



2nd MINNESOTA BATTERY

“ACTION FRONT”

Circular No. 323

October 2024

On This Date-160 Years Ago

The men of the Second Minnesota veteranized in March of 1864 and earned a furlough home. Those who were not eligible to reenlist did not get the furlough, so they went on detached service to the Second Illinois Battery I. The following is where they served in the fall of 1864 while attached to the Illinois Battery.

October 1st 1864

Moved by train to Stevenson, AL then to Huntsville, AL arriving and unloading at 7:00 PM for the pursuit of General N.B. Forrest who, along with General Hood, were marauding in Alabama and Northern Georgia.

October 4th 1864

The Division started for Florence, AL in pursuit of General Forrest.

October 7th 1864

Armed men with muskets and moved to Redan Irwin fronting Rossville Gap. Here they repaired the fortifications.

October 10th 1864

The 2nd Division (Morgan) with Battery I return to Chattanooga on the 14th and stay through the 18th.

October 16th 1864

The men of the 2nd Minnesota Battery are discharged from Battery I, 2nd Illinois Artillery and returned to duty at Stringer's Farm. Sherman, after ordering Thomas to chase Rebels and repair supply routes realizes that he must cut his supply lines in his advance on Savannah, GA.

November 9th 1864

Remaining 7 men return from duty with Battery I, 2nd Illinois Artillery to the 2nd Minnesota Battery.

Upcoming Events

November 11, Veterans Day, Winona, MN

There are no events in October, so the next event will be Veterans Day in Winona. A head count will be taken and more details available at the October meeting.

Help Needed!

We have reached that time of year where events become scarce and this leaves some rather big holes in the newsletter.

PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE keep an eye out for articles of interest that might be something to share with our members. If you are researching something Civil War, write up an article about it. Find a fun Civil War joke, recipe or photo? Learn a new fact about an piece of equipment? Good possibility it could find a place on these pages.

PLEASE help your editor find interesting content for this newsletter. After 25+ years of writing it, I'm starting to run out of ideas!!



Next Meeting

October 26, 11:00 am

Elks Club, 306 W 4th Street, Red Wing

Contact Ken Cunningham with questions or agenda items.
651-388-2945.



Battery Profiles

Jacob U. Freed

Jacob was one of the rare men of the Battery in that he left a fairly detailed first person account of his life, reporting it to the pension examiner in 1879. The details are precise, indicating he may have kept some kind of journal or diary, though nothing of the sort has been found to date.

It was in April of 1858 when Jacob arrived in St. Paul. He was a carpenter and worked as such in both Minneapolis and St. Paul until September of 1860 when he moved to “his farm” in Buffalo, Minnesota. Since he called the farm “his,” it likely means he purchased the farm. There he stayed, working as a farmer until he enlisted with the Second Minnesota Battery in January of 1862. He made special note of enlisting with Battery under the command of Captain Hotchkiss. Since Hotchkiss was also from Wright County, perhaps the men knew each other.

The descriptive roll of the Battery states Jacob was born in Berks County, Pennsylvania, in about 1824, so Jacob was 40 when he enlisted. He had hazel eyes, brown hair and light complexion, and stood 5' 4 ½" tall. He was single when he enlisted and records indicate he never married.

The Battery went South and Jacob said it was near Jacinto, Mississippi, that he came down with chronic diarrhea. He was under “almost constant treatment for it.” Then, while “on the retreat to Nashville, Tennessee, about December 31, 1862,” Jacob was thrown from the caisson and was injured on his left side. While Jacob didn't describe the injury, he said it “disqualified” him for further duty.

It is not clear where he was from January of 1863 to July of that year when he was sent to the Convalescent Camp at Murfreesboro, Tennessee. He was treated there until September when he was transferred to the Veteran Reserve Corps, Company G, 8th Regiment. He went to Elmira, New York, and then to Rock Island, Illinois. It was at Rock Island that the injury to his side began to get worse, so bad that the regimental surgeon had Jacob under an almost constant treatment of “Crotan oil.” Eventually, he was sent to Chicago, Illinois, and the Soldiers' Home before being formally discharged from the service. His discharge was not for disability, it was because Jacob had reached the end of his term of service on March 24, 1865.

Jacob did not stay in the Soldiers' Home, he left and went back to Philadelphia, his home town according to his enlistment records. He listed several different addresses where he lived in the city, noting that he was always being treated for the “wound in his side” and the chronic diarrhea. On the 1880 census, Jacob was living with his sister. Throughout these moves, Jacob supplied the name and address of the attending doctors as he moved from one part of town to another. He admitted to treating it himself sometimes when it was not as bad, but the injury to his side prevented him from doing manual labor. He also complained that it was made much worse when he “takes cold.”

The pension was filed in 1879, but records are not clear if he received any part of it before 1886.

Despite all of the health challenges Jacob faced, he must have done alright for himself, but his life after the Army was not something Jacob left many records about. Under the “occupation” box on his death certificate, Jacob was called a “retired gentleman.” His obituary—all five lines of it—said he was a “retired coal merchant” and that he had been ill for two days with “gastritis.” The rest of the obituary said he was 93 year old bachelor and gave his last address. The death certificate confirms the newspaper obituary by listing the cause of death as “acute indigestion” and “senile debility.”



Jacob shares a grave marker with her. She died six years before Jacob and the engraving tells us she was married to J.K. McIlwayne. Is she perhaps Jacob's sister?

A second newspaper article gave Jacob's age at death of 92 years, but final authority rests with the death certificate. It stated Jacob's age at the time of his death on April 6, 1905, as 93 years, 11 months and 25 days.

Jacob was laid to rest in the West Laurel Hill Cemetery in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Jacob's story does not quite end there. He left an estate valued at \$58,000. He did have a will which seems to indicate the estate was to go to a Mrs. Inez Freed (a sister-in-law?), but the courts revoked that decision in favor of a nephew of Inez Freed. What happened to the estate is not known. It is also not known who Isabella is even though

Another Viewpoint on Quilts and Cornrows

The ladies are familiar with the quilt story associated with the Underground Railroad and have gotten quite good at gently explaining that quilt historians (professionals, not just us) have pretty much labeled the idea that quilts were used as signals thone Underground Railroad as FOLKLORE. No evidence has ever been found to support the idea that a tumbling block pattern in a quilt was a signal that an escape was forthcoming on the plantation or a black center square in a log cabin quilt hung on a porch rail signaled a “safehouse” for runaway slaves.

As charming as these stories are, the evidence does not hold up. The first recorded pattern named “log cabin” does not appear until 1863. By then, the Underground Railroad was not operating as it had in the years before the war. There are no documented quilts that even anecdotally say they were used in signaling on the Underground Railroad, no letters mentioning it, no diary entries, no family stories. Without evidence, the idea that quilts were used as signals is hard to accept. Arguments can be made to say that it was a *SECRET* code, it was not written down or talked about, but without evidence, there is no proof it really happened.

Recently, a story has circulated on social media claiming that slaves would create maps by braiding cornrow in patterns in their hair to show others ways to escape slavery in the South.

This, too, has some flaws when examined under the light of history and evidence. In a survey of photographs said to be of slaves prior to 1865, there are no cornrows to be seen, though in fairness, many heads were covered with hats for the men and a kerchief or turban for the women. This also begs the question, if their heads were so often covered, how did anyone see the maps?

While researching these stories, I found an article that turned the idea around to a different perspective.

Patricia Turner, folklorist and professor of African American Studies at UCLA said, “When fugitive slaves figured out how to get themselves from place to place, they were incredibly brave and heroic people. That’s the core message and that’s true,” [These are] kind of urban legends that [serve a] function of giving particulars to generalities. Slave messages on quilts and cornrows [...] make concrete [or] give a story to something that is ultimately very true in my mind,” she said.

In her book, “[Crafted Lives: Stories and Studies of African-American Quilters](#),” Turner dove into the mythology around the quilts, and points out that they grew popular from children’s stories and oral history. In the 90s book, “Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt,” a young slave uses scraps of cloth to fashion a map on a quilt, something her master would never recognize.

Turner did not want to definitively answer the question of signals in cornrows, but she preferred to focus on the attention that legends like this brought to the real stories of the resilience of Black slaves. “I am reticent to say anything too concrete, because I want lay people to want to know more about what life was like for enslaved people,” she wrote. “There is no real value added to harshly saying “no” to a story. You can couch your language [and say] ‘Well, no slave narrative covers it.’ Others will say, ‘Well that doesn’t mean it didn’t happen,’” she continued. And ultimately, stories are often told by people in positions of power, something that Turner believes the tales of the quilt and cornrows push back against. She said, “One of the common denominators between the two stories is they focus on African Americans using their own resources for emancipation. If you look at stories that can be substantiated about the Underground Railroad, a lot of focus is on the white savior. The abolitionist or white conductor or Quaker, the parties that came in and helped the slaves, history gave a lot of attention [to them] as heroes. You could argue [they got that attention] because if ‘mainstream culture’ was white, and you depict white slave owners as evil, you want children to not have a negative view of white people. You make sure there are heroic white people, too. At the end of the 20th century, Black people were telling the story and they were making the Black person the complete hero. You need narratives that reinforce the bravery of the Black people themselves. [These stories] come about at a time when talking about what Black people brought to the table was important politically, sociologically and economically.”

There is likely to never be an answer to whether quilts or cornrows were used to share maps and codes to help Blacks escape slavery in the American South. We can, however, point to the rich tales surrounding the very real struggle for emancipation that are not “white hero” stories. The stories, even if not based in actual documentable history, still point to people (both Black and white) as resilient, inventive, and determined which is why these stories are so enduring today.

So, no, these stories have no evidence of truth, but when talking about them, people can be steered toward an understanding that even if the stories are not true history, the history of how being resilient, inventive, and determined can make a big difference in the world.

Gum Blankets

One of the most important items a soldier carried on campaigns was the gum blanket. Between 1860 and 1866, the Union bought or made 1,893,007 of these blankets and issued one to every soldier in the Union Army. They were among the first items given to a recruit and offered protection against rain and muddy ground.

These blankets were 60 inches wide by 70 inches long, with brass eyelets on the outer edge. Manufacturers used cotton, a cheap and light fabric, for the substrate and then coated it with either a black varnish or rubber. Of the two choices, rubber provided much more protection from the weather and resisted cracking and deterioration. By the end of the War, all gum blankets were coated with rubber. Charles Goodyear perfected the process for vulcanizing rubber in 1844. Vulcanized rubber remained flexible and according to promoters, its water resistance allowed for “protection against common colds and rheumatism as well as against more fatal disorders such as pneumonia and influenza.” The Army’s gum blankets were only coated on one side. This strategy allowed Union contractors to produce them more cheaply, but there were other benefits.

Blankets covered with rubber on both sides just added weight for the Union soldiers to carry during campaigns. The water resistance of the gum blankets led to a multitude of uses. Although each soldier received only one blanket, two men would share each other’s during bad weather by laying one blanket on the ground, and then covering themselves with another. This “allowed them to survive rain, snow, sleet, or severe cold weather where they might have otherwise frozen to death or fallen ill from exposure.” Gum blankets also provided protection if the men were forced to march in rough conditions. Soldiers could also use them as a poncho. Because of the eyelets, a man would need only a leather shoelace or a metal hook to connect the two sides of the blanket, which would wrap around his shoulders. This allowed not only the man to be protected from weather, but his knapsack, which carried valuable items, to be protected as well.

When John Ritchie and the 54th regiment left on a short-term expedition in 1864, the soldiers only took “3 days cooked rations in haversack, 80 round cartridges, and rubber blanket.” Throughout the war, some soldiers abandoned their knapsacks completely, due to the weight, and kept all of their valuables in their gum blanket. The men would place anything from photographs to clothing rolled up inside this blanket, and then rolled again in a wool blanket, tied together with twine. This came to be known as a bed roll, or also a blanket roll.[8]



The Second Minnesota Light Artillery Battery is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation and interpretation of Civil War history by living it.

Membership is \$12 per year. Non-member newsletter subscription rate is \$6.00 per year.

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In contrast to heavy and bulky knapsacks, these bed rolls were lightweight and “distributed the load comfortably across the torso.” A few soldiers painted the cotton side of the blankets with checkerboards or ‘chuck-a-luck’ boards.[10] Not only did these blankets serve a practical function, but also a recreational one.

The value of these gum blankets cannot be understated. In northern newspapers recruiting advertisements mentioned two items: money and a gum blanket. In 1862, a Philadelphia Inquirer article promoted enlistments with the City Bounty, the United States Bounty, and the soldier’s advanced pay, making a total of \$316 for enlisting in the Union army. Directly under this total, the ad stated “In addition, each recruit will receive a superior GUM BLANKET, which is invaluable in the field.” These blankets were so useful that many Confederate soldiers stole them from the dead and captured Union soldiers they came across. The Confederate version were made from canvas painted with a linseed oil—not nearly as protective and durable as the rubberized gum blankets.