgeon," in *Glimpses of the Nation's Struggle: Papers Read Before the Minnesota Commandery of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States*, first series, 279 (St. Paul, 1887).

<sup>21</sup> Hand, in *Glimpses of the Nation's Struggle*, 279.

<sup>22</sup> *Fredonia Censor*, April 9, 1902; Winton Tolles to the author, August 1, 1963.

<sup>23</sup> Adjutant General of Minnesota, *Reports*, 1862, p. 182. The disgraced officers included William W. Webster, Captain, Company A; William H. Mills, Captain, Company C; Clinton Gurnee, Captain, Company E; John B. Preston, Captain, Company F; Mark W. Clay, Captain, Company K; Adolphus P. Elliott, First Lieutenant, Company A; Isaac P. Tichenor, First Lieutenant, Company F; Samuel H. Ingman, Second Lieutenant, Company F. The war department later reinstated Captain Webster when his men agreed to serve under him.

On the surface, Lester seems to have been a patriotic, intelligent man. Perhaps he was overly devoted to routine and to following the book, as evidenced by his well-trained smoothly running regiment. His attention to trivia, his bachelorhood, his failure to practice his profession—all might indicate that he ran from involvements and responsibilities. This impression is strengthened by his behavior when the golden chance to be a colonel floated in front of his nose. He hemmed and hawed, stared in the mirror of self-doubt, and had to have a friend wheedle him into grabbing it. But nothing else in his life or character gives any clue to his failure on that disastrous day at Murfreesboro.

Except for his official report and an unsuccessful request for a court of inquiry, Lester himself kept absolutely silent from 1862 until his death in 1902. After his dismissal from the army on December 1, 1862, he fled to New York City, where he later married and worked for twenty-five years—first in a legal capacity and then in civil engineering. In 1887 he moved to Geneseo and secured a job as search clerk in the Livingston County clerk's office. In 1890 the Phi Beta Kappa chapter of Hamilton College elected him an honorary member. His last three years were spent teaching private classes in modern languages.<sup>22</sup>

THE AFTERMATH of the disaster in Tennessee found the enlisted men paroled and sent to Benton barracks at St. Louis—swearing never to serve again under any officer who had voted to surrender. The officers, who went to Libby Prison, were exchanged a few months later while the prisoner-of-war cartel was still in effect. The nine, led by Lester, who had voted to lay down their arms were dismissed from the service.<sup>23</sup>

Union General Don Carlos Buell, whose invasion of east Tennessee was stalled, summarized the Murfreesboro fiasco: "Take it in all its features, few more disgraceful examples of neglect of duty and lack of good

conduct can be found in the history of wars.”<sup>24</sup>

In Minnesota the first official report of the surrender was in a letter from Major Hans Mattson who later commanded the Third. He hinted at some further scandal but would not criticize a superior officer.<sup>25</sup>

Unofficially, the newspapers expressed puzzlement about Lester’s inaction; a rumor spread that he had been kidnapped and drugged. A private, backed up by the regimental sergeant major, called the colonel a “coward,” and Dr. Levi Butler described Lester as “stupefied ever since the alarm had been given and utterly paralyzed with fear.”<sup>26</sup> One of the corporals wrote his parents that with the colonel it had been “surrender and nothing else,” and that the men were “nonplused.” His letter concluded: “The boys were deceived, he was a noble appearing man, a first rate drill master, great for show, but the pluck wasn’t there.”<sup>27</sup>

Among the reasons given for Colonel Lester’s behavior, two achieved some prominence. Many years afterwards Judge Charles E. Flandrau hinted of some Aspasia or Cleopatra in the background, observing: “An explanation of Lester’s actions which obtained circulation in Minnesota was, that he had fallen in love with a rebel woman, who exercised such influence and control over him as to completely hypnotize his will. I have always been a convert to that theory, knowing the man as well as I did . . . saying ‘Cherchez la femme.’”<sup>28</sup>

Lester was said to have visited Oaklands, the Maney home, quite often. And Mrs. Maney, the owner’s daughter-in-law, had been a famous beauty. However, it appears that her husband, Lewis Maney, was on hand all the time. Had a scandalous triangle really developed, it is hard to believe that the enlisted men would not have heard about it.<sup>29</sup>

The corporal from Nininger thought the answer was “contained on one word—*whisky!*” The regimental sergeant major, William D. Hale, supported this view. In September, 1862, he wrote that the “people

do us justice and lay the blame on our whisky guzzling officers.” Not until fifty-one years later, however, at the Third Minnesota’s twenty-ninth reunion and long after Lester’s death, did Hale make public specific charges. He then claimed that Lester went off alone to the Maney home in the afternoon of July 12, 1862, and lurched back about 9:00 P.M., thoroughly drunk. A Negro servant saw the colonel throw himself upon his cot without undressing. During the night—according to Hale’s story—a sentinel near the tent heard the miserable sounds of someone throwing up and moaning incoherently. The soldier wondered if he should call a doctor but decided not to. Next day the colonel was a changed man: “dazed, unnerved, stupid, silent, and unapproachable.” In that shape he had to meet Forrest’s surprise attack.<sup>30</sup>

There is ample evidence that Lester acted as if in a trance. The corporal said, “whisky.” The sergeant major said, “whisky.” Rumor had the colonel “drugged.” A group of officers commented that “all day he had appeared abstracted and indifferent” and spent “the day idly almost, and without adopting any means of defense.” The surgeon said Lester was “stupefied” and “paralyzed.” Flandrau used the word “hypnotized.” In 1913 Hale added “dazed.”

In short, Lester acted like an indecisive man in the grip of an Olympian hang-over. He stood “mute” or growled, “We will see.” He waited and waited and waited for orders. He stood glued. He refused to answer questions and acted as if he were some-

<sup>24</sup> War Department, *War of the Rebellion Records*, series 1, vol. 16, part 1, p. 793.

<sup>25</sup> Mattson to Ramsey, July 20, 1862, file no. 120, Governors’ Collection, in the Minnesota State Archives.

<sup>26</sup> *Pioneer and Democrat*, July 26, 1862; Hale to his parents, July 22, 1862.

<sup>27</sup> *Thirty-Ninth Annual Reunion*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Charles E. Flandrau, *History of Minnesota and Tales of the Frontier*, 133 (St. Paul, 1900).

<sup>29</sup> Hughes, *Hearthstones*, 10.

<sup>30</sup> Bowler to Lizzie Caleff, July 31, 1862, Bowler Papers; Hale to his father, September 11, 1862, Hale Papers; *Twenty-Ninth Annual Reunion*, 9.

where else and whatever was happening did not concern him. Anyone who has suffered from the same gruesome ailment will recognize the symptoms.

While this hypothesis may not answer every question — such as why it was not put forward until 1913, or what part personal rivalry between the colonels of the Ninth Michigan and the Third Minnesota may have played — it does tie together many elements, including the Maney house and the possible woman in the case.

Lester had been to the Maney house before. Its owners were “secesh,” and there is every possibility that they were forewarned of Forrest’s raid. Mrs. Maney was probably a charming hostess. If Lester did pay a visit on the eve of the attack, it is easy to imagine her coaxing him to take one for the road — then another — then still another. Next day the hapless colonel — and his hangover — visited the same house to find it Forrest’s headquarters. Maney whisky had done good service for the Confederacy. If this picture is accurate, it squares with what the enlisted men said about whisky. It also helps to explain Lester’s long years of silence — which inevitably suggest that he had something to hide.

WHETHER intoxicated, in love, or incompetent, Lester almost literally poisoned his

men’s lives. Although the Third fought with distinction against the Sioux in the Battle of Wood Lake, at Vicksburg in 1863, and at Devall’s Bluff in 1865, the men made an obsession of the Murfreesboro disaster. Not until twenty-one years after the surrender did they form a veterans’ organization, and they then used it pretty much as a wailing wall.

In 1902 one old soldier grumbled that in “all the long years since that lamentable act Col. Lester has not uttered one word in extenuation, and we are forced to the conclusion that he had none.”<sup>31</sup> In 1913 Hale’s charges were published, and in 1923 — sixty-one years after the Murfreesboro disaster — the rapidly diminishing group of Third Minnesota survivors still buzzed with anger. In that year their reunion proceedings included a newly discovered 1862 letter about the surrender. Cursing their colonel in quavering voices, the old men of the Third held reunions until 1931, when only five were able to attend.

Their association is wound up now, and the long years of bitterness are ended. Perhaps the kindest words concerning Murfreesboro and Henry Lester were spoken in 1887 by his friend Daniel Hand whose advice it had been to accept the Ramsey appointment: “I have been sorry since that I gave it. He knew himself better than I did, — knew the fatal indecision that was his, and so came disaster. He was never a coward, but when the supreme moment of his life came was not prepared for it.”<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> *Eighteenth Annual Reunion*, 9 (Minneapolis, 1902).

<sup>32</sup> Hand, in *Glimpses of the Nation’s Struggle*, 279.

THE embittered veterans of the Third Minnesota, at a reunion in the 1880s





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