RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

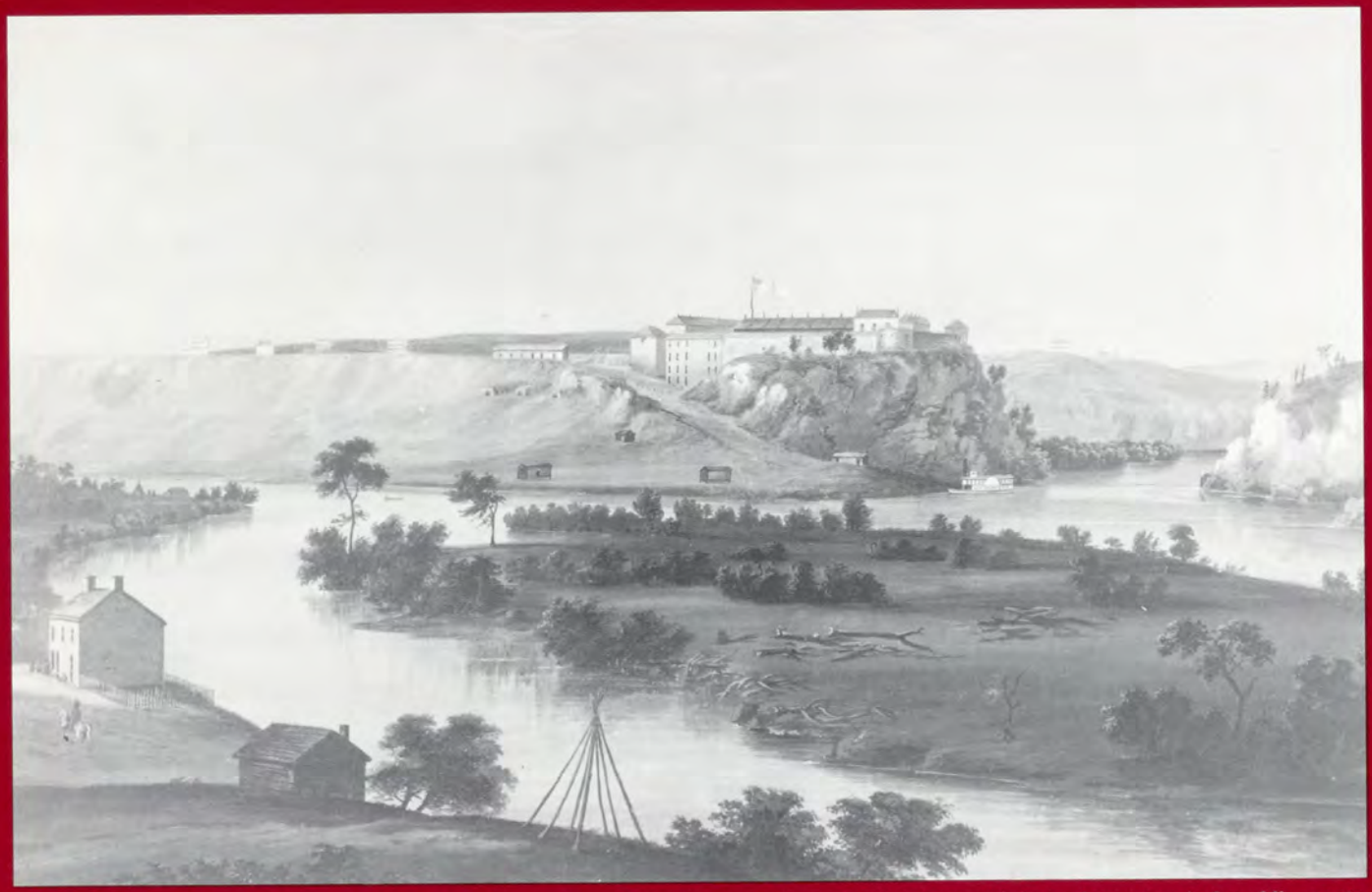
Summer, 1993 Volume 28, Number 2

Colorful, Contentious – St. Paul's 100-Year-Old Neighborhood Press

Page 13

Birth, Death, Reincarnation
The Story of Fort Snelling and Its State Park

Page 4



Old Fort Snelling in 1844. This water color and gouache painting by John Casper Wild shows the fort a few years before Minnesota became a territory. The many pitfalls in the effort to save, restore and rebuild the fort and create Fort Snelling State Park are described by an active participant, in the article beginning on page 4. Minnesota Historical Society photograph of the original painting, which is in its collection.

Ramsey County History is published quarterly by the Ramsey County Historical Society, 323 Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth Street, St. Paul, Minn. 55102. Printed in U.S.A. ISSN Number 0485-9758.

RAMSEY COUNTY

History

Volume 28, Number 2 **Summer, 1993**

CONTENTS

Publication of *Ramsey County History* is supported in part by a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie, Jr., and by a contribution from Reuel D. Harmon.

A Message from the Editorial Board

In the past several months the Editorial Board has received requests to reprint articles published in back issues of *Ramsey County History*. This recognition of the editorial strength of our magazine is very gratifying to all members of the Ramsey County Historical Society.

The Editorial Board wants our readers to know that we respond promptly to these requests. We can sometimes provide additional copies of a particular issue when there is enough lead time involved in the request. The cost of reprinting or purchasing additional copies depends on the nature of the request.

While the Editorial Board wants to encourage a wide dissemination of our editorial material, we also are obliged to remind our readers that the magazine is copyrighted by the Society and under current copyright law cannot be photocopied and distributed without our permission.

—*John M. Lindley,* chairman, Editorial Board

Books, Etc.

The Last Full Measure: The Life and Death of the First Minnesota Volunteers

Richard Moe
Henry Holt & Company, 1993

Reviewed by Thomas H. Boyd

On a snowy day several months ago, I had the pleasure of traveling to Grand Marais to attend a hearing. The Cook County courthouse is an understated building both inside and outside. The judge, who wore a blue robe, and his staff were friendly and direct. The courtroom was austere – the judge's bench was little more than a desk and the jury box was made up of a dozen chairs moved to one side of the room. The only ornamental aspect of the courtroom was a small portrait that hung high on the wall behind the judge.

After the hearing concluded, the judge was kind enough to identify the man in the portrait as Colonel William Colvill. He explained that Colonel Colvill was originally from southern Minnesota and had been one of the commanding officers who led the First Minnesota Volunteers in repelling the Confederate Army at Gettysburg in July, 1863, 130 years ago. He further explained the enormous losses sustained by the First Minnesota on Cemetery Ridge and in Pickett's Charge. Colonel Colvill survived and, following the end of the Civil War, he located in Cook County where he was a successful businessman and community leader for many years.

The story of Colonel Colvill – a non-military man who had served so valiantly and then, when his service was done, had returned to civilian life – fired my admiration and imagination. To my delight, I returned from northern Minnesota to find a marvelous book to feed my new interest.

Richard Moe, now president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, has written of the common men who did uncommon things in *The Last Full Measure: The Life and Death of the First Minnesota Volunteers*. Moe's book is made up primarily of first person accounts contained in letters, diaries, and newspaper articles that he has strung together with an unobtrusive narrative style. He has done a marvelous job of telling the story of the men who made up the First Minnesota Volunteers.

Moe writes of the excitement and enthusiasm that characterized enlistment in the early days of the Civil War. After Governor Alexander Ramsey had seized for Minnesota the distinction of being the first state to tender volunteer troops to preserve the Union, a "war meeting" was held on April 25, 1861, in the courthouse at Red Wing. The meeting consisted of rousing patriotic speeches and the drafting of patriotic resolutions.

> When the speeches were finished and the resolutions adopted, the presiding officer issued a call for volunteers. At least two men in the audience, Edward Welch and William Colvill, believed that great honor would attach to the first man to sign up, and they both sprang from their seats and leapt over chairs in a race to the front of the room. Welch appeared to be the winner until he fell bounding over the last chair, making a valiant effort to reach for the pen on his way to the floor. Colvill got to it first, however, calmly telling Welch, "you are next Ed." More than fifty men followed them to the front of the hall, according to one account, "pledging their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor in upholding the stars and stripes against the rebellious assaults now made upon them."

However, the excitement of enlisting was followed by months of tedious drilling and waiting. The state had little or no funds to outfit and supply the First Minnesota Volunteers. Further, the men who made up the First Minnesota were not professional soldiers and had little or no experience in the military.

The First Minnesota Volunteers' limitations as a military force were dramatically exemplified by the dearth of qualified officers. In general, men achieved rank through political skill rather than military acumen. This situation was addressed when, after months of waiting, the First Minnesota Volunteers traveled east to Washington, D.C., where General George McClellan had created a board to evaluate and remove incompetent officers from responsible positions.

Before they met the enemy, the First Minnesota Volunteers met the weather. "The mud disrupted everything, including daily drilling and it quickly got on everyone's nerves. . . . The only relief came when temperatures were cold enough to freeze it solid."

The weather eventually became the least of the soldiers' worries. Soon enough, the First Minnesotans were transformed from the greenest of enlisted men to battle hardened veterans. With battle came casualties. One of the wounded at the Battle of Glendale was then Captain William Colvill:

> He took a bullet through his left breast but didn't tell his comrades. [William] Lochren had nothing but admiration for the taciturn officer: "With that imperturbability for which he was distinguished, he gave no sign of being hurt, and turned over his command to his Lieutenant, as if for a

few minutes absence, and no one knew that he was hurt until the next morning, when he was heard from as having walked to the field hospital at Malvern Hill."

At Antietam, the soldiers of the First Minnesota learned the horrors of battle were only outweighed by the horrors that followed battle. One soldier wrote several weeks after the battle: "We advanced over the ground gained by Hooker, he had just been taken off the field wounded, and his men were exhausted. As we moved on the dead and wounded lay thick, and fragments of regiments cheered us as we passed. Our men and Secesh lay as they fell, many begging us for a drink of water, others telling us not to tread on them and it *was* difficult to march over the ground without stepping on some man."

Eventually, the battles fought by the First Minnesota turned their excitement and enthusiasm for the war to bitterness and cynicism, as demonstrated by a letter from one soldier quoted by Moe:

> That great and proud army which set out for the Confederate Capitol last spring with high hopes, finds itself, after a six month campaign, back again upon the Potomac at its place of starting.
>
> . . . Much blood and treasure had been expended and today, notwithstanding recent partial successes, the rebellion seems as far from being crushed as ever. . . .

Several days after the battle of Chancellorsville, the First Minnesotans received the disconcerting news that General Sully was being transferred back to Minnesota to prosecute the war against the Dakota, and his second in command, Colonel Morgan, had been forced to resign due to illness. These events left Colvill, who had since been promoted to colonel, in command of the First Minnesotans. Moe writes, "[a]lthough Colvill's performances at Bull Run and on the Peninsula had proved that he was personally brave, the Minnesotans were unsure of his leadership abilities. Colonels of the First Minnesota were now judged by a new standard, that set by Sully, and it was hard for a civilian like Colvill, no matter how courageous, to measure up. No one would know what kind of a leader he would be until he was tested in battle." The First Minnesotans' next battle would be at Gettysburg.

"Morning came early for the First Minnesotans on 2 July, and if there was any doubt about what the day would hold, it was quickly dispelled. 'Roused at 3:00 A.M. & ordered to pack up & at 4:00 A.M. move towards the battlefield where we arrive at 5–40 A.M.' Isaac [Taylor] wrote. 'Order from Gen. [John] Gibbon read to us in which he says this is to be the great battle of the war & that any soldier leaving the ranks without leave will be instantly put to death.' "

As the Battle of Gettysburg began, General Daniel Sickles, commander of the Union Third Corps who Moe describes as "the North's most successful political general," demonstrated his lack of military training and experience by advancing from the ground he had been ordered to defend. On his own, General Sickles ordered his corps to move across Cemetery Ridge to higher ground. Sickles' men soon were half a mile in front of the other Union forces. Confederate brigades seized this opportunity to breach the Union line.

Moe writes: "[if] the Southerners kept coming and managed to get over the ridge, they would split the entire Union line in two. It would then be in a position to create havoc by 'rolling up' the Northern forces on the ridge all the way to Cemetery Hill and perhaps beyond, to Culp's Hill. It would be, in short, a Union disaster of immense proportions. Not only the day would be lost but almost certainly the battle as well. [General Robert E.] Lee would have the victory he had come north to seek."

The 262 members of the First Minnesotans stood alone between the advancing Confederate forces and the Union rear. When the men of the First Minnesota were given the orders to charge, "[e]very man realized in an instant what that order meant—death or wounds to us all; the sacrifice of the regiment to gain a few minutes time and save the position, and probably the battlefield—and every man saw and accepted the necessity for the sacrifice." The First Minnesota began its advance.

"Silently, without orders, and, almost from the start," Lochren remembered, "quick had changed to utmost speed":

> . . . for in utmost speed lay the only hope that any of us would pass through that storm of lead and strike the enemy. "Charge!" shouted Colvill, as we neared their first line; and with leveled bayonets, at full speed, we rushed upon it; fortunately, as it was slightly disordered in crossing a dry brook at the foot of a slope. The men were never made who will stand against leveled bayonets coming with such momentum and evident desperation. [The] first line broke in our front as we reached it, and rushed back through the second line, stopping the whole advance. We then poured in our first fire, and availing ourselves of such shelter as the low banks the dry brook afforded, held the entire force at bay for a considerable time.

Only 150 men had made it the full distance from Cemetery Ridge to the swale, and their commander, Colonel Colvill, had been seriously injured in the charge. However, the First Minnesotans had stopped the Confederate advance. Once dusk fell, reinforcements arrived and the Minnesotans were able to withdraw.

The fighting continued the following day for the remaining members of the First Minnesota. When General George Pickett led his desperate charge of 15,000 men across the open field towards Cemetery Ridge, it appeared as though its full force would hit the depleted First Minnesota. Moe writes: "[a]s the surviving rebels hit the Union line near the clump of trees they had used as an aiming point—the spot would soon become known as the 'high-water mark' of the rebellion—the First Minnesota and the other regiments in [General] Harrow's brigade received orders to leave their positions and charge headlong into the Confederate flank."

"For two hours we had fought desperately," one soldier wrote a few weeks later. "Our muskets became so heated we could no longer handle them. We dropped them and picked up those of the wounded. Our cartridges gave out. We

Books to page 27

Books from page 26

rifled the boxes of the dead. Artillery men from the disabled pieces in our rear sprang forward, and seizing guns and cartridges of the wounded, fought by our side as infantrymen. Many of the men became deaf, and did not recover their hearing for a day or two. It was a grand and terrible scene." Seventy per cent of those actually engaged in the fighting – 229 men – had fallen. In an engagement that resulted in the awarding of Medals of Honor to two of its members, the First Minnesota forced Pickett's division to fall back.

General Winfield Scott Hancock, who had ordered the charge and was one of the few who had seen the First Minnesota carry out its orders, later told Senator Morton Wilkinson of Minnesota that "[t]he superb gallantry of those men saved our line from being broken. No soldiers, on any field, in this or any other country, ever displayed grander heroism."

Moe's strength as the author of this book is his willingness to let the primary source material speak for itself. He has done a marvelous job in culling out fascinating, moving, and highly descriptive passages from the diaries and letters of the members of the First Minnesota. Moe's narrative is original yet unobtrusive, and provides the perfect balance between placing these excerpts in context and allowing the soldiers' words to speak for themselves. These comments are particularly applicable with regard to the book's chapter on the Battle of Gettysburg. I would recommend this book to anyone who seeks to know more about Minnesotans who fought in the Civil War and whose portraits may have ended up on our courthouse walls.

Thomas H. Boyd is a St. Paul attorney and author of the article on Judge Walter B. Sanborn which appeared in a recent issue of Ramsey County History.

Fort Snelling from page 12

ship from this charming Axel Von Bergen of aristocratic Swedish background. Today he can be remembered by all who descend the Von Bergen trail made possible at the fort by a generous donation in his memory.

Headquarters building, Fort Snelling, 1900. Minnesota Historical Society photograph.

During all these years of Association efforts in the areas of acquisition and protection, the Minnesota Division of Parks, under the leadership of Judge Hella and the direct supervision of a succession of park managers, beginning with Clinton Johnson and continuing with Harold Raak and others, has succeeded in creating a beautiful and enjoyable park out of what was literally and in substantial part a dump back in 1962.

Finally, it can fairly be said that neither the unique early nineteenth century fortress we see today, nor the continuum of parks along the Mississippi between the downtowns of our two cities and extending for miles up the Minnesota River and all coming together in Fort Snelling State Park, would have come to pass without the strong, continuing, and cooperative dedication and effort of *individuals* in both the public and private sectors. The dreams of those with vision, such as Wirth, Nichols, Hella and Fridley, were transformed into reality by the support of a series of governors, including Orville Freeman, Elmer L. Andersen, and Karl Rolvaag, by congressmen such as Humphrey, MacGregor, and Frenzel, and above all by citizens such as Savage, Harmon, Black and Von Bergen who carried on the work of preaching, lobbying, fundraising, and prodding, and who "stayed the course."

While an article on history as this is must deal primarily with the past rather than the present or the future, it may not be amiss to report that the Fort Snelling State Park Association, after a period of years when its members felt they could say "mission accomplished," is undergoing rejuvenation as it finds new challenges for its members to meet. One of these is to secure the late Tom Savage's dream of a new park visitors' center to be located below the fort and not far from the old steamboat landing. It would replace the relatively inaccessible and wholly inadequate temporary interpretive center created out of the uncompleted Wilkus house on Pike Island. The Association's members are today bending their efforts to secure legislative funding for this very necessary feature for the park, which is to be named in honor of the Association's founding president.

Another dream of at least some members of the Association is for it to be not just a Fort Snelling Park Association but to become a Fort Snelling Historic District Association, which would include the old village of Mendota. Such a project could make the historic Sibley House, along with its adjoining Faribault House, Dupuis House and St. Peter's Church, all an integral part of the Fort Snelling Park and Historic District, with perhaps a restored ferry to connect the fort and Mendota directly, as was the case back in the days before the Mendota bridge was built.

Samuel H. Morgan, a retired St. Paul attorney, was one of the prime movers in the establishment of Fort Snelling State Park. He is a past president of the Fort Snelling State Park Association and of the Minnesota Parks Foundation.

THE HIGHLAND VILLAGER

Published every other Thursday at the Commercial Press, 418 South Third Street, a Union Shop, Minneapolis, Minnesota, GE. 6644, by Elizabeth J. Haas and Bessie J. Jones.

Elmer A. Huset—Managing Editor

41

Church news must reach us not later than Saturday; letters to the editor, social news and classified ads by 5 o'clock Monday.

New Owners

As new owners of "The Highland Villager," we wish to take this opportunity to thank the advertisers for their patience and the cooperation accorded us during the transition of ownership. It is our sincere desire, with your cooperation, to make "The Highland Villager" outstanding among papers of its kind.

We welcome news items of interest to Highland Village residents. Mail your news items to the Highland Villager, 418 South Third Street, Minneapolis 15, Minnesota.

The masthead from the second issue of the Highland Villager, *dated March 12, 1953. For the history of St. Paul's colorful neighborhood newspapers, see the article beginning on page 13.*

R.C.H.S.
RAMSEY · COUNTY · HISTORICAL · SOCIETY

Published by the Ramsey County Historical Society
323 Landmark Center
75 West Fifth Street
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102

NON–PROFIT ORGANIZATION
U.S. Postage
PAID
St. Paul MN
Permit #3989