

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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*The St. Paul Volunteer
Fireman and the Battle
of Gettysburg*

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Spring, 2003

Volume 38, Number 1

An 'Attempt' on His Life?

Sitting Bull's 1884 Visit to St. Paul

—Page 4



Sitting Bull around 1880, just before his 1884 visit to St. Paul. Minnesota Historical Society photograph. See article beginning on page 4 on Sitting Bull's visit and an alleged attempt on his life. Minnesota Historical Society photograph.

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The Society regrets an omission from the 2002 Donor Recognition Roll in the Winter issue of *Ramsey County History*. The list of supporters should have included the name of Albert W. Lindeke, Jr., a generous and loyal supporter. We apologize for this omission.

A Message from the Editorial Board

In 1884 the Lakota Indian leader Sitting Bull visited St. Paul. Our feature article in this issue focuses on the circumstances of his two brief stays in the city that year and whether during the latter visit there was an attempt to assassinate the man who embodied so much of the conflict between the white settlers and the native inhabitants of the American West. This issue also includes Civil War historian Patrick Hill's account of Wilson B. Farrell, a St. Paul volunteer fireman, who gave his life as a member of the First Minnesota Regiment in the Battle of Gettysburg and a brief salute to the sesquicentennial of the founding of St. Paul's Oakland Cemetery, where Farrell is now buried. This issue concludes with Helen Miller Dickison's history of today's Fairmount Methodist Church, Minnesota's first German Methodist church, which celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2002.

Readers of *Ramsey County History* and anyone interested in the history of Ramsey County and St. Paul now have a new resource for history searches: the Society's web site at www.rchs.com. On the site's home page, the researcher can click on several links that are of value. One is "Ask the Historian," which provides questions and answers about the area's history that recently have come to Society staff members. Another briefly profiles the histories of some of St. Paul's neighborhoods. All the information on this link comes from the Society's *Ramsey County Historic Site Survey Report*, a major resource in the RCHS library. The final link on the Society web page connects the user to information on the contents of the most recent issues of *Ramsey County History* and ties to a complete listing of articles published in the magazine since its initial publication in 1964. We hope this new link will get many hits from users and increase awareness of the richness of the content of our magazine's back issues.

John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

The St. Paul Fireman Who Rose to Command the First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry Regiment at Gettysburg

Patrick Hill

Although it had been anticipated all morning, when the first artillery shell burst over Union commander Major General George Meade's headquarters at Gettysburg, surprised men scattered for cover in all directions. A steward who had been serving lunch to a group of Union generals of the high command was killed instantly, his body nearly torn in half by a shell fragment. Among those scrambling for safety was Captain Wilson Farrell, Company C, First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry. On this July 3, 1863, afternoon Company C was on detached duty serving as provost guard of the Second Division, Second Corps posted near the Army of the Potomac Headquarters. There was no cover available, neither natural nor artificial, in the area where Company C was stationed, so the only course available for these men, who had all been recruited in St. Paul, was to hug the ground. Farrell probably wondered for a moment if even his duties as a volunteer fireman in St. Paul had been as dangerous as this.

In 2002 the St. Paul Fire Department celebrated its 125th anniversary as a professional department of city government. However, it should not be forgotten that there was a period of twenty-five years between 1852–1877 when the vital community service of fire fighting was performed by volunteers. In those times, much like volunteer departments of today, when the fire bell sounded, men would respond from the businesses around the town. At first, it was a small group led by R.C. Knox who traveled on foot carrying their equipment, comprised essentially of ladders and pails, which were stored in an alley at Wabasha and Third Street. Yet from its beginnings, St. Paul was a boomtown with people surging toward the frontier hoping to make



Officers of the First Minnesota Volunteers at Camp Stone near Edwards Ferry, Virginia, photographed by Matthew Brady on March 16, 1862. Wilson Farrell is standing on the left. Others are (standing, left to right) Samuel T. Ragnet, Louis Muller, Charles Zierenberg, and Henry Coates. Seated is Mark W. Downey. Photo is from the Minnesota Historical Society collections.

their fortunes from the abundance of natural resources to be found there. Soon this primitive arrangement for fire defense gave way to better organization.

By 1858 small fire stations were located strategically about the town equipped with pumper wagons, ladders, and hose. One of the first three of these stations was designated the Minnehaha Company located at Third and Jackson Streets. Servicing the heart of the business community that would become known as Lowertown, the station was captained by Hiram P. Grant a shopkeeper who later, as Captain of Company A of the 6th Minnesota Volunteer In-

fantry, would first earn the laurels of a hero at the Battle of Birch Coulee during the Dakota Uprising of 1862, only to become a scapegoat for the same event later. Among the recruits in his company were James J. Hill, eventually to be renowned world-wide as "The Empire Builder," one of America's greatest railroad tycoons. Norman Kittson was also a member. Kittson already had made his fortune in the fur trade and later would partner with Hill in the purchase of Hill's first railroad, the St. Paul and Pacific. His home once stood where the St. Paul Cathedral does now. The fire station roster also carried the name of an obscure



"Charge of the First Minnesota," from Northwestern Photograph Company's Book of St. Paul Views, 1888. Minnesota Historical Society collections. This is from a section of the Gettysburg Cyclorama which was on display in downtown St. Paul in 1887-1888. This depicts the moment of death for Wilson Farrell, who fell in the area shown in the upper left quarter of the photograph.

young banker named Wilson B. Farrell.

Farrell was born in 1830 in Cincinnati, Ohio, and orphaned at an early age, spending his formative years in Indiana. At age sixteen he enlisted in a regiment of Indiana volunteers, commanded by Willis Gorman, which saw duty in the Mexican War. Gorman was destined to become the second territorial governor of Minnesota and the first colonel of the First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War. With some intermediate stops in the decade following the Mexican War, Farrell eventually took up residence in St. Paul in 1856, two years prior to Minnesota statehood. He held a number of responsible positions with various St. Paul banks and accounting firms, and became a member of the St. Paul Lodge #2 of the International Order of Odd Fel-

lows, a fraternal, community service-based organization. He was active politically in the Democratic Party being a member of the "Little Giants" who supported Senator Stephen Douglas of Illinois in the 1860 presidential election against Abraham Lincoln. Undoubtedly the most important of his St. Paul relationships was his marriage to Mary Catherine Fitch in 1859. There is some evidence that she may have been related to one of his fellow firemen at the Minnehaha Station. Now just when it appeared that Wilson Farrell, the rootless wanderer, was finally beginning to develop a sense of belonging in his life, this small tide of happiness quickly started to recede. In 1860 Mary, his new bride and partner, took ill and died. At the age of thirty, the orphaned Farrell was now a

widower, too. Heartbroken, Farrell turned to his friends in the Odd Fellows, fire department, and politics, gaining solace from their support.

In 1861, following the attack on the federal installation at Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina, President Lincoln called for volunteers to suppress the rebellion and preserve the Union. Farrell would not allow his politics to interfere with his love of country and immediately answered the Republican president's call. Joining with William Acker an active Republican and adjutant general of the young state, Farrell helped to raise Company C, the first company accepted in the first regiment offered to President Lincoln for defense of the Union, the First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry. The regiment was mustered into



The “the Angle” and the “famous copse of trees,” photographed by the Tipton Photography Studios of Gettysburg. The pastoral peace suggested here is in stark contrast to the violence wrought during this turning point in the Civil War, Pickett’s Charge at the Battle of Gettysburg, July 32, 1863. Photograph by W. H. Tipton, Minnesota Historical Society collections.

federal service on April 29, 1861, and left for the Eastern Theater of the Civil War in June of that year. Acker was elected captain of the company and due to his experience as a veteran in the Mexican War and the esteem in which he was held, Farrell was elected lieutenant. When Acker accepted a commission in the regular army in August, Wilson was promoted to captain of Company C.

The First Minnesota performed notably in all its engagements during its service. When other volunteer units would often leave a field of battle in panic or confusion, the First earned its reputation for bravery. Memorable service was provided at the First Battle of Bull Run (where the regiment was the last to leave the field in this Union defeat), on the Peninsula, and

at Antietam in 1862. At Fredrickburg in December of that year, while the regiment was under fire in a particularly difficult situation, as other regiments gave way threatening the collapse of the entire Union flank, the First Minnesota held on. Noting their tenacity, division commander Major General O. O. Howard was said to have exclaimed to Brigadier General Alfred Sully, once a colonel of the First, “Sully, your First Minnesota does not run!” To which Sully replied, “The First Minnesota never runs.” At Gettysburg, the regiment would experience its most difficult test. Wilson Farrell was with the regiment through all these trials.

During the first three days of July in 1863, the largest battle ever fought in the western hemisphere to that date occurred

in the sleepy crossroads town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The First Minnesota arrived late on the first day and took no part, but they would make up for their absence in the next two days.

Early on July 2 the regiment filed into a position along Cemetery Ridge, an important location in the center of the Union line south of town. As the men massed along the ridge, one of the first actions was the detachment of Captain Farrell and Company C for provost duty behind the division line by division commander Brigadier General John Gibbon. Since the provost guard essentially acted as the division police, the assignment was allotted only to the most trustworthy and responsible of units. Due to Farrell’s handling and training, Company C had



Wilson Farrell's grave at Oakland Cemetery, St. Paul. Photo from the author.

developed just such a reputation and frequently served as provost.

Later that day, as the battle developed, the remaining eight companies of the First Minnesota were ordered to plug a hole in the Union line being exploited by an enemy force at least six times its size. The regimental historian recalled that "Every man realized in an instant what that order meant—death or wounds to us all . . . and every man saw and accepted the necessity of the sacrifice." In this charge, the loss in killed and wounded has traditionally been reported as 82 percent, the highest casualty percentage suffered by any Union regiment during the Civil War. There was not a single shirker. All were accounted for. Fortunately in their position as provost guard, Farrell and Company C had been spared this cup. Their fortunes would change on the morrow.

During the lunch at Union Army Headquarters on July 3, while taking measure of his Confederate opponent General Robert E. Lee, General Meade surmised that Lee's forces would strike on Gibbon's front. Because of the military expertise of the men of the provost guard, Meade ordered them to be returned to their regiments for this day's work. Gibbon turned to Captain Farrell to give him the order. "Very well, sir," said Farrell, touching his hat in salute. It would be the last order he would receive.

A short time later, before Farrell could move, the Confederate artillery opened fire on his position in advance of their

planned attack. For the next ninety minutes or so, Company C hugged the ground praying that their lives would be spared. The day would culminate in a Confederate assault known in American history as Pickett's Charge, the "High Tide of the Confederacy" and the little remnant of the First Minnesota, including Wilson Farrell, would be there.

Just as Meade had predicted, Gibbon's position was in the path of the Southern attack, and when the artillery fire ended, 13,000 Confederate infantrymen stepped out of the woods and advanced. Ultimately, the Union position was broken at a section of their line called "the Angle" and the Confederates poured through the gap to the right of the position of the remaining members of the First Minnesota, now commanded by Captain Nathan Messick, Company G, from Red Wing. Immediately the First Minnesota and its brother regiments of Harrow's Brigade wheeled right to help seal the breach.

Once the artillery fire ended, Farrell and Company C were also on the move. After no doubt first detailing a portion of the company to deal with the increasing numbers of Confederate prisoners beginning to stream over the ridge, Farrell then advanced with the remainder toward the increasing sounds of battle. By complete coincidence, as they cleared the crest they were reunited with the rest of the First Minnesota moving in from their left. Now, as a single unit they moved forward toward the point of danger.

Captain Messick already had been dealt a fatal wound during the move to the right, but the enemy was now directly before the regiment and these sturdy veterans knew instinctively what must be done. They rushed ahead to engage the enemy in hand-to-hand combat, shouting and cursing, clubbing with their muskets and throwing stones over the heads of their comrades in front of them. It was a bloody melee, but it was over in a few minutes as the outnumbered Confederates died or surrendered.

When Messick fell, command of the regiment devolved upon Farrell who was the next senior captain, but his command would be short-lived. While in the advance of his company, leading them forward to break the wave of the Confeder-

acy's "High Tide," Farrell was mortally wounded by a rifle shot to the head. He was taken to the Second Corps hospital in the rear, where the next day on July 4, Wilson Farrell, age thirty-two, orphan, widower, veteran of two wars, and St. Paul volunteer fireman, died.

His body was buried temporarily at Gettysburg, until his lodge brothers from the Odd Fellows in St. Paul, led by his wife's brother-in-law, Charles Mayo, then secretary of the Minnesota Historical Society, retrieved it. Farrell was re-interred on August 2, 1863, in Oakland Cemetery in St. Paul, next to his wife. Their grave site lies beneath a large oak tree on a windswept, grassy knoll in a quiet corner of the cemetery. It is seldom visited and the limestone marker provided by his Odd Fellows lodge brothers, lies broken and deteriorated by weather. This year marks the 140th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, and the death of Captain Wilson B. Farrell, of St. Paul. Efforts are underway to repair or replace his gravestone for that anniversary.

Patrick Hill is a St. Paul native, a buyer for a 120-year-old St. Paul company and a student of early St. Paul and Civil War history. He has just finished work on a book about the surrender of the Third Minnesota Volunteer Infantry Regiment at Murfreesboro, Tennessee, in 1862.

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"Little Sure Shot," Annie Oakley. Photograph from the Annie Oakley Foundation Collection, Greenville, Ohio. See article beginning on page 4.

R.C.H.S.

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