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Frankfort Soldiers in the Civil and Dakota Wars Part Two: the 4th, 9th, and 2nd Minnesota Regiments

By Bob Zahler

A year ago in this publication we looked at the famous 1st Minnesota Regiment and the men of Frankfort Township, now St. Michael, who served in that regiment. In this issue we'll look at a few of the other regiments and their various military engagements.

More soldiers from St. Michael, a total of ten men, served in the 4th Regiment than any other single regiment, although they were spread throughout five different companies: John Baptist Marx and Jacob Vetsch (Co. A), Michael Kinna Sr. and Lorenz Vetsch (Co. D), Peter Columbus, Peter Duerr, Emil Gutzwiller and Ferdinand Gutzwiller (Co. G), John Buol (Co. H) and Valentine Valerius (Co. I). While the 4th Minnesota Regiment gained some fame as being a part of the siege of Vicksburg in the summer of 1863, only Peter Columbus was in the regiment at that time. The rest were not mustered in until the spring and summer of 1864. They did, however, participate in the Battle of Allatoona Pass (Georgia) in October of 1864 and were part of General Sherman's famous March to the Sea.

After the fall of Atlanta on September 2, 1864, Confederate General John Hood ordered his forces to disrupt the supply and communication lines of General William T. Sherman. Important to these lines was the Western and Atlantic Railroad connecting Atlanta to Chattanooga. If Sherman was to successfully sever the South, he would need the ability to resupply his troops. The railroad cut through the Allatoona Mountains northwest of Atlanta at Allatoona Pass, a 175-foot deep, man-made cut that allowed the trains to pass through the mountains. It was also here that Sherman had his supply depot. The destruction of the pass and capture of the depot would disrupt Sherman's plans and therefore it became paramount to his success to protect the pass. The 4th Minnesota was among 2,000 union troops positioned along a ridge near the pass to defend it against advancing Confederate forces. Fighting commenced on the morning of October 5, 1864.

The steady fire of the 4th Minnesota was crucial in keeping the 35th and 39th Mississippi Regiments trapped in a gully; their battle flags were eventually captured along with 80 prisoners. Thirteen Minnesotans were killed in the fighting including Michael Kinna Sr. of Frankfort who had settled with his family west of Foster Lake. Kinna is buried at the Marietta National Cemetery. Jacob Vetsch, who had just recently joined the regiment, suffered partial deafness the rest of his life as a result of a shell exploding near him at Allatoona. Jacob's younger brother, Lorenz, who had come up from Missouri to Minnesota to visit his brothers Joseph and Jacob, volunteered from Frankfort to fight in Joseph's place. Fifteen days after the Battle of Allatoona Pass, Lorenz died of peritonitis, an infection common when the membrane around the abdomen is punctured. Lorenz Vetsch was reported to have been buried somewhere in eastern Tennessee; but unmarked graves were very common. John Buol, from the western part of Frankfort, reported in an 1890 veteran's census that he too was wounded, but it is not clear if this



Three veterans appear in this photo. From left: Peter Duerr (4th MN), unidentified man, John Duerr, Ferdinand Gutzwiller (4th MN) and sitting in front is Emil Gutzwiller (4th MN). The occasion was Emil and Mary (Duerr) Gutzwiller's 50th Wedding Anniversary in 1923.

happened at Allatoona. After Allatoona Pass, the 4th Minnesota participated in Sherman's March to the Sea and then marched through the Carolinas and Virginia and finally in Washington, DC where they marched in review at the front of the column of General Sherman's troops.

Four men from the eastern part of Frankfort served in Company B of the 9th Minnesota Regiment and all were mustered-in in August of 1862: Francis Chute, Michael Kinna Jr., Peter Middlestedt and William Reems. Company B spent the first year in the Dakota Indian War. Shortly after being formed, Indian hostilities erupted and they were sent west where they were attacked by some Dakota near Acton. The company proceeded to Hutchinson where they were attacked once again by an estimated 300 Dakota. The Dakota War was short-lived and ended with the execution of 38 Dakota men at Mankato in December 1862. Company B remained in defense of Hutchinson and other posts in southwestern Minnesota until the following year. Company B joined other companies of the 9th at Fort Snelling in October of 1863 to prepare to head to Missouri where their job was to guard the railroads from Confederate attacks. Peter Middlestedt of Frankfort died in Rolla, Missouri on May 21, 1864. Since Company B had not recently been engaged in any fighting and since the rest of the regiment was on its way to St. Louis at the time of his death, it is likely that Pvt. Middlestedt died of disease.

The 9th Minnesota fought its first major battle against the Confederacy at Brice's Crossroads in Mississippi on June 10, 1864. This battle resulted on one of the most lopsided victories for the Confederacy as Union General Samuel Sturgis had a near two-to-one advantage over the army of Confederate General Bedford Forrest, yet he managed to lose the battle. Sturgis has been blamed for inaction, but failure was also due to muddy roads, heat exhaustion and lack of rations among the union forces. The 9th Minnesota was the last to leave the field of battle in retreat and therefore covered the rear of the retreating column. Consequently, they were more exposed to advancing Confederates and got slowed by the wounded and bedraggled. Michael Kinna Jr., who was wounded during the battle, was taken to Andersonville Prison in Georgia, which became notorious for its overcrowded and disease-infested conditions. In light of the privations suffered by Andersonville inmates, Kinna may have considered his death on July 9th a blessing. His grave is at the Beaufort National Cemetery in South Carolina. Of the 233 soldiers of the 9th Minnesota captured at Brice's Crossroads, 119 (over half) died in prison.

The 9th Minnesota, now veterans, found success under better leadership at Tupelo, Mississippi on July 14, 1864 and then again at the Battle of Nashville on December 15, 1864. At Tupelo the 9th was mostly held in reserve but at Nashville they were on the front lines along with several other Minnesota regiments including the 5th Minnesota which included two other Frankfort boys: Christian Wolff and William Roloff, both from Company D. Christian Wolff, who had been promoted to the rank of Corporal, had been wounded in June of 1863 in Richmond, Louisiana. He went back into service and was wounded again on December 16 in Nashville. He died of his wounds on January 19, 1865 and is buried at Nashville National Cemetery. Francis Chute, another Frankfort soldier but in the 9th Minnesota Regiment, was also wounded at Nashville. Chute died on December 18, 1964 and is buried at the Memphis National Cemetery.

The last regiment that will be discussed here is the 2nd Minnesota Regiment in which five men from Frankfort served: Conrad Lutz (Co. F) John Igel and Peter Schumacher (Co. G) and Arnold Cochran and Simon Walesch (Co. I). The 2nd Minnesota fought in the famous battles of Chickamauga, Georgia (September 19-20, 1863) and Missionary Ridge Tennessee (November 25, 1863); however, only Arnold Cochran and Simon Walesch were in the regiment at that time and only fought at Chickamauga. While Chickamauga was a loss for the union, the 2nd Minnesota played an important role holding the field and repulsing several attacks long enough to allow the army to retreat. Only Gettysburg produced more casualties than Chickamauga. Corporal Arnold Cochran of Frankfort was killed at Chickamauga and Simon Walesch was wounded. Cochran's name is included on the Minnesota monument at the battlefield, but his grave is unmarked. Men were hastily buried and most bodies were eventually moved to Chattanooga where there are over 1,800 unmarked graves. Walesch was eventually discharged because of his disability. The other three Frankfort men in the 2nd Minnesota joined in 1864 and participated in Sherman's March to the Sea.

While these infantry regiments gained the most fame during the war, the other men from Frankfort who have not already been mentioned here served in various infantry, artillery and cavalry units doing their duties honorably. It is the goal of the St. Michael Historical Society to make sure that the graves of all of the Civil War veterans are appropriately marked and their service noted in our records.

An Honor 130 Years Overdue

By Bob Zahler

In a report released earlier this year, about 22 war veterans commit suicide each day, an alarming and extremely sad statistic. Suicide among veterans is not a new problem and is one that has likely persisted since the beginning of warfare; but shamefully, we are just now giving it the attention it deserves. While suicide among Civil War veterans was noted in some military records, the government did not follow and care for veterans in the way it does today and so Civil War veterans with mental illness often suffered alone. The stigma attached to suicide, especially in the 19th century, also meant that the victim may not have received a burial appropriate for a veteran. This may have been the case with Pvt. Franz Zahler, a Civil War veteran who waited 130 years to receive the honor he deserved.

Franz was born in Ettenbeuren, Germany in 1835. He immigrated to the United States in 1855 and applied for citizenship the following year in Ramsey County. He and two brothers, Anton and Joseph, immigrated separately to America ahead of the rest of the family. Anton went to Minneapolis where he established a brewery, and Joseph came to Frankfort where he also established a brewery. Franz eventually followed Joseph to Frankfort and arrived here on January 1, 1857. By June he had built a cabin on his claim just south of present-day downtown St. Michael. His parents and the rest of the children, twelve in all, arrived in the fall of 1857 and moved into the cabin he had built for them. Franz then went searching for work since it would take a few years before the land would produce an income and the cabin would have been extremely crowded.

For the next few years Franz seemed to wander, probably looking for work. In 1858 he took a job doing survey work in the Sauk Valley, but in 1862 Franz volunteered for military service in the war with the 2nd Minnesota Battery of Light Artillery which was recruiting that summer. Franz signed the enlistment papers on August 11, 1862. He was given a bounty of \$25 for his promise to serve three years. Franz went south with more than twenty other new recruits. They joined the battery just in time to take part in the battle at Perryville, Kentucky. It was the first major battle in which the battery participated and their position put them in some extremely hot fighting. Later, the 2nd Battery played important parts in the battles at Stone River, Chickamauga and Missionary Ridge. Whether it was because of dedication to the cause and his buddies or lack of other opportunities, Franz reenlisted for another three years in March of 1864. When the war was over, he and the 2nd Battery returned to Minnesota where they were mustered out on August 16, 1865. Franz came through the war without physical harm; but he had been away for three full years and he had seen some of the worst fighting of the war. Many of his brothers-in-arms were dead, but Franz had survived. Now he had to somehow transition back into civilian life.



*Franz Zahler's gravestone at Crystal Lake Cemetery
Photo by Bob Zahler*

Franz returned to Frankfort after the war. His father had died while he was gone and his brother Wilhelm was running the farm. He was appointed to the position of "Constable" of Frankfort Township on April 18, 1867; but he was not ready to stay put for long. Franz's brother Michael was setting up a brewery in Waconia, so Frank moved again to work there. Later in 1868 he married Mary Stenger in Waconia and together they had five children. They ran a small store in a tiny community called Helvetia in Carver County and possibly did some farming along with working at the Waconia brewery. By 1873, Frank was holding down another job working as a "malster" at the North Star Brewery in St. Paul. Church records and newspaper accounts indicate that Mary and the children remained in Helvetia.

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Meetings held on the second Monday of the month at the St. Michael City Hall in the Gries and Lenhardt Public Meeting Room adjacent to the library.

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Franz seemed prone to trouble and heartache. He and Mary had lost one child to diphtheria, and Franz's shifts in occupation and residence seem to indicate restlessness. Perhaps today Franz might have been diagnosed with PTSD or depression, but in 1876 there was no help for him. On December 13, 1876 near Lake Calhoun, a passerby found Franz Zahler's body slumped-over in his sleigh; a bullet hole in his head. In the sleigh were some stock items for the store in Helvetia and a revolver lying on the floor. The coroner ruled the death a suicide; Franz was just 41 years old. A newspaper reporter said Franz had just purchased the revolver while he was in Minneapolis, suggesting that the act was premeditated. Three days after he was found dead, a second child of Franz and Mary died from diphtheria at the age of just 22 months. Having seen this disease before, Franz likely knew, on the night he took his life, that this child was not likely to survive. Was it all too much for him? Was he tormented by the fact that he had survived while his buddies and now two of his children had died?

Anton Zahler, Franz's brother who lived in Minneapolis, arranged for Franz's burial in Layman's Cemetery in Minneapolis. Anton was likely the only person to attend the burial since Mary was at least a day's ride away and their baby was deathly ill. The stigma attached to a suicide at that time certainly only compounded the tragedy for the family. How the original grave was marked is not known. In 1922 the cemetery was closed for redevelopment of the land and the families were asked to remove the remains of their loved ones. Franz's widow had long-before remarried and moved away. His brother Anton had died in 1878 and so it is presumed that Anton's widow had the bodies of Anton and Franz reinterred, but for 128 years the new burial plot remained a mystery.

In 2004 I was contacted by Vickie Wendel of the 2nd MN Battery of Light Artillery Re-enactors who had been told that I was researching Zahler family history. The re-enactors were determined that all of the original battery members should have proper grave markers and I agreed to help them find Franz's grave. Over the next year I scoured the records to find anything that would point toward Franz's final resting place. Following some sketchy evidence, I decided to check the cemetery records of Crystal Lake Cemetery in Northeast Minneapolis. The cemetery records showed that Franz had indeed been reinterred there, but no marker was on the grave.

As a veteran, Franz was guaranteed a grave marker, but there would still be costs to have it set. Consistent with its commitment to honor the memories of their fallen comrades, American Legion Post 567 in St. Michael agreed to pay the extra costs. Additionally, the post honor guard and numerous members participated in a special gravestone dedication ceremony on June 17, 2006. The dedication event, conducted by the 2nd Minnesota Battery of Light Artillery Re-enactors wearing Civil War period uniforms, included a canon salute and flag ceremony. After 130 years, Pvt. Franz Zahler finally received the military honors he was due. May we never wait this long again to honor a veteran.



*Civil War re-enactors & Post 567 members provide Honor Guard for Franz Zahler's gravestone dedication in June 2006
Photo by Bob Zahler*