

A War Story

Margaret McMillan wrote this memoir while living on Broadway Street in Eau Claire. Her great granddaughter Lynn Myers discovered it while working on a research paper in 1967, more than a century after the Civil War.

Margaret McMillan was born Margaret Hamilton in 1843, the third youngest of 12 children. When she was six, the family emigrated from Canada to Chicago. Almost immediately her father took sick and died, and her mother followed him a week later. Margaret's eldest brother, who was married, took in the three youngest children, including Margaret; the rest were "given away." She was at her brother's home in Merrimac, about ten miles south of St. Paul, when the Civil War began.

Margaret had become acquainted with a young man named Michael B. Madden, who enlisted in the Second Minnesota Infantry. She walked the ten miles to St. Paul to see him, but found that he was stationed at Fort Snelling, seven miles farther on. She found him on duty.

"[Michael] told me," she wrote, "that quite a number of soldiers were to take their wives with them and asked me to marry him immediately and go with him. It did not take much urging to induce me to do this. I was then seventeen years of age. The wedding ceremony was performed at the fort before thousands of soldiers."

The Second Minnesota Regiment, including 32 soldiers' wives, ended up in Lebanon Junction, Kentucky, where as many as 4,000 Union troops were headquartered during 1861, and where Confederate soldiers, under General John Hunt Morgan, made daring early winter raids that year, burning bridges and trestles.

Our regiment disembarked and stacked arms in a field near the junction, each woman marching by her husband's side to the camping ground where we found other troops were also stationed.

Sometime in the day, October 23, our baggage and tents arrived after we had spent the previous night sleeping in the rain with

only a knapsack for a pillow and blanket and overcoat for covering.

... Our camp was set in regulation style in a field just within the angle formed by the Main and Lebanon branch tracks, and at retreat, camp guard was mounted and we considered the war begun so far as we were concerned. Each soldier who was accompanied by his wife had a separate tent provided; also the women ate their meals in their tents, their husbands bringing their meals to them, which consisted mostly of hardtack and black coffee.

The grounds presented the appearance of a beautiful white

city, with rows of white tents as far as the eye could reach. Reveille was sounded an hour before daylight and the soldiers then had to stand to arms until sunrise to guard against a surprise by the enemy. The campground was damp and unhealthy on account of recent rain and in the morning hours the fog would settle over them like a cold wet blanket.

Many of "our boys" were taken sick and sent to the hospital, many were homesick and discouraged, but I never heard one woman complain. After roll call and breakfast, drill commenced and continued most of the forenoon. At four o'clock in the afternoon "dress parade" took place. One could never wish to witness a more beautiful sight, line after line of soldiers in their bright blue uniforms in straight lines, officers giving commands amid the din of the music of the bands.

Finally an order was issued from headquarters and read at dress parade, that all women who had accompanied their husbands with the Second Minnesota must return home as they expected a battle at any time and it would be unsafe for the women to remain any longer.

The day arrived for them to leave, all going except Mrs. George, wife of Lieutenant Colonel George, and myself. The picture is still fresh in my memory, the little group of weeping, sorrowful women waiting for the train to "pull in," our regiment

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standing in line and as each one boarded the train someone would step out of line and bid his wife farewell, many of them saying goodbye for the last time.

In a few days war was begun. The first battle that our regiment participated in was the battle of Somerset and in this they were victorious. Here General Zollicoffer was killed. At the time of the battle I was at Lebanon and when news came that we were victorious I immediately hired a guide and horse and rode horseback 100 miles and at the end of the third day arrived at the battle field.

The battle field was a large cornfield with a little log hut in the center, which had at one time been occupied by an old lady, who in some mysterious way had been able to escape. Rail fences were all torn down and trees were flecked with bullets, the under brush was cut away as with a scythe and this little hut was completely riddled with bullets. Many fresh graves had been mounded, the dead having all been buried. We rode a few miles farther and after fording the Cumberland River we arrived where the Second Minnesota was encamped, this being the last time I ever saw my husband. I was unable to get through the lines. I returned to Lebanon and entered the hospital.

While the Second Minnesota was on a forced march for three days to Pittsburgh landings we enforced Grant's army, this being just a few days before the great battle of Pittsburgh landing, or Shiloh, and my husband being unable to continue fell by the wayside, was brought back to the Nashville hospital and the next day died.

News of his death was sent me by the chaplain of our regiment, Timothy Cressy, who had also

performed our marriage ceremony at Fort Snelling. I at once prepared to return home, having only to wait for my husband's clothes and-back pay which were to be sent to me and I also sent to headquarters for my transportation. While waiting for this to arrive, [Confederate General John Hunt] Morgan's guerilla band raided the place and I was destined not to return for some time.

The hospital was situated on a high hill just outside of the city of Lebanon and at the foot of the hill was a beautiful grove known as "Phillips Woods" with a little stream of water running through it spanned by quite a large bridge. Just about six o'clock in the evening word was received that Morgan was within a few miles of the city. At this time there was only a few companies left to guard the city, as most of them had been called away to re-enforcements. We had the protection of the home militia, which consisted only of Union men, who had been supplied with government arms to be used in case of emergency. Upon hearing this dreadful news all homes were deserted, people leaving their supper tables and rushing for a place of safety. A wild panic ensued, men running in all directions for guns, women

fainting and children screaming while the soldiers were preparing to fall in line at the end of the bridge to meet the enemy.

Running across the bridge, I, with others, jumped a fence into a large cornfield, where white and black, men, women and children were all huddled together. Suddenly a solemn hush stilled the air. We could hear the horses' hoofs like distant thunder on the turnpike road. On and on they came and as they approached the hospital the air was rent with wild cheers. Soon the heavens were ablaze with light and our worst fears were confirmed, the hospital was soon a heap of smoldering ashes.

On they came to the bridge and as they approached, our men, who were situated on this end of the bridge, opened fire. Morgan charged on them and in a few minutes our lines were broken, men running in all directions, some even throwing their guns in their haste to reach a place of safety. At this time the bridge was burned.

During this time we were all crouched in the cornfield, bullets raining all around us, but as I remember we all escaped unhurt. We remained here all night, cold and wet with dew and frightened almost to death. Just at day break



Survivors: Members of the G.A.R. (Grand Army of the Republic) encampment gather for a photo on South Barstow Street in Eau Claire. c. 1897. CVM Collection

Morgan dispatched squads of men over the city, saying that no one would be molested, that all he wanted was government property and that the commissary would be burned at seven o'clock. Hearing this people left their hiding places and returned to their homes.

... True to their word, the commissary was surrounded and burned to the ground. All that was saved was a bit of sugar or coffee or what could be conveniently tied in a bandanna handkerchief and hung on the horn of their saddles.

The commissary being burned, their next act was to tear up all union flags in strips, knot them and tie them to their horses' tails so they would drag in the dust and ... their work being completed, they mounted their horses and proceeded to ride through the streets like demons, shouting and cheering, while the Union Flags, tied to their horses' tails, made such a dust that it was almost impossible to see the horses. Finally they left the city.

There I was only seventeen years old, not knowing anyone outside of the hospital and it burned to the ground so I made the acquaintance of a lady, who with her husband kept a toll gate. I at once commenced keeping toll for them and in this way managed to pay for my board as I was doomed to stay until the bridges could be rebuilt.

We were stationed in the city and while at my duty one beautiful Sabbath morning just as the bells were ringing for church, a man on horse-back came dashing into the city shouting that [Confederate] General Bragg's Army was within a few miles of town and had fired on our pickets....

Stationed at my post I could hear them pressing forward amid

their cheers. As they came toward me I opened the gate wide and sat and watched them pass through to where our boys had just left. All day and night they kept marching in, one steady body of men.... We were held prisoners for three long months and during this time had no communication with the outside world whatever, not even a letter or a newspaper.

I, in company with others, baked bread for the rebels. Every day a sack of flour was brought to us and made into bread. We mixed flour, water and salt together which when baked was as hard as rocks. Two rebels would come with the sack, one holding the sack while the other scooped the bread in, shoulder it and carried it away to camp.

A battle was daily expected. It took Gen. Thomas three months to surround the rebels but the battle was fought at Perryville, nine miles distant, the Union men being victorious.

... The second day after the battle, I with a horse and guide drove to the battlefield hoping to see my brothers, who were with the 22nd Illinois. After driving a few miles we found both sides of the road, as far as the eye could reach, lined with soldiers who had been in the previous battle, some sleeping, others making coffee and preparing something to eat.

As we drove farther on we met people on horseback, women with babies on their arms, old men and women, some three on one horse, leaving their homes in the early morning hours, as they feared another battle and were going to a place of safety.

We soon reached the ground where the battle had been fought and for a long while we watched squads of men all over the field

digging graves and burying the dead. A little farther on was a large tent with a red flag, which was the hospital tent. We passed on but were stopped by the guards who told us that we could proceed no further, as we were then so near we could see the men in line, officers galloping back and forth on their horses giving commands, and getting the artillery in position.

It was a most wonderful sight. Being unable to proceed farther we retraced our steps slowly to Lebanon. Having had so much rain the roads were knee deep with mud fast travel was impossible. Lebanon was a general hospital. All the churches and school houses were used for hospitals; seats were all removed and tots placed there-in.

I at once decided to enter and do all I could to help, as I knew it would be only a short time until I would be able to return home. Here I witnessed many heart-rending sights and many were the letters I wrote for dying soldiers, who knew they would never see home again.

This ended my war career, as I was glad and thankful to be a passenger on the first train that slowly crept over the rebuilt bridges. Part of my journey home was on the same boat *The War Eagle*, which had taken us south the year before.

Margaret married Duncan McMillan, who also then enlisted and served during the last year of the Civil War. The couple finally settled in Eau Claire, where Duncan became a scaler for the Chippewa Logging Company. Margaret lived in Eau Claire for at least 40 years.

The full text of her memoir can be found in the Glenn Curtis Smoot Library and Archives at CVM.