

A Test of Duty

STEARNS COUNTY VOLUNTEERS

STEVEN PENICK

“We are having a hard old time here, and we all wish we were back home. . . . This country is no good, and I don’t know what our Uncle Samuel is fighting for.” Captain James McKelvy’s words, sent home in a bamboo envelope in July 1899, revealed the transformation he shared with 100 other Stearns County volunteers serving in the Philippine Islands.¹ They had enlisted in the Spanish-American War the previous year, believing they would be fighting to free Cuba. Instead, they found themselves across the Pacific Ocean, mired in a war with unclear objectives and battling Filipinos who, like the Cubans, sought independence after centuries of Spanish rule.

Dubbed the “splendid little war” by Secretary of State John M. Hay, the Spanish-American War began in April 1898. In this age of imperialism, jingoism, and yellow journalism, Cuba—nearby, resource rich, and controlled by Spain—had attracted American entrepreneurs, who invested in agriculture and sugar processing. William Randolph Hearst’s and Joseph Pulitzer’s New York-based newspapers fanned wider public interest in the island’s affairs after 1895, when Cuban nationalists sought independence from Spain. Stories of thousands of noncombatants suffering disease and famine in Cuban concentration camps fueled American outrage against Spain. President William McKinley had opposed military intervention; public opinion was divided, but many citizens agitated for American involvement.²

In January 1898, McKinley sent the *U.S.S. Maine* to Havana on a “courtesy call” but also to protect American business interests. Fate intervened



Steven Penick is a curator at the Stearns History Museum in St. Cloud. His research interests include studying how local communities react to state and national events.

on February 15 when the ship exploded in Havana harbor, killing 266 crew members. An American investigation, while not conclusive, pointed to an external cause, such as a mine; a Spanish study found that an internal explosion sank the *Maine*. Many Americans formed their own conclusions, however, blaming Spain for sabotage. The ship's explosion helped propel the United States toward war, which Congress formally declared on April 25.³

Other issues less obvious to the public shaped American war objectives. Expansionists such as Minnesotan Cushman K. Davis, head of the Senate foreign relations

committee, saw intervention as a vital way to secure American economic interests abroad. The looming war with Spain promised more than opportunities to American businesses already tied to Cuba. Far Eastern countries such as China offered new markets for American products, but Japan and European powers, especially Germany, vied for influence in this region. Taking the Philippines could be a key to reaching these markets.⁴

Military developments contributed to the growing war sentiment. Early in the 1890s, the Navy Department began preparing for possible war scenarios, including a

IN THE SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR



Men of the Thirteenth Minnesota Volunteer Infantry in the trenches before Manila, August 1898

Spanish attack on the American West Coast, launched from the Philippines. Planners deemed this unlikely, citing Spain's lack of resources; they preferred an aggressive strike against the archipelago. As conflict neared in 1898, American intelligence sources assessed the Philippine Islands as a Spanish weakness, vulnerable to an attack that would eliminate any threat to shipping and end the war sooner. Most citizens clamoring for involvement, including many politicians, were focused on Cuba. They did not understand the political, economic, and military scope of war with Spain, which would change American foreign policy for years to come.⁵

Indeed, McKinley can be considered one of the first presidents to deal with such large-scale global issues. Yet his modus operandi added an element of uncertainty as the war was developing. As historian H. Wayne Morgan wrote, "The most remarkable aspect of his diplomacy was its lack of public focus. Cuba was obviously foremost in his thoughts, yet he never clearly defined what he proposed to do about it." Similarly, historian Stanley Karnow commented, "Little in his personal papers reveals his real sentiments, and his public statements were masterpieces of ambiguity that sound like deliberate satires." This stance opened McKinley to criticism even from fellow Republicans. As the war progressed, the lack of clear objectives would greatly influence the soldiers' experience in the field.⁶

Americans captivated by the Cuban story and a sense of grand adventure came from all walks of life. Stearns County in central Minnesota, home to the ambitious volunteers of the Thirteenth Minnesota's Company M, was a region of nearly 45,000 souls, the great majority of them German Catholic. Residents tended to vote Democratic, although Republican pockets existed. This small but important group proved significant as the Spanish war began. Local newspapers revealed in 1898 that, while Democrats perceived President McKinley as a shifty, evasive leader, area Republicans viewed him as a man of quiet wisdom and bravery.⁷

Newspapers, routinely allied with political parties in this era, did much to shape public opinion in the run-up to war, leading Senator Davis to comment: "The origin of this peculiar power of the newspaper is very recent." Local arguments for intervention in Cuba paralleled national sentiment in many ways. Three newspapers shared the majority of the Stearns County readership: Alvah



"Uncle Sam to Spain—I propose to Feed Starving Cuba—With your Consent if You Please, Without It If You Don't! See?" St. Cloud Journal-Press reprint of a Minneapolis Journal cartoon, March 31, 1898

Eastman's Republican *St. Cloud Journal-Press* provided insight to the actions and opinions of state Republicans who controlled the governor's office and the Minnesota National Guard. The *St. Cloud Times* and its editor, Colin Macdonald, served the large Democratic audience. Gerhard May's German-language paper, *Der Nordstern*, which held the largest circulation, reached the county's many immigrant and ethnic Democrats, especially in rural areas.⁸

At first, both Macdonald and Eastman favored the diplomatic course McKinley pursued. But after the February sinking of the *Maine*, each, at his own pace, moved toward advocating a military response. Macdonald, the Democrat, expressed a more urgent tone, appealing for a swifter course, while Eastman initially preferred the White House's methodical strategy. Eventually, both the Democratic *Times* and Republican *Journal-Press* came to favor American intervention, although this unanimity would later unravel.

May, of *Der Nordstern*, sympathized with the Cubans but adamantly opposed the war from several angles, including the potential for risky foreign alliances. His experiences growing up in Germany perhaps influenced this view. May believed that the working class would carry the burden of front-line combat while the upper classes prof-

"TELL THE BOYS TO RALLY ROUND THE FLAG. I HAVE GOT MY COMMISSION."

ited through business ventures. Instead of fighting Spain, he preferred to see the U.S. address domestic issues such as increased wages for the working class or improved agricultural prices for farmers.⁹ Yet Stearns County war enthusiasm continued, despite any perceived drawbacks.

By March 1898—a month before war was declared—area citizens moved to form a militia company. First, the community chose James E. McKelvy, the county sheriff and, as a former U.S. cavalry soldier, the area's leading military figure, to head the company. McKelvy's prestige equaled his own ambition and skill. His father, James M., had established the family's roots in St. Cloud. The senior McKelvy practiced law and socialized in Republican circles, thus broadening the scope of his personal and professional connections around the state. James E., perhaps inspired by his father's service for the Union in the Civil War, enlisted in the army when he was 18. His military career included tours in the West during the Indian wars of the 1880s. He had returned to St. Cloud in 1892 and began working at the police department before becoming county sheriff.¹⁰

Word that a militia company was forming reached the streets as McKelvy and others distributed posters that described requirements for volunteers. Qualifications included a minimum height of five feet, four inches, weight between 125 and 200 pounds, and the ability to perform specific breathing exercises. Macdonald and Eastman both championed the cause through persuasive editorials. In early April, the *St. Cloud Journal-Press* noted public anticipation: "In view of the patriotic feeling abroad in the land just now and the probability that the state would do something handsome in the way of equipment in uniforms, arms, etc., there has been a decided revival in the interest [in forming a company]." ¹¹

It did not take long to fill the ranks. By April 25 the *St. Cloud Times* reported, "There are now more than 150 names on the list of those who want to volunteer. . . . Letters and telegrams are pouring in every day." Two days later, the *Times* captured the local mood: "The war feeling is spreading in St. Cloud. The young men who are interested in forming a company of the National Guards here are already talking of going to the front and their only fear seems to be that they are not going to get a chance."¹²

Meanwhile, prominent St. Cloud Republicans, including Dolson B. Searle, Loren W. Collins, Captain McKelvy, and Alvah Eastman, worked to get the company accepted into one of the state's three National Guard regiments. The contingent needed to practice some political maneuvering, as the regiments apparently were already at full strength. After several meetings with Governor David Clough and Adjutant General Herman Muehlberg of the Minnesota National Guard, the group succeeded. Around noon on April 28, Francis Huber, a watchman at the Stearns County Jail, received a telegram from McKelvy: "Tell the boys to rally round the flag. I have got my commission. Leave [St. Cloud] Saturday morning." The new Company M was assigned to the Thirteenth Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, a regiment of mostly Twin Cities men who seemed unimpressed by the Stearns County recruits.¹³



Company M's Captain James McKelvy, studio portrait, 1899

Confirmation notice created a flurry of activity. A local committee hastily formed to plan a departure ceremony, and area businesses got into the act by decorating their buildings. Several hundred men had volunteered for the 100 available positions in the company. They came from across Stearns County, but most were from St. Cloud. U.S. Army regulations provided guidelines for any potential recruit, to which McKelvy added, "I want young men, well and strong and good shots." Acceptable ages ranged from the late teens to thirties. Henry J. Limperich, 33, and 21-year-old Leigh D. Bruckart, both with St. Cloud connections, were appointed lieutenants. McKelvy's previous military experience certainly played a significant role as he narrowed the large volunteer pool. Within a day, he chose the top 100.¹⁴

April 30 dawned with a drizzly rain, "wet as were the eyes of many loved ones left behind," the *St. Cloud Times* observed. Volunteers experienced a whirlwind of activities as citizens by the thousands gathered at Court House Square in St. Cloud to honor them. The "boys" began their parade there, trudging through the rain-soaked streets past a cheering crowd. Several blocks along the route, Civil War veterans congregated at the Mitchell Building, voicing a resounding chorus of support. The men eventually made their way to the Davidson Opera House, a 1,000-seat theater, where public speakers stated their convictions, goals, and patriotic sentiments.¹⁵

Community leaders invoked Civil War glories, Spanish human-rights violations, and the sinking of the *Maine*. Republicans and Democrats offered unified support for the volunteers and the war. *St. Cloud Times* editor Macdonald, also the commander of the McKelvy Post of the Grand Army of the Republic, stated, "Captain McKelvy and Company, This gathering of our citizens, the decoration of our public buildings and business places, and the demonstration of today in your honor, bespeak the appreciation which our people feel at your brave conduct in volunteering at your country's call." Other speakers naïvely stated that the United States did not seek material gain but was helping the Cuban people gain independence. What was unknown and unsaid would prove equally important: complex issues and their consequences would dissolve this unity.

The volunteers, bound for Camp Ramsey on the state

fairgrounds in St. Paul, hoped that Cuba would be their assignment. They boarded railroad cars to the sound of booming cannons. Ripley Brower, a respected St. Cloud lawyer, expressed residents' concern as he presented the men with an American flag: "Take it and when you are in your camp or when you are arm to arm and shoulder to shoulder with the boys in blue beneath its curling folds remember that the friends at home are thinking of you and longing for your safe and speedy return."

At Camp Ramsey, the new volunteers soon glimpsed the seriousness of war. Captain McKelvy noted, "It is a big job to get a green company drilled, armed and clothed ready for the field." The company worked diligently to hone military skills and earn a respectable reputation. Henry Fischer later wrote that other companies viewed them as farmers. Added Lt. Bruckart, "We all felt that we were looked upon as intruders by the ten national guard companies and that we must work hard to overcome that view."¹⁶

Certainly, troop readiness concerned McKelvy, but other issues existed as well. Varied reports indicated a lack of food. Shortages of uniforms, tents, blankets, and weapons affected training. Only half of the 3,600 men at the camp could bear arms, gun slings, and bayonets. The *Journal-Press* reported, "In the midst of the hurry and worry of the life at Camp Ramsey, Captain McKelvy and his two lieutenants had about all they could do in getting the equipment for the boys. This left the work of drilling the boys in the hands of the non-commissioned officers."¹⁷

Many troops, including Company M, slept in horse and cattle barns. Those in tents did not fare much better. Up to six men slept in each, the majority without blankets in the near-freezing May temperatures. The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* perhaps understated the reality: "In such cases there was no cause for apprehension, as the men found their quarters were so warm that blankets were not necessary. They are becoming accustomed to the routine of camp life and find it much more pleasant than on the initial day."¹⁸ The volunteers reportedly viewed inconveniences as temporary and remained upbeat.

In early May, word from the front reached Camp Ramsey. Commodore George Dewey's victory over the

"...WET AS WERE THE EYES OF MANY LOVED ONES LEFT BEHIND."

Spanish fleet in Manila Bay all but eliminated its ability to attack the West Coast. This encouraging news added to the volunteers' enthusiasm. On May 12 the Thirteenth Regiment received orders to Camp Merritt in San Francisco and, from there, to the Philippines.¹⁹

This assignment would challenge the abilities of officers and volunteers alike—largely, historians agree, because of poor planning. According to David F. Trask, “The failure of the President to press for extensive prewar preparations and campaign planning inhibited the War Department during the last months before war, but important internal weaknesses in the department and the army itself also played a significant role.” Morgan adds that military commanders had little inkling of their fu-

ture assignment, as “McKinley said nothing of Philippine independence, but promised cooperation and kindness; events would formulate a firmer policy as soon as he had adequate information.”²⁰

The volunteers, unaware of these problems, marched past cheering crowds and flag-waving friends to the train depot and their four-day trip west. Henry Tenvoorde of Company M reported his comrades' mood: “The boys want to get to the front as soon as possible, and have a share in the actual work. I think our Minnesota troops will compare with any in the country, and when the time comes, will be able to sustain the reputation which the old First made at Gettysburg.” After five weeks at Camp Merritt, the soldiers left for the Philippines on June 26.²¹

Crowds jamming Washington Avenue, Minneapolis, to honor the Thirteenth Minnesota, bound for the Philippines in May 1898



The *City of Para*, a Pacific Mail Steamship Company relic, took the Minnesota men across the Pacific. As Iver Engebretson, Company M, put it, “The ship was chartered for 600, and we had 1200 on board so you see that we were somewhat crowded.” Hastily refitted as a transport ship, it had three decks. The upper deck quartered the officers in staterooms; the band and hospital corps bunked in the middle, and the lower deck held the volunteers. Rank conferred privilege: the bottom deck was narrow and dark. Long rows of bunks loomed three levels high. John Bowe, Company B, wrote in his diary, “There was scarcely any ventilation; the place smelled like a rabbit warren, and it was oppressively hot.” Only one man at a time could pass along the narrow aisle. Many soon chose to sleep on deck under the stars rather than in the dark, dingy quarters below.²² If Camp Ramsey had not been experience enough, the *City of Para* introduced the volunteers to army life.

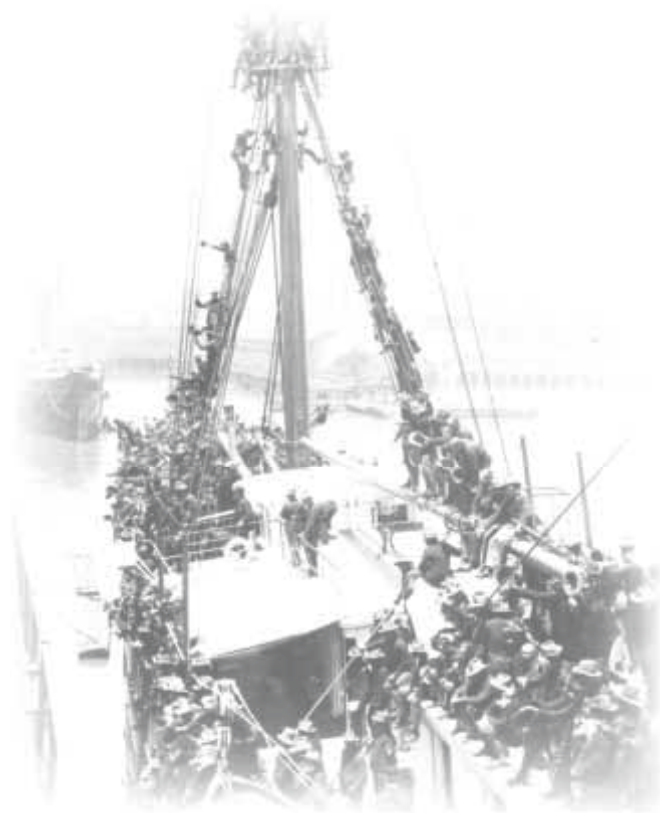
Food rations continued to be a problem. Bowe wrote, “The food was bad and not enough to go around.” The volunteers ate maggoty meat, complaining to their com-

manding officers to no avail. Their diet consisted of mostly rice and bread. They drank heated saltwater, often near 100 degrees, while officers enjoyed a variety of foods, alcohol, and other amenities. Bowe commented about this disparity, “The officers, in their cool cabins in the upper decks, had ice water, and even their beer on ice.” Much as they had at Camp Ramsey, the volunteers stated little in public while trying to make the best of the situation.²³

The journey also provided the men some opportunity to relax after the rigors of training. Volunteers wrote letters home, watched marine wildlife following the ship, soaked up the sun on deck or watched the waves in their endless pattern across the horizon. They even enjoyed a few days on the Hawaiian Islands. The men discussed the future of these islands, a hot political topic of the day, many favoring annexation to the United States on the basis of sheer beauty alone. Thoughts of the good life and returning home circulated. All of this cheer and relaxation would end soon enough.²⁴

Minnesota volunteers disembarked from their month-long floating home on August 7, 1898, at Camp Dewey, a peanut field south of Manila that became the center for American troops on the islands. “Of course it was raining, but the rain in no way affected the enthusiasm of the soldiers, they had put ten thousand miles between themselves and home for the purpose of paying their little tribute to the memory of the Maine, and now was the time and here was the place,” wrote John Bowe. The ability to adapt to the Philippine climate would be critical for survival. First impressions did not lead to optimism. “It rained all the time we were at Camp Dewey. It was the wettest, muddiest, and most miserable camp that we had during the war,” Bowe continued. There were other complaints, as well. One soldier told attorney Brower in St. Cloud, “Sanitation! What there is of it consists of ditches on the surface and these only in the city and you can imagine in a climate like this where meat has to be eaten the same day it is butchered and the ground soggy and rain-soaked continually.”²⁵

Rain often topped the list of grievances. Bowe reported, “The road and surrounding country is covered with water and we could no more see the road than we could fly. Rain has been falling steadily now for eighty-four hours.” The troops later endured a month with more than 35 inches of precipitation. Survival took enormous effort. Clothing never dried out. Equipment needed con-



The City of Para with the Thirteenth Minnesota aboard, departing San Francisco, June 26, 1898

"WE PUT OUR BAYONETS ON AND POLITELY REQUESTED THEM TO STAND BACK OR BE VENTILATED. THEY STOOD BACK."

stant cleaning and lubrication. Sleeping quarters often remained wet, muddy, and sometimes moldy. The men nonetheless readied for the task they had anticipated since recruitment in April.²⁶

By the time Company M arrived, the Spanish were confined in Manila. In May 1898, after conferring with Admiral Dewey, exiled Filipino leader Emilio Aguinaldo had returned from Hong Kong and raised an army. On June 12, he declared independence from Spain. By July he had secured the rural areas and, with American help, contained the Spanish in the city. By August, the Spanish realized their fate: the Filipinos controlled the countryside; the Americans, the sea and beyond. To maintain dignity and minimize casualties, the Spanish governor of Manila and its Roman Catholic bishop negotiated with Dewey to offer only token resistance to any attack and guarantee capitulation. In return, the Americans would prevent Aguinaldo's troops from entering the city.²⁷

On August 13 American troops stormed Manila. Company M played a prominent role in the battle. Soldiers' letters reveal how they confronted both the Spanish and the Filipinos, who were poised for their moment of victory. Fred Gregory of Company F described the scene: "We had a sharp fight and an exhausting day of it and after the fight lay down in the mud and water and slept as peacefully as I ever did at the Grand Central [a St. Cloud hotel]. We put our bayonets on and politely

requested them to stand back or be ventilated. They stood back." Bowe recounted, "Company M was scattered among the bushes, snipping [*sic*] away at the Spaniards in the trees and trenches immediately in front. . . . Capt. McKelvy, with his hat stuck on one side, was having the time of his life, turning Spanish sharpshooters into aerial acrobats."²⁸

By day's end, American forces had captured hundreds of Spanish prisoners and taken control of the city. Many Filipinos concluded that their dream of independence was near. On the other hand, American troops, Company M included, saw their victory purely as retribution against Spain for sinking the *Maine* and for Cuban atrocities. These differing viewpoints laid the foundation for future trouble.²⁹

"We all expected to return to the United States when peace was declared," Lt. Limperich wrote in October 1898, "but the prospect is now more remote than ever and I think that we will be kept here for some time to come." The Spanish-American War had ended in August, when Washington and Madrid agreed to a ceasefire. Cuba would become independent; Guam and Puerto Rico were ceded to the U.S., and a decision on the Philippine Islands was deferred until a later peace conference. For the Philippines, a new era began, marked by a

Camp Dewey, a wet, muddy peanut field south of Manila, photographed by Company M's Lt. Henry Limperich



"I HAVE SEEN BIG BURLY FELLOWS, NOT BOYS, BUT MEN 35 AND 40 YEARS OF AGE BREAK DOWN AND CRY LIKE BABIES BECAUSE THEY RECEIVED NO MAIL."

strained relationship with the Americans. Did McKinley favor independence, annexation, or a policy somewhere in between? Filipino inquiries about the American presence on the islands received vague responses. Distance played a role in this, as cables lagged between Washington and military commanders in the field. More troublesome for the army was the president's continued failure to disclose his intentions.³⁰

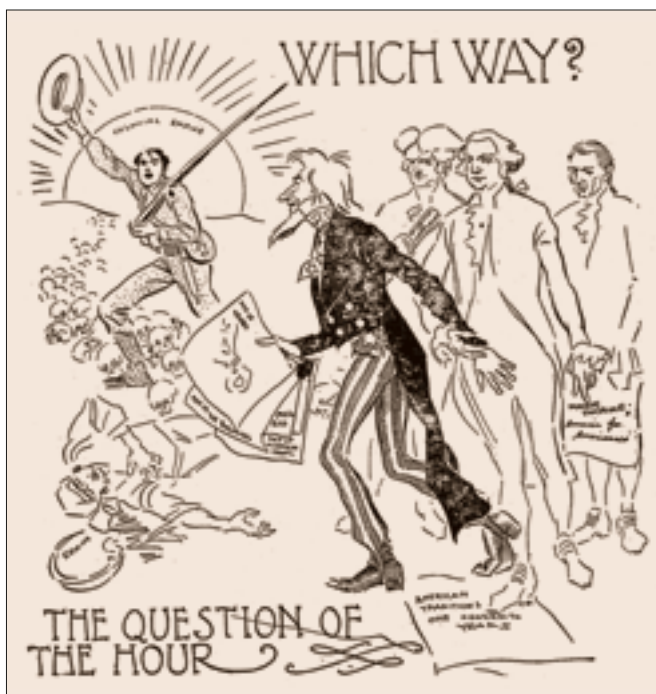
Lacking clear direction, American commanders juggled troops to fulfill specific tasks while attempting to address Filipino concerns about their independence. Duties varied from promoting economic recovery to enforcing civil order. Company M's responsibilities included policing, making arrests for petty crimes, and maintaining general order. Other army personnel worked on reestablishing clean drinking water. The Filipinos simultaneously pursued their own aims. The *St. Cloud Times* reported, "In declaring their independence before the

arrival of our soldiers, the Philippine insurgents appear to have intended to put in a bid to be left in control of the islands."³¹

The situation reached the point of chaos. In October, Lt. Limperich recorded, "Everything goes in a hurry here at present, and orders are issued and then countermanded with such regularity that we are kept in a continual turmoil." This confusion added to the growing tension between the Americans and the Filipinos. Peter H. Schumacher, Company M, wrote home about the deteriorating conditions: "We were in almost constant fear of being attacked by the natives. They all carry big knives, and you have to be on the lookout, or they will run a knife into you almost any time." Herbert A. Morrison from Melrose simply observed, "We are having all kinds of trouble with the natives." Limperich explained in a letter home, "From the commencement of hostilities, the Filipinos acceded to all American requests, but after bottling up the Spaniards in Manila, the Filipinos were completely ignored when the Americans advanced and thus deprived of the fruits of victory." Despite the setback, Filipinos continued to apply political and military pressure, seeking leverage to determine their own future.³²

For the Americans, mail from home was a critical morale booster. Joy for one often followed heartbreak for others, as a volunteer stated: "I have seen big burly fellows, not boys, but men 35 and 40 years of age break down and cry like babies because they received no mail." Limperich noted in October, "For two long months there has hardly been a word from home, not even newspapers."³³

When mail did arrive, the men enjoyed reading the newspapers' extensive coverage of local events. One Company M volunteer wrote, "A bundle of *Daily Times*, which had reached Manila on the previous mail, were received with cheers." By the autumn of 1898, articles and editorials from Stearns County were depicting the growing division over the American role on the islands. Volunteers read Republican Eastman's stand for maintaining a presence in the Philippines and Democrat Macdonald's arguments for bringing the troops home. These conflicting opinions must have added to their developing disillusionment.³⁴



Trampling "American Traditions of One Hundred Years," Uncle Sam strides toward the sunshine of "Colonial Empire," while George Washington points to the "Monroe Doctrine—America for Americans"; *St. Cloud Times*, August 24, 1898

By November, most men were clearly anxious to return home. U.S. military plans continued to be murky. The *Minneapolis Journal* quoted the Thirteenth Minnesota's assistant surgeon Arthur Law: "Not a man has yet expressed any other wish except to go home again, regulars and volunteers alike." The *St. Cloud Times* published comments from the field: "We enlisted for two years or the war! The war is over! Our agreement is fulfilled! We do not wish to do garrison duty here!" Henry Fischer's opinion was similar: "It has been almost six months since I left St. Cloud, anxious to get home again. Capt. McKelvy, Lieut. Bruckart and Lieut. Limperich, have the same feeling, but it looks as if we were billed to stay here until our full two years' enlistment period is up."³⁵

Others complained about military and environmental conditions, sanitation, and the insects that seemed to be everywhere. Not all felt this way, however. Fred Gregory, Company F, voiced a minority opinion: "If America keeps these islands, as she ought to, there are some of the greatest chances to make money in the world." By late December, when the *St. Cloud Journal-Press* published these remarks, Filipino fate was sealed. On December 10, Spain sold the islands to the U.S. for \$20 million.³⁶

On February 4, 1899, tensions exploded into armed combat as the Filipinos clashed with U.S. occupation forces. The ensuing war, in which Filipinos were labeled "insurgents," pitted freedom and self-rule against foreign control and foreign economic opportunities. Stearns County editors provided some insight into the widening political division back home. Eastman immediately editorialized, "If the insurgents should be reckless enough to kill a single American soldier this Philippine question would be settled, and settled right and there would be no division among American ranks." Macdonald countered, "For the first time in the history of the American republic, its army and navy was employed . . . in battling against a people who are fighting for their liberty." One week later Eastman asserted, "The United States forces captured Manila from Spain, and the insurgents had no more right to it than they have to St. Cloud." The editorial debate continued to unfold as American soldiers battled an enemy they did not initially intend to fight.³⁷

Company M participated in 24 military engagements in Manila and the countryside in 1899. The main American objectives—eliminating Filipino military capability while restoring order—remained easier said than done.

Guerillas harassed American troops and subverted political attempts to influence the local population. Captain McKelvy wrote to a friend, "If I am lucky in this game of cards and get home again to those that are dear to me, I will never leave them again. You are a lucky man that you did not come along, for there is only turmoil, toil, and strife." Many shared the view of an unidentified Thirteenth Regiment soldier who wrote, "This is as disagreeable a place as I ever saw. Of course, the boys don't write home to their folks and tell them how bad it is."³⁸ As the war progressed, weary soldiers anticipated their orders to go home. Frequent rumors circulated about mustering out, only to be unfulfilled.

The war took its toll on Company M. Illness was a constant threat. Dozens of volunteers were on the sick roll, spending days or even weeks in the hospital. McKelvy himself spent time in sickbay. Sources vary, but the official history of the Thirteenth Regiment lists 43 deaths from disease attributed to the environment—two of them in Company M. Contaminated drinking water was a major concern. Laboring in sultry temperatures, the men drank directly from streams. Frank J. Ruff, Company M, described the conditions: "There is fever, small pox, rheumatism, dysentery, etc., most of it coming from bad water. It must be boiled before drinking, but you cannot always get boiled water when you are dry and then it is drank unboiled."³⁹

Combat, of course, also caused misery. The *St. Cloud Times* reported, for example, the story of "young Egidius J. Fehr, who went through Honolulu in the third Philippine expedition less than a year ago, healthy, strong, and anxious for the fray, and now returns to his Minnesota



LEFT: Colin Macdonald, editor of the *Democratic St. Cloud Times*, 1881. RIGHT: Alvah Eastman, voice of the *Republican St. Cloud Journal-Press*, about 1885

home a very much crippled and emaciated piece of humanity.” The St. Cloud boy had enlisted at age 18 and faced some of the most intense combat, receiving multiple wounds. In one encounter, nearly 40 Filipinos separated Fehr and six others from their line. They managed to escape, but both of Fehr’s legs were broken, his left arm shattered, and he was shot in the chest. He arrived in San Francisco for treatment, “where he will remain until his regiment is discharged, and then he will go back home to be numbered among his country’s heroes,” the *Times* reported. Fehr survived his ordeal, and Company M maintained its record of not losing a single man in combat.⁴⁰



Young Egidius J. Fehr, Company M, who survived extensive combat injuries

While troops dealt with the dangers of front-line duty, citizens back home found themselves questioning the role of American forces in the Philippines. Local editors fueled the debate that generally followed party lines. Democrat Colin Macdonald favored a return of Company M. His *St. Cloud Times* editorials during the second half of 1898 and throughout 1899 aggressively questioned the American role in the Philippines and President McKinley’s political aims. By this time, Democrat John Lind had replaced Republican Clough as governor and was working through political channels to bring the state’s volunteers home. In July 1899 Macdonald was writing, “The now admitted bad situation in the Philippines is one to cause this nation as a people to feel humiliation before the world. The campaign against the Filipinos, notwithstanding the rose-colored telegrams of Gen. Otis, is now shown to be a failure.” The Democrats’ position irked McKinley, as many had clamored for war in 1898.⁴¹

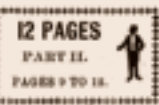
Local Republicans read their party philosophy, as well. *St. Cloud Journal-Press* editor Eastman reacted to Macdonald’s rhetoric by stressing American honor in retaining troops in the Philippines. He espoused patriotic themes, claiming that loyal Americans should support the president and the troops. Talk about bringing them home especially frustrated Eastman. He retorted to Macdonald’s arguments:

Governor Lind would humiliate the state of Minnesota by having its legislature adopt a resolution calling upon the administration to bring back at once the Thirteenth regiment from the Philippines, notwithstanding the fact that every soldier now there is needed to uphold the honor and defend the authority of the American flag. . . . The war in the Philippines is part of the war with Spain, and while the boys in the Thirteenth are doubtless, many of them at least, anxious to come home, they are neither cowards nor infants in arms, and they want to finish up the work they have so well begun.⁴²

Debate soon cooled. In the summer of 1899, the Thirteenth Minnesota received orders to head home. They departed on August 12, arrived at San Francisco September 17, and mustered out on October 3, 1899.⁴³ (The conflict would grind on until July 1902—almost four years after the ceasefire with Spain.) Stearns County residents reacted to the much-anticipated news by formulating plans for a celebration.



The Saint Cloud Times.



VOL. XXXIX.

ST. CLOUD, MINN., WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 11, 1899.

NO. 32.

COMPANY M HOME COMING

Arrangements Approaching Completion for Saturday's Demonstration in Honor of St. Cloud's Soldier Boys Return.

School Children's Parade in the Afternoon—Every Child to Carry the Star Spangled Banner.

Company M With its Springfield Rifles Will Give an Exhibition Drill in the Afternoon.

Addresses at Empire Park in the Afternoon by Several Distinguished Speakers, Including Gov. Lind.

Banquet to Company M Will be from Five to Seven O'clock in Evening at the West House Dining Room.



Our Gallant Brave Soldier Boys. Let Us All Join on Saturday to Celebrate their Return Home.

The process began slowly. St. Cloud Mayor John McDonald called a public meeting in late July, seeking volunteers for a welcome-home committee. A scheduling conflict resulted in no one attending, causing *St. Cloud Times* editor Macdonald to react disappointedly, "If one of the gallant boys of Company M looked in, he would have thought: 'Where, o where are the thousands who bade us good-bye when we went to the war?'"⁴⁴ The mayor then appointed a committee, knowing it would take time to prepare a large-scale event.

Had the public grown numb to the war and returned to the routine of daily life? Macdonald's editorials indicated a change in local attitude and, all efforts aside, it appears that community spirit never achieved prewar levels. Nonetheless, the appointed committee gained momentum as it organized meetings, arranged speakers, planned a parade, and gathered volunteers to serve a welcome-home dinner. Residents also donated funds to help defray transportation costs. Angering many, the army required the men of the Thirteenth Minnesota to muster out in San Francisco and pay their own travel home.⁴⁵

On October 14, Company M returned to St. Cloud, a full 18 months after departing. Nearly 4,000 people, a somewhat disappointing number according to newspaper reports, gathered in the city's Empire Park on a chilly, wet afternoon. The crowd listened as speakers paid homage to the volunteers, first in German and then in English.

Their speeches noticeably avoided the controversial issues that had developed since the volunteers' departure, focusing instead on military performance. Fred Schilpin, representing Mayor McDonald, declared, "You return to us laden with honors. We are proud of the record of the Granite City boys and for this we are glad to see you. You have performed the full measure of your duty." Perceived by some as backwoods characters on their departure, the men returned as distinguished soldiers who had loyally served their country.

Company M's experiences—from recruitment through mustering out—caused a dramatic change in the volunteers' viewpoints. Their letters and diaries, often quoted in contemporary newspaper articles, show that the men understood their initial mission as serving their country. They were drawn into war for humanitarian reasons and provoked by the sinking of the *Maine*. They knew little of the Philippines, its troubled history with Spain, or long-term American objectives, but they did understand the immediate goal of defeating the Spaniards in Manila. After succeeding at this, they continued to serve with no clearly stated purpose. The sometimes contradictory field orders and lack of concrete accomplishments, compounded by challenging environmental conditions, eroded morale and caused some to question the war.

Why did the McKinley administration consider the Philippines to be different from Cuba? Historians posit several reasons. Key documents reveal the president's concern over a power vacuum if the Americans vacated the islands. A German presence and Japanese interest in the region raised the stakes, and McKinley concluded that other countries should not benefit from the fruits of American efforts. In an age of imperialism, the president also believed that America's reputation among the world powers would suffer if he ordered a withdrawal.⁴⁶

While in the field, Company M members began to see similarities between Cuba and the Philippines. Many came to believe that Filipino nationalists were fighting for a just cause. Years later, John B. Pattison, Company M's quartermaster sergeant, reflected on his experiences. He recalled the widespread desire to volunteer and serve: "There were 15 and 16 year olds who lied about their age

just so they could get in." Like many Stearns County volunteers, he was captivated, at the age of 21, by the excitement and a chance for active involvement, but the reality of war changed him. Pattison remained proud of the work Company M performed but wondered if he would make the same decision again. "I've done a lot of thinking since the Spanish-American war and I'm not so sure I would be as eager to enter the fighting as I was 70 years ago."⁴⁷

Lewis Burlingham, a Thirteenth Minnesota volunteer, perhaps best summed up the soldiers' changed attitudes in a remarkably frank letter home. In June 1899 the 20-year-old confided to his parents: "Why did the U.S. go to war with Spain? Why did she take this white elephant on her hands then she turns around and does what Spain was doing when we interfered . . . all done for greed. This war here is nothing but a damn political and religious affair."⁴⁸ □

Welcoming the Thirteenth Minnesota back from the Philippines, Minneapolis, October 1899



Notes

1. *St. Cloud Times*, July 19, 1899. Local newspapers frequently printed excerpts of letters from the front; unless otherwise noted, all such quotes are from newspapers.

2. David F. Trask, *The War with Spain in 1898* (New York: Macmillan, 1981), 8–11, 31; Stanley Karnow, *In Our Image* (New York: Random House, 1989), 10–11; Ivan Musicant, *Empire By Default* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998), 29. Historians have debated whether public opinion influenced American action in Cuba. Hay was ambassador to Great Britain until August 1898, when he was appointed secretary of state.

3. Trask, *War with Spain*, 24–36; Adam Scher, “Spanish-American War Collections at the Minnesota Historical Society,” *Minnesota History* 56 (Fall 1998): 130. Congress declared Cuban independence on April 19, leading Spain to declare war on the U.S. on April 24. Congress’s April 25 reciprocal declaration was retroactive to April 21.

4. Barbara Stuhler, *Ten Men of Minnesota and American Foreign Policy, 1898–1968* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1973), 15–31; H. Wayne Morgan, *America’s Road to Empire* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1964), 22–23; Trask, *War with Spain*, 14, 74–79.

5. Morgan, *America’s Road*, 74–75; Trask, *War with Spain*, 14, 72–83.

6. Morgan, *America’s Road*, 25; Karnow, *In Our Image*, 91; *St. Cloud Times*, Oct. 18, 1899; *St. Cloud Journal-Press*, Apr. 21, 1898, Aug. 11, 1898; Musicant, *Empire*, 9.

7. Hildegard Binder Johnson, “The Germans,” in *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State’s Ethnic Groups*, ed. June D. Holmquist (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1981), 167; *Legislative Manual of the State of Minnesota, 1899*, 484–85, 506; *St. Cloud Times*, Apr. 13, 1898; *St. Cloud Journal-Press*, Apr. 21, Aug. 11, 1898.

8. *National Printer Journalist* (Chicago), Jan. 1901, p. 18; *American Newspaper Annual and Directory* (Philadelphia: N. W. Ayers and Sons, 1900). Circulation for Stearns Co. papers in 1900 was: *St. Cloud Times*, 2,975; *St. Cloud Journal-Press*, 2,800; *Der Nordstern*, 6,200; *Melrose Anzeiger*, 1,956; *Melrose Beacon*, 500; *Sauk Centre Herald*, 875; *Sauk Centre Avalanche*, 720. Regarding the recently purchased *Der Nordstern*, the *St. Cloud Times*, Dec. 15, 1892, stated: “The new owners announce that the paper will be Democratic at all times and under all circumstances, and support all county, state, and national nominees of the party.”

9. Gerhard May biography file, Stearns History Museum, St. Cloud; *Der Nordstern*, Apr. 7, 21, 1898. Many other German editors in Minnesota shared May’s viewpoint; Carol A. Mayer, “Editorial Opinion in Minnesota’s German Language Weeklies, 1890–1920” (master’s thesis, St. Cloud State College, 1974), 82.

10. McKelvy biography file, Stearns History Museum; *St. Cloud Times*, Aug. 1, 1884;

St. Cloud Journal-Press, July 21, 1898.

11. *St. Cloud Journal-Press*, Apr. 7, 1898. Before 1898, neither *St. Cloud* nor Stearns County had a volunteer militia company, although newspapers reported citizen interest over the years.

12. *St. Cloud Times*, Apr. 25, 27, 1898.
13. *St. Cloud Times* and *St. Cloud Journal-Press*, Apr. 28, 1898. Both dailies covered the unfolding events from Thursday April 28 through Saturday April 30. All Minnesota volunteers arrived in St. Paul on April 29—except Co. M, which was delayed by the acceptance process; *Journal-Press*, Oct. 12, 1899, Aug. 27, 1908.

The state granted Civil War veterans’ requests that the First, Second, and Third regimental names be reserved due to their historic significance; thus, the First became the Thirteenth Regiment. Franklin F. Holbrook, *Minnesota in the Spanish-American War and the Philippine Insurrection* (St. Paul: Minnesota War Records Commission, 1923), 20.

14. *St. Cloud Times*, May 4, 1898; Holbrook, *Minnesota in the Spanish-American War*, 282.

15. Here and two paragraphs below, *St. Cloud Times*, May 4, 1898.

16. *Journal-Press*, July 21, 1898, Oct. 12, 1899.

17. *Journal-Press*, May 19, 1898.

18. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, May 3, 1898.

19. Holbrook, *Minnesota in the Spanish-American War*, 47.

20. Trask, *War with Spain*, 154; Morgan, *America’s Road*, 77.

21. *St. Cloud Times*, May 11, 1898; Holbrook, *Minnesota in the Spanish-American War*, 48.

22. *St. Cloud Times*, July 27, 1898; John Bowe, *With the 13th Minnesota in the Philippines* (Minneapolis: A. B. Farnham, 1905), 24. Bowe assures readers that this published version of his diary had no oversight or approval from commanding officers.

23. Bowe, *With the 13th*, 24–26.

24. Bowe, *With the 13th*, 24; *Journal-Press*, July 21, 1898. The Hawaiian Islands were annexed on July 7, during the regiment’s three-day stay in Honolulu; Holbrook, *Minnesota in the Spanish-American War*, 49; Trask, *War With Spain*, 388–90.

25. Bowe, *With the 13th*, 30–31, 33; *Journal-Press*, Sept. 29, 1898.

26. Bowe, *With the 13th*, 141–42.

27. David Trask, “The Spanish-American War,” Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/rr/hispanic/1898/trask.html (accessed May 1, 2008); Trask, *War with Spain*, 402–10. Dewey became a rear admiral on May 11, 1898; www.history.navy.mil/bios/dewey_george (accessed Dec. 4, 2008).

28. *St. Cloud Times*, Nov. 9, 1898; Holbrook, *Minnesota in the Spanish-American*

War, 52–54, 242; Bowe, *With the 13th*, 34–35.

29. *Journal-Press*, Oct. 20, Nov. 10, 1898.

30. *St. Cloud Times*, Oct. 19, 1898. Morgan, *America’s Road*, 75: “Opinion over retaining the islands was divided within the administration.”

31. *St. Cloud Times*, Sept. 14, 1898; *Journal-Press*, Feb. 16, 1899; Graham A. Cosmas, *Army for Empire* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1971), 116–21.

32. *St. Cloud Times*, Oct. 19, 1898, Mar. 15, 1899, Oct. 26, 1898.

33. *St. Cloud Times*, Aug. 9, 1899, Oct. 19, 1898.

34. *St. Cloud Times*, Dec. 28, 1898 (quote). On divided opinions see, for example, *St. Cloud Times*, Nov. 30, 1898; *Journal-Press*, May 4, 11, 1899.

35. *Minneapolis Journal*, reprinted in *St. Cloud Times*, Nov. 2, 1898; *St. Cloud Times*, Oct. 26, Dec. 7, 1898.

36. *St. Cloud Times*, Nov. 2, 30, 1898; *Journal-Press*, Nov. 10, Dec. 22, 1898 (quote); Trask, “Spanish-American War.”

37. *Journal-Press*, Feb. 2, Feb. 16, 1899; Trask, “Spanish-American War”; *St. Cloud Times*, Nov. 16, Nov. 30, 1898, Feb. 8, 1899. The Spanish began using the term *insurrectos* (insurgents) in the 1870s. Americans continued this identification; Trask, *War with Spain*, 391–402.

38. *St. Cloud Times*, July 19, 1899, Nov. 30, 1898.

39. *St. Cloud Times*, Feb. 15, 1899; Martin E. Tew, “Official History of the Operations of the 13th Minnesota Infantry, U.S.V.” in Karl I. Faust, *Campaigning in the Philippines* (San Francisco: Hicks-Judd Co., 1899), 87 (Co. M). To tally all of the regiment’s casualties, see p. 47, 63, 67, 71, 75, 79, 83, 91, 95, 99, 103, 107. *St. Cloud* newspapers reported 45 deaths; Holbrook, *Minnesota in the Spanish-American War*, 625, lists 34.

40. *St. Cloud Times*, Aug. 9, 1899; Tew, “Official History,” 87.

41. The *Journal-Press*, Apr. 27, 1899, reported Lind’s effort, which failed, and similar attempts in other states. *St. Cloud Times*, July 19, 1899; Morgan, *America’s Road*, 101.

42. *Journal-Press*, Apr. 27, 1899.

43. Holbrook, *Minnesota in the Spanish-American War*, 70–71.

44. *St. Cloud Times*, July 26, 1899.

45. Here and below, *Journal-Press*, Oct. 19, 1899.

46. Morgan, *America’s Road*, 74–75, 85–88, 94–97; Trask, *War With Spain*, 481–86.

47. *St. Cloud Times*, Mar. 24, 1969; Holbrook, *Minnesota in the Spanish-American War*, 282.

48. Scher, “Spanish-American War Collections,” 137. Burlingham served in Co. K; Holbrook, *Minnesota in the Spanish-American War*, 270.

The photos on p. 295, 299, and 302 are from the collections of the Stearns County Historical Society, St. Cloud, MN. All others are in MHS collections; p. 301 (left) is by Charles A. Zimmerman, p. 301 (right) by Zimmerman and Whitstruck, and p. 304 by Edward A. Bromley.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).