



2ND MINNESOTA BATTERY OF LIGHT ARTILLERY

Sylvia Townsend

Sylvia Townsend was probably the only authorized woman with the Second Minnesota Battery when she was appointed the Battery's laundress on March 22, 1862. She accompanied her husband, Alfred, from their home near Dundas in Rice County when he enlisted at Fort Snelling. Sylvia went with the Battery when they moved south. She wrote how well she remembered the trip to "Pitsburd Landing" (her spelling) shortly after the battle (Shiloh, Tennessee, April 6-7, 1862). She remained with the Battery as they camped around Corinth, Mississippi and the subsequent fall of that city. While historians call the action at Corinth a "siege", Sylvia called it a "battle".

In a letter, Sylvia explained, "there was much sickness among the men" and a detail was left to care for the men of the Battery, Alfred among them. Sylvia went with her husband and took up duties as a nurse in the hospital at Farmington, Mississippi. She noted that "the boys had to take care of each other the best they could. there were three women nurses in the Farmington Hospital and nearly three thousand sick soldiers so we could do very little and had not much to do with but we done what we could."

Sylvia's duties included making and serving gruel to the men. She said she "made it in a large boiler hung on a pole over a campfire, carried it around in a pail with a dipper". The hospital was just getting organized and she felt badly about the men with no beds as there were not enough to go around. She said they "had not much to do with to make them comfortable but we done what we could". The situation soon changed as just before Sylvia left the hospital, Mother Bickerdyke came and "then there was a stirring up".

Alfred had, according to Sylvia, over-worked in the hot southern climate at the hospital and suffered a "partial sunstroke" that brought on a fever. It was determined that he be sent North, so Sylvia brought Alfred north on the hospital boat to St. Louis, then on to Minnesota after he was discharged for disability. They reached Minnesota in November of 1862.

But the war was not over and Alfred recovered so well that he decided to enlist in the 37th Wisconsin Infantry in the spring of 1864. He was sent east, so Sylvia settled their affairs in Dundas and followed him. She went to Washington and from there to City Point, Virginia, where she "was helping all I could and perhaps helped save some lives." She remained there until the war ended, coming back to Minnesota with Alfred.

After the war, Alfred and Sylvia moved to Stearns County, near Melrose. Alfred taught school there for a time and Sylvia kept house. Alfred became the town clerk for Melrose and one Fourth of July, a meeting of the town supervisors held at

the Townsend home decided to name a lake for Sylvia. It bears the name of Lake Sylvia to this day.

Sylvia was born in Watertown, New York, on August 31, 1837. Her maiden name was Field. She married Alfred Townsend on February 9, 1854, in Lawrence, Michigan, after knowing him about a year. She was 17 years old; Alfred was 35 years old and it was the second marriage for him. His first wife died four years before. Sylvia and Alfred moved to Minnesota and lived near Dundas in Rice County before the war; after, they moved to Melrose, Stearns County. They never had children.

Alfred died on January 39, 1877. Sylvia, living alone, decided to apply for a widow's pension. Depositions in the pension file from Alfred's comrades confirm her appointment as the Battery's laundress and testify to her good character. Yet, Sylvia had a difficult time getting her pension. A woman, she may have been Sylvia's sister-in-law, gave a false statement, claiming Alfred had a previous wife that he had abandoned prior to marrying Sylvia. The Pension Department was forced to investigate the allegation before ruling on the claim. Statements from neighbors, friends, and former Battery members all refute the woman's story. Sylvia's deposition explains in gentle words how Sylvia received a letter from the woman, saying she was sorry if she caused Sylvia any trouble by lying to the Pension examiner and enclosed a dollar as evidence of good faith. Sylvia burned the letter. She told the examiner about the woman, "Her mind is peculiar. She cannot tell a story as she has heard it. She will get various stories mixed together, though I do not think she means to do it. Her understanding appears to be weak and on this ground she has been excused by me for many things."

Alfred's mother lived the last 17 years of her life with Sylvia and in the pension deposition, Sylvia told the examiner she had been very close to her mother-in-law.

The examiner wrote his recommendation to the Pension Department and included some of his impressions of Sylvia after interviewing her. "This pensioner is a woman of unquestioned veracity and integrity where she has been well known for 30 years...I failed to find one person who would question her word." He concluded his recommendation for approval with this statement, "In all my experience as a Special Examiner (about 5 years) I have never found a claimant who has impressed me more absolutely honorable than this pensioner. I believe that this woman's reputation and character should be given much weight in determining the merits of this claim." Evidently, the Pension Department thought so too, as she did receive the pension.

In 1921, Sylvia was contacted by a member of the Woman's Relief Corps who was trying to put together something about the women who had served in the Civil War. Sylvia wrote two letters describing her life from 1862-1865, though she insisted she had done little that was of note or worthy of recording.

Sylvia died at her home on September 11, 1924, at the age of 87. She was laid to rest beside her husband in Oakland Cemetery near Sauk Centre, Minnesota.

Her words, written just three years before she died, said much about the struggles she must have faced as a woman trying to work during the years of the Civil War. "You know everything was very different in those days from what things are now and if women done anything outside the home they worked against great obstacles". Sylvia wrote those words less than six months after women were given their first opportunity to vote in the 1920 Presidential election.



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.

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