

A Soldier's Story

As we are all very well aware, today's armed forces, including the National Guard and Reserves from Martin County and southern Minnesota, see action throughout the world in a technologically advanced military. The face of war has continually evolved over the years. In that respect, it is interesting to go back in time and compare the experiences of those in the military of the 1860's in order to fully appreciate the advances that have been made over the years.

The following article includes excerpts taken from an account of one soldier's experiences while stationed at Fairmont. It comes from a letter written by Lorin Cray to the Sentinel on July 23, 1903, covering the years of 1862-1863 when he was stationed at Fort Fairmont.

Mr. Cray enlisted in the army in August of 1862 for a period of three years. His military service began at Fort Snelling. Within a few days of his enlistment, his company was ordered to march to St. Peter to address the Indian outbreak at the Lower Agency. Cray's company was made up largely of farm boys, and the only arms provided them were old Austrian and Belgium muskets which had been poorly cared for since the War of 1812, many of which were useless. He described his company at that time as resembling a squad of Missouri bushwhackers rather than Union soldiers.

Cray's company spent the winter at St. Peter drilling, picketing the town along the bluffs to the west, and scouting in the country toward New Ulm and Fort Ridgley.

In early May of 1863, one platoon from his company was ordered to Fairmont, and another platoon to Chanyaska Lake which was located eleven miles northwest of Fairmont. They marched from Judson through Garden City, Vernon Center, Winnebago City, and from there directly to Fairmont. Their trip was through prairie grass, as there were no roads.

His description of arriving in Fairmont was that of a sleepy, quiet location. The few little homes on the lakes were hidden in the woods, and the little fort was the only evidence of man. The fort was located in the vicinity of the present court house. It was constructed of logs, stood about eight feet high, and was about 150 feet square. It enclosed the first courthouse which was located in the southwest corner of the fort, and also served as a mess

room. Sleeping bunks were arranged three tiers high, each bunk intended for two men.

The soldiers of Cray's company inherited three boats from the Wisconsin Cavalry that preceded them. The boats, two log canoes and one flat boat or barge, were kept on Lake Sisseton. They soldiers spent a considerable amount of time engaging in naval battles with these boats.

Their duties while stationed at Fort Fairmount consisted mainly of scouting the prairies to the west for Indians. There were a line of forts constructed that summer that stretched from the Iowa line well to the north. Scouting expeditions were also to the north; however, their attention was mostly to duck and goose hunting, as no Indians were seen that summer.

The soldiers planted a vegetable garden to the east of the fort. They raised corn, potatoes, beets, onions, and peas. Many of the soldiers enjoyed working in the garden during that summer.

Actually, their summer duties were very light and they had a great deal of free time. The soldiers spent time fishing, hunting, and frequently organizing picnics on the lakes south of Fairmont. They were said to have hauled in over 300 fish at one time with their seine on Hall Lake. They caught pickerel, bass, perch, crappies, and sunfish.

Cray's company boasted some good musicians, which encouraged them to plan a July 4th celebration and dance. They invited friends from Blue Earth City to St. Peter. The barracks, which were surrendered to the ladies, was overflowing. The celebration included an all night dance. In preparation for the celebration, the soldiers went out on Lake Sisseton and George Lake with three boats. They killed 36 geese and caught an abundance of fish for their July 4th meals.

The usually large herds of buffalo that roamed the area at that time were broken into smaller groups as a result of the movements of the military troops and Indians. On several occasions, buffalo were spotted across Lake Sisseton. The soldiers organized hunting parties, and in one instance succeeded in killing three buffalo, which served them with buffalo steak for their evening meal.

The soldiers also succeeded in catching live fox, prairie chickens, quail, cranes, geese and a variety of ducks which they kept in cages at the fort. In addition, a tame hawk was at the fort and would arrive in a timely manner when the bugle call for meals was sounded. It then waited patiently to be served its ration of raw meat.

Mr. Cray relates that things had been going quite smoothly for the soldiers at Fort Fairmount, however, they were becoming a bit careless regarding the location of their clothing and other important items when they went to bed. On one dark night, the drum sounded after midnight, signaling the call of an attack. The soldiers were very disorganized and had great difficulty in preparing themselves for the impending attack. As a result, it took about 15 minutes to get prepared and dressed. However, many of the soldiers were without hats, shoes, other articles of clothing, including some without their guns. The fort commander strongly suggested that had this been a real attack, all would have been killed. The first two men ready, however, were given a reward of a six day furlough. The remainder trained until they were able to prepare themselves for battle within two minutes from the sounding of the drum which signaled an attack.

Another experience the soldiers of Cray's company had was when a peddler came to the fort with kegs of whiskey and beer on his wagon and opened up for business. Within a few days, several soldiers became intoxicated and quarrelsome and soon there was trouble at the fort. Several days later, it was discovered that a number of the kegs of beer had been tapped and rolled into the lake and the faucet to the keg of whiskey had been left open. The fort's Captain was very upset by this and, as a result, had the sergeant arrested. The sergeant was kept under arrest for two days; however, due to the fact that no evidence was found against him, he was eventually released.

Upon leaving Fairmont in October of 1863, Mr. Cray and the other soldiers discussed whether or not they would one day return. Many years later, Mr. Cray was the only one to ever return, as the others were either killed in battle or died at the prison stockade at Andersonville. Upon his return, he saw the progress that had been made in Fairmont during his absence of forty years. But in his memory, he stated that he most vividly recalled the little lakes, beautiful wooded hills, and the little log fort as he remembered it forty years ago.

Visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont to read the complete letter written by Mr. Cray and to learn more about Fort Fairmount.