



2ND MINNESOTA BATTERY OF LIGHT ARTILLERY

Emil Solner

Emil was a young man in Christiana, Norway, when both of his parents died. He had a sister, Hilda, and in 1859, Hilda married Gulbrand Toftner. By 1861, Emil, Hilda and Gulbrand were living in Winona County, Minnesota, so it is probable they came to America together. Emil was working as a mechanic and lived in the community of Utica.

Gulbrand and Emil were both mustered into the Second Battery on February 21, 1862. Both men were most likely recruited by Richard Dawley, a Mexican War veteran who lived in Winona County and brought many men to the unit through his efforts. Dawley was commissioned as the Battery's lieutenant one week after Gulbrand and Emil were mustered in.

Emil spoke very little English, having only been in the U.S. for a few months when he enlisted. He said his birth was on February 13, 1814, in Christiana, Norway. He had blue eyes, light hair, a light complexion, and stood 5'9-1/4" tall.

The time in the army was rather uneventful for Emil. He was detailed to work as a teamster in April of 1863 and stayed at his duty until September when he returned to the Battery. In March of 1864, Emil was among those who agreed to serve another three years or the duration of the war. He reenlisted. It was while he was on his veteran's furlough that the trouble – at least in the army's opinion – began.

Instead of returning to Minnesota, Emil left the command in Chicago. Hilda had gone to Chicago after her husband and brother left for the army and Emil wanted to see her. Gulbrand was dead, having been discharged for disability in November of 1862 and died in the summer of 1863.

While Emil was in Chicago visiting Hilda, some men began talking to Emil about serving in the navy. They said Emil's skills as a mechanic and fireman on steamboats were needed in the navy more than the army and he could easily transfer from his artillery battery to a steamboat. Emil thought the idea sounded very reasonable and as he had worked on ships in Norway, he had the right experience. Emil said he thought he would like that, so he agreed to serve in the navy and was sent to New York City under the charge of the enlisting officer. No bounty was offered to Emil and his command of English was still limited, so he did not question the process. To his way of thinking, everything was fine and he was serving his new country to the best of his abilities.

The army did not see it that way. They only knew Emil had gone to Chicago on his veteran's furlough and had not returned. In the Second Battery's records, Emil was marked as a deserter.

Emil was assigned to the *U.S.S. Faugh Kee* where he served honorably as a mechanic and fireman until he was discharged at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, at the end of the war.

The only family Emil had in this country was his sister, Hilda, and she was still in Chicago, so Emil did not return to Minnesota. He went to Chicago to live.

On January 14, 1867, Emil married Jennie Malatesta, an Italian woman from Chicago. She was a widow, and though Emil's records do not show her as having had children from this marriage, she probably did. The 1870 census listed four children living with them, but the only one of the four Emil cited as his was Anna, the youngest born in December of 1868. The first three were most likely Jennie's by a former marriage. Emil's occupation was that of saloon keeper, quite a change from the machinist he had been before and during the war.

The great Chicago fire of 1871 took Emil's home and everything they owned. The family had to start over. That may have been when Emil went back to being a machinist as he was called on the 1880 census. Getting a job would be easier than rebuilding a saloon. Also by 1880, they had six children and Emil was called "father" by all of them. He listed them as his on later pension applications as well.

In 1904, Emil decided to apply for a veteran's pension and was told he was ineligible as he was a deserter. The Pension Department had the records of the Second Battery. No transfer had ever been made for Emil to leave the army and join the navy. Emil wrote detailed letters explaining why he had gone to the navy – he had learned to speak English quite well by this time – and that he really believed he was doing nothing wrong. When the Pension Department asked for proof of his honorable discharge from the navy, Emil had to admit he had none. His discharge papers were among his possessions lost in the Chicago fire. So was the only copy he had of his birth records. He could prove nothing! Several people wrote letters confirming Emil's story and suggested that Emil's lack of language skills should count in his favor. It was easy to get talked into believing something was right when you didn't really understand the language someone was using to persuade you.

Finally, in 1912, the Pension Department concluded that the navy records they had obtained backed up Emil's story and they agreed that he had been a faithful soldier and sailor for Uncle Sam, so they awarded his pension. This came after a very lengthy investigation as to whether Emil had been given a bounty for his reenlistment in the army or enlistment in the navy. Emil never understood he should have gotten a bounty and had never asked for it, so he was never given any from either service.

In 1922, paperwork was filed for Emil with the Pension Department once more. He was 81 years old and disabled from a "complete ankylosis of the left knee following compound fracture of the patella and an extreme genu valgum of the right knee in compensatory origin". The witnesses were Rosalie Mackay and Anna Solner, Emil's stepdaughter and daughter. From the certificate, it appears that Emil was living with Rosalie in Gulfport, Mississippi, though Anna was still in Chicago.

Where Emil went or when he died is still unknown.

Researched and compiled by the reenactors of the 2nd Minnesota Battery of Light Artillery. Visit our website at <http://www.2mnbattery.org> for more information about our soldiers and our organization.

Updated: 7 March 2014