

VOLUNTEER GUARDS IN MINNESOTA

The first volunteer military company in Minnesota was organized at St. Paul on April 17, 1856. The interest of some of its members in military drill doubtless arose out of the increased tensivity of sectional rivalries that marked the fifties. The time was nearly at hand when Elmer E. Ellsworth was to dramatize through his Zouaves a mounting northern interest in preparedness.¹ Another motive was supplied by the need of trained men to meet any special emergency that might arise in the frontier territory. Probably for many the decisive factor in causing them to join the guards is to be found in the glamor of uniforms and military organization, coupled with the likelihood that a company of young civilian soldiers would be a nucleus for many interesting social activities. At all events, the organization was effected under the name of Minnesota Pioneer Guard, and, true to pioneer traditions, it was solidly based upon a constitution and bylaws.

The formal rules of the guard called for commissioned and noncommissioned officers with duties similar to those of officers of the regular army of the United States, for monthly drill, for a court martial to investigate any "un-officer-like or un-military conduct," and for a "Board of Direction"—consisting of the commissioned officers and five other members—with power to change and amend the bylaws and to accept or discharge members. A fine of two dollars was to be imposed for absence from the annual meeting or from any parade, and a fine of fifty cents for absence from drill or a monthly meeting. Any member who became intoxicated at the time of a drill or a parade or who imbibed

¹ Charles A. Ingraham, *Elmer E. Ellsworth and the Zouaves of '61* (Chicago, 1925).

too freely at a drinking house in St. Paul while dressed in uniform was to be punished by fine or expulsion.

When the guard was reorganized under state law on November 4, 1858, a new constitution was adopted for the purpose of "perpetuating those relations of harmony and friendship so essential to the prosperity of every volunteer association, and establishing on a firm and lasting basis the character and discipline of the company." One of the "Rules of Order" under the new constitution provided that no member while speaking in a meeting should mention another member by name, but should describe his position in the company or refer to him as, for instance, the gentleman on the opposite side of the question. Nor should anyone "resort to personalities or ungentlemanly remarks to, or in relation to another member."² The new bylaws listed fines for nineteen different types of neglect or violation of rules. For instance, the secretary was to be fined one dollar for neglecting to send or bring his books to a meeting. The committee on accounts seems to have had difficulty in collecting fines. In March, 1859, members in arrears were notified that unless they paid fines or dues charged against them or gave written excuses for failing to do so before the next monthly meeting their names would be stricken from the membership list.³

At the very outset the members of the guard were so enthusiastic that they drilled twice a week. A few weeks after they organized, the following item appeared in a local newspaper:

We were present the other evening at drill, and were pleasantly surprised at the skill displayed by the members. The "Pioneers" make a pleasure of learning the routine of military exercises and they will soon attain a degree of proficiency to appear in public with credit.

²The manuscript constitutions of the Minnesota Pioneer Guard, adopted under territorial and state law respectively, are in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

³Minnesota Pioneer Guard, Minutes, March 22, 1859, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

When the cornerstone of a building for the Minnesota Historical Society was laid in 1856, the members of the guard did not take part in the ceremonies because their uniforms, ordered some time earlier, had not arrived. For what would be the fun of marching in a parade if one could not strut along in a striking uniform? Fortunately the uniforms arrived the day before the Fourth of July. Each consisted of a blue, single-breasted dress coat with three rows of gilt buttons and bindings of orange-colored cord; sky-blue pants with broad orange stripes down the legs; and a hat of the army pattern with an orange pompon for the privates and a plume of the same color for the officers.⁴

On July 4, 1856, about thirty-five members of the guard in full parade uniform appeared at the armory and they marched thence through some of the principal streets of St. Paul to the Capitol. There they were received by a special committee and conducted to seats in the room used by the supreme court, where the exercises of the day were held. "We think the 'Guard' made a fine appearance," commented a local newspaper reporter, "and their evolutions and manoeuvres while upon the street would have done no discredit to a company much longer accustomed to the drill." At a military dress ball in the evening they again appeared in full uniform, though white pantaloons had been substituted for the blue ones, and they remained standing until the ladies and the citizen guests had dined. Dancing until the "wee small hours" followed the dinner. This "magnificent affair" was much to the guards' taste, so a similar party was given on the evening of the next Thanksgiving Day. On that occasion "the music was excellent—the supper sumptuous—the company, the fairer portion of it, pretty, accomplished, and witty—the gents agreeable and polite."⁵

⁴ *Daily Pioneer and Democrat*, May 19, June 26, 1856; *Pioneer Guard, Minutes*, April 17, 1856.

⁵ *Pioneer and Democrat*, July 7, December 1, 1856.

The social activities of the guard and its proficiency in drill evidently made it the envy and admiration of others and stimulated the organization of similar groups. A company of Irish citizens of St. Paul, called Shields Guards, was organized on July 8, 1856. The Germans also intended to form a military company at this time, but nothing seems to have come of their plans. A St. Anthony newspaper announced on July 12, 1856, the organization of the Falls City Light Guards. Red Wing joined the movement with the organization of the Red Wing Rifles in March, 1857. After the Inkpaduta massacre of April, 1857, a member of the Red Wing company made an urgent appeal to the governor for arms.⁶

The Inkpaduta massacre probably would not have been the cause of widespread panic had there been well-trained volunteer military companies in the southwestern part of the territory. Inkpaduta was the leader of a small band of Sioux who fell upon a white settlement at Lake Okaboji in Dickinson County, Iowa, just south of the Minnesota line, and murdered over thirty settlers. With four women captives, the Indians moved into Jackson County, Minnesota, where they brutally murdered several more victims before fleeing to Dakota.

On April 10 a mass meeting was called in Mankato and addressed by a man who claimed to be an eyewitness of the massacre. From fifty to sixty men volunteered to go to the defense of the settlers. The next morning about thirty-five appeared at an appointed meeting place. "Some were rigged in the style of western hunters, with bright-colored shirts, and a belt full of pistols and knives; one had cut his coat away after the style of the dress uniform of an old country soldier." Two who were mounted wore military

⁶ *Pioneer and Democrat*, July 17, 1856; March 19, 1857; *St. Anthony Express*, July 12, 1856; Charles W. Beers to Samuel Medary, July 26, 1857, Governor's Archives, in the custody of the Minnesota Historical Society.

gloves and boots and had bright-colored scarves tied across their shoulders and breasts. These volunteers started out to find the Indians, halting long enough at the Blue Earth River bridge to elect officers. They scoured the country and, since they were suspicious of all Indians, they began firing indiscriminately on all they saw or encountered. A burning straw stack near Garden City was enough to start a rumor that the entire town was being fired by the Indians. Many settlers in the vicinity fled to St. Peter and there, too, a volunteer company was organized.⁷

At Cambria a volunteer company of thirty or forty Welsh and German settlers marched against an Indian camp in the vicinity. A delegation conferred with the Indians, who declared that they had no connection with Inkpaduta. Evidently their word was accepted and there was no shooting. A member of the Judson volunteer company on guard duty thought he saw an Indian skulking through the brush and fired a shot. The people of the town hastily began to erect a fort. When someone grew bold enough to look for the Indian, he discovered a wounded horse.⁸

The St. Paul Light Cavalry Company, which was organized on April 15, 1857, received orders from the governor on August 20 to proceed to Rum River to protect the settlers from Indian depredations. Twenty-seven mounted men, "arrayed in red coats and white pants" and armed with heavy swords and army pistols, left St. Paul on August 25. On the twenty-eighth they encountered six Chippewa; a skirmish followed in which a soldier and an Indian were killed and another Indian was wounded. The five remaining Indians were taken to the Ramsey County jail, but four of them were released and the fifth escaped.⁹

There is evidence that volunteer companies also were or-

⁷ William W. Folwell, *History of Minnesota*, 2:223 (St. Paul, 1924); Thomas Hughes, *History of Blue Earth County*, 84 (Chicago, 1909).

⁸ Hughes, *Blue Earth County*, 88.

⁹ Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1:325; James Starkey to Medary, 1857, Governor's Archives.

ganized at this time at South Bend, New Ulm, and Traverse des Sioux. The Scott Guards of Belle Plaine and the Carver Grays probably had their origin in this period. News that Indians were plundering settlers on the Watonwan River, twenty miles southwest of Garden City, reached the village late one day and resulted in the organization of the Garden City Sharpshooters. That same evening sixty men volunteered to form a militia company. A fund of a hundred dollars was raised and turned over to the captain and lieutenant for the purchase of arms and ammunition at St. Paul. The two men drove twelve miles to Mankato and thence took a steamer to St. Paul. They visited Governor Medary in the morning before he was out of bed, and then hurried to Fort Snelling to obtain sixty Springfield rifles and a supply of ammunition. Within thirty-six hours they were back in Garden City drilling their company. For two weeks the members drilled daily. Then they received letters from the governor and Indian agents in Minnesota informing them that no one had been killed in the last raid of the Indians and that two companies of regular infantry had been ordered to Fort Ridgely. The citizens of Minnesota Territory were ordered to refrain from any interference with the military force, since the secretary of war had disapproved of Governor Medary's plan to make use of a volunteer force to chastise the hostile Sioux.¹⁰

When the Indian scare passed over, many of the volunteer companies, including those at Belle Plaine, Cambria, Carver, Judson, and South Bend, probably ceased to exist; at least no information has been found on their activities after 1858. Even the Pioneer Guard's enthusiasm fell off to a considerable extent. For some time there were no business meetings or drills. A meeting was finally called on

¹⁰ Alonzo L. Brown, "Narrative of the Fourth Regiment," in *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 1: 198 (St. Paul, 1890); Theodore E. Potter, "Recollections of Minnesota Experiences," *ante*, 1: 431-435; Commissioner of Indian Affairs, *Reports*, 1857, p. 72, 77.

December 8, 1857, when there was some discussion about the merits of functioning during the winter. A motion was made and carried that the company adjourn sine die. The captain, arriving late, asked the members to reconsider the motion. A resolution was then adopted that the group meet in a week for drill and business. Meanwhile one committee was appointed to enlist new members and another was instructed to collect the uniforms of members who no longer intended to act with the company.¹¹

A new impetus was given to the organization of volunteer companies on June 15, 1858, when, in a special message to the legislature, the new governor, Henry H. Sibley, encouraged their organization. Referring to the Inkapaduta massacre, he stressed the need of military preparedness. Accordingly, "An Act to organize and discipline the Militia and Volunteer Militia" was passed by the legislature and approved by the governor on August 12, 1858. It provided that men enrolled in the volunteer militia should be the first to be ordered into service "in all cases of war, invasion, riot, or insurrection." Whenever forty men organized as a volunteer company, the governor, acting as commander-in-chief, was to appoint the commissioned officers of the company.¹² Six months later the following companies were reported as organized: Minnesota Pioneer Guard, City Guard, and Light Cavalry, all of St. Paul; and the Jackson Rifles, Stillwater Guard, Washington Light Artillery, Red Wing Rifles, Mankato Rifle Company, Garden City Sharpshooters, Little Falls Guard, St. Cloud Rifle Company, and companies at Blue Earth City and Traverse des Sioux. Regimental officers were said to be organizing companies at Hastings, Wabasha, Rochester, Taylor's Falls, Cambridge, Minneapolis, and Shakopee. A state encampment for review and inspection was to be held in July, when the crack companies were to compete in drill and discipline

¹¹ Pioneer Guard, Minutes, December 8, 1857.

¹² Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2: 26; *General Laws*, 1858, p. 231-254.

for the state colors, but these plans do not seem to have materialized.¹³

The later activities of the Minnesota Pioneer Guard probably are typical of those of other companies in the late fifties. On May 27, 1859, members of the guard went on a steamboat excursion to Minneapolis. After a trip of five hours the members and their guests were entertained at the Nicollet House with a dinner of roast turkey and champagne. This occasion brought forth an interchange of sentiments of goodwill from the citizens of St. Paul and of the two cities at the Falls of St. Anthony. After the dinner the guardsmen crossed the river to St. Anthony, where they marched and went through "intricate" maneuvers. A cotillon party in the evening ended the festivities. On board the steamer "Denmark" the next morning the members adopted resolutions expressing their thanks and commenting on the "bond of sympathy which should exist between . . . close neighbors and cities of such importance."¹⁴

The guard again combined social and military activities on the Fourth of July, 1859. At six o'clock in the morning its members met at the armory, and then marched through the streets to the boat landing and embarked on the steamer "Itasca." They intended to parade at Hastings and at Prescott, but were prevented by rain. The rain ceased before they arrived at Hudson and they were able to promenade before the admiring eyes of the residents of that village. At Stillwater, they were met by the Stillwater Guard and the Washington Light Artillery and were escorted to the parade grounds. There the companies competed in military maneuvers and exercises with arms. Lunch

¹³ *Red Wing Sentinel*, February 19, 1859. Between July 17, 1857, and February 4, 1859, the adjutant general issued arms to twelve companies in the following order: Waterman Guards, Fairfield Guards, Garden City Sharpshooters, Dakota City Guards, St. Paul Light Cavalry, Shelbyville Rifle Company, St. Cloud Rifle Company, Winona Artillery, Washington Light Artillery, Jackson Rifles, Stillwater Guard, and Dakota County Guard. Adjutant General, *Reports*, 1859, p. 10.

¹⁴ Pioneer Guard, Minutes, May 17, 27, 1859.

was then served, and the guests drank great quantities of iced champagne from tin dippers. In the evening a grand ball was held, and members of the Pioneer Guard were reluctant to leave when at twelve o'clock the steamboat bell sounded for the return trip.¹⁵

On January 2, 1860, the members of the guard formed a parade to escort the governor-elect, Alexander Ramsey, from the Winslow House to the Capitol for his inauguration. After the ceremonies they went to his residence, where refreshments were served, and they then ordered carriages and rode to the homes of Brigadier General Emerson and ex-Governor Willis A. Gorman. The procession from place to place was accompanied by a band.

The Pioneer Guard's band came into existence after a committee of five was appointed on November 30, 1858, to solicit subscriptions from St. Paul citizens for the purchase of instruments. By February 1 a hundred and fifty dollars had been contributed and the following resolution was adopted:

RESOLVED: That the Pioneer Guard justly appreciate so much kindness from the hands of the citizens of St. Paul, and hope, before many moons shall come and go, to be able to appear before them, a well drilled, efficient and spirited corps, with a band of music, whose stirring strains will lighten the carking cares of life, quicken the marshall spirit of our people, and add something to the life, the interest and gaiety of the young city of St. Paul.¹⁶

Since some members of the guard paid more attention to its social than to its military activities, a resolution was passed excluding from certain festivities members who had not attended the two previous drills.¹⁷ The guard often assisted in maintaining law and order. It was requested by the Ramsey County sheriff to be present at the hanging of a Mrs. Belanski, in order to "aid and protect him in the

¹⁵ Pioneer Guard, Minutes, July 4, 1859; *Daily Pioneer and Democrat*, July 6, 1859; *St. Paul Globe*, March 12, 1899.

¹⁶ Pioneer Guard, Minutes, November 30, 1858; February 1, 1859; January 2, 1860.

¹⁷ Pioneer Guard, Minutes, July 12, 1859.

discharge of a very unpleasant duty." The guardsmen appeared in uniform at the hanging in the courthouse square and their presence is believed to have prevented a public disturbance.¹⁸ In August, 1859, the adjutant general called upon the company to discharge a duty "of a very delicate and difficult nature, but not less incumbent on them than foreign aggression" by assisting in the arrest at Monticello of some notorious murderers who were responsible for what has been called the "Wright County War." At least a part of the guard's "line of march" to Monticello was covered in Burbank's four-horse express coaches. The company reached that village on the evening of August 6, and the next day the Stillwater Guard and the City Guard of St. Paul arrived. Police brought in three prisoners, who were taken to safe quarters by the Pioneer Guard. Since the county authorities believed that they could enforce the law without military assistance, the companies returned to their home cities. In St. Paul the Pioneer Guard proceeded to the Capitol, where the adjutant general thanked the members for their "prompt response to call, gentlemanly conduct, military deportment, and service to the state." He asserted that the promptness with which the company obeyed the orders to march to Wright County showed that it was ready for any crisis.¹⁹

The crisis of the Civil War put an end to the half-serious activities of the military companies. Their training, however, stood them in good stead. Even the two marching clubs, organized in St. Paul during the presidential campaign of 1860, had received some practical experience.²⁰ When the news of the firing upon Fort Sumter reached

¹⁸ Pioneer Guard, Minutes, March 20, 23, 1860.

¹⁹ Pioneer Guard, Minutes, August 4-11, 1859; *Pioneer and Democrat*, August 6, 8, 12, 13, 1859; Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:29; Adjutant General, *Reports*, 1860, p. 7.

²⁰ The Republicans were known as the "Wide Awakes," while the Democratic club went by the name of "Little Giants." J. Fletcher Williams, *History of the City of Saint Paul and of the County of Ramsey*, 396 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 4 — St. Paul, 1876).

Washington, Governor Ramsey, who happened to be in the national capital, immediately tendered to President Lincoln the services of a regiment from Minnesota. The governor then wired to Lieutenant Governor Ignatius Donnelly to issue a call for volunteers. Donnelly sent at once for A. T. Chamberlain, at that time captain of the Pioneer Guard, and suggested calling the company together. A meeting was called for the same evening, April 15, at the armory, which was packed with an excited crowd of citizens who hoped to join the guard. A vote was taken to determine whether or not the Pioneer Guard should enlist as a company. The vote was unanimously in the affirmative. Sixty men signed the enlistment roll, and the old Minnesota Pioneer Guard became Company A of the First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry. The next morning Donnelly's call for volunteers was published. The first ten companies organized within ten days would be received into service. Preference, however, was to be given to the eight volunteer companies active at Chatfield, Mankato, New Ulm, St. Anthony, Clearwater, St. Cloud, St. Paul, and Stillwater. When the ten days had expired, three of the old companies—the Minnesota Pioneer Guard, the Stillwater Guard, and the St. Anthony Zouaves—were ready for active service.²¹

The experiences of the other companies probably were similar to those of the Clearwater Guard, which met on April 22, 1861. When a vote was taken on whether or not to volunteer its services to the government, the result was twenty yeas, twenty-three nays, and eleven absent. Sixty-four privates and fourteen officers were required to make up a company, and it did not seem likely that the ranks could be filled in the required time. As a result the

²¹ *History of the First Regiment, Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1864*, 1-3 (Stillwater, 1916); Adjutant General, *Reports*, 1861, p. 231; John D. Hicks, "The Organization of the Volunteer Army in 1861 with Special Reference to Minnesota," *ante*, 2: 332.

Clearwater volunteers were advised to join other organizations.²²

Most of the ten companies accepted for the First Minnesota regiment had been organized prior to the Civil War. These companies, in addition to the three already mentioned, were the St. Paul, Red Wing, Wabasha, and Winona volunteers, the Lincoln Guard of Minneapolis, the Faribault Guard, and the Dakota County Guard of Hastings.²³ With the exception of Faribault, all the places represented had seen volunteer military organizations at one time or another.

References to thirty-seven volunteer companies in Minnesota have been found by the present writer. The histories of all may not be as interesting as that of the Minnesota Pioneer Guard, but each was a factor in the social life of a frontier community, each met in one way or another special local needs, and each gave to its members a basic training in military drill.

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²² Clearwater Guard, Minutes, April 22, 1861, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society. A copy of the constitution of this company precedes its minutes.

²³ *History of the First Regiment*, 6, 7.



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