

FATHER PRUCHA, who received the society's Solon J. Buck Award in 1954, the first year it was given, is currently in residence at Saint Mary's College, Saint Marys, Kansas.

# An Army Private at OLD FORT SNELLING in 1849

FRANCIS PAUL PRUCHA, S.J.

AMONG the unsung pioneers of Minnesota must be listed the soldiers of the regular army who manned the frontier forts in the territory. The troops at Forts Snelling, Ripley, and Ridgely, like those at other posts throughout the country, were a motley group—"a rag-tag and bob-tail herd," as one foreign visitor described them. The army officers, to be sure, formed a gentlemanly professional corps, and in the ranks, too, there sometimes appeared men of exceptional ability. In the main, however, the private soldiers were rough citizens drawn from the lower levels of society and, in increasingly larger numbers, from the hordes of immigrants pouring in from Europe.

They were unknown men, whose lives and thoughts have but seldom obtruded into the written records. These soldiers were not the kind of people who leave literary remains. The troops of the Civil War, drawn in large numbers from the

literate classes and eager to record for the folks at home their new experiences in camp and in the field, left an enormous bulk of letters and diaries that have been the boon of historians. But the pre-Civil War soldier was quite a different type. It is of considerable interest, then, when occasionally there appears a firsthand account of frontier army life by one of these forgotten men.

Such a record may be found in two personal letters written by Gustavus Otto, a German immigrant who served as a private at Forts Ripley and Snelling in 1848 and 1849.<sup>1</sup> The letters describe a life of hardship and loneliness, of dissatisfaction with the severity of the weather and the work, disgust with his associates, and a general feeling that his abilities and skills were not getting quite the respect and return they deserved. The letters are human documents, distilling in the yearnings and criticisms of one man much that was common to many.

<sup>1</sup> The letters from Otto to his wife at Detroit, dated Fort Snelling, April 7, 1849, and to Gottlieb Häfner at Detroit, dated Galena, Illinois, August 13, 1849, are preserved in the Duffield Family Papers, Burton Collection, Detroit Public Library. They are written in a neat German script. An English translation is available in the Burton Collection, which the author has checked against the originals and modified where necessary.

OTTO was a native of Bavaria. When or why he emigrated to the United States we do not know. We may presume that he left his homeland, as did so many others in that day, for economic or political reasons and sought to get a new start in the great middle regions of America. We find him at



INFANTRY private (seated)  
in the campaign uniform of  
the late 1840s

Detroit on June 10, 1848, enlisting in the Sixth Infantry for a five-year period. He was a short man, with blue eyes and sandy hair. His age was twenty-nine, and he listed his occupation as "painter."<sup>2</sup> The circumstances of his enlistment escape us, but his letters give a hint that family troubles and at least a tinge of intemperance may have made him see in the recruiting officer's invitation a chance to escape an uncomfortable situation—to start again, to recoup his self-respect and his family's affections.

Otto tells us that from Detroit he went "to Toledo, from there to Newport Barracks, on the other side of Cincinnati, from there to Jefferson Barracks, 10 miles from St. Louis; and after 4 weeks' delay we went 1200 miles up the Mississippi River among the Indians." His destination was Fort Marcy, later to be called Fort Gaines and then Fort Ripley, which had been established on the Mississippi River near the mouth of the Crow Wing in 1848 when the Winnebago Indians were removed from

Iowa to Minnesota. The spot did not appeal to the recruit. "What we had to endure there cannot be described," he wrote to his friend in Detroit. "I got dysentery, from which I thought I could not recover, but God helped me; last winter we marched back again 250 miles to the fortress Fort Snelling, where we remained. There for the first time I slept under a roof again, for until then we were treated like dogs, and I often wished to be a slave."<sup>3</sup>

FORT SNELLING was more to Otto's liking, and the beauty of the region impressed him, as it did most newcomers to the area. "The country is very pleasant here," he

<sup>2</sup> Registers of Enlistment, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, National Archives. The 1846 Detroit city directory lists Otto as a painter, residing on Macomb Street. His name does not appear in earlier or later directories.

<sup>3</sup> The actual distance from St. Louis to St. Paul via the Mississippi River is only 800 miles, and it was 150 miles from St. Paul to Fort Ripley by the military wagon road along the river.

wrote, "only very hilly along the banks of the Mississippi River. On the heights all is prairie with pleasant hills; our fortress lies very high on the bluff and is built of stone. All the goods, which come by steamboat, we must carry up the bluff, and the boats arrive here twice a week. One mile from here is a little village with several stores, which carry on trade with the Indians. The place is called St. Peter's, and 6 miles from here is a little town, which increases every day in size and is very good for provision dealers; it is called St. Paul.<sup>4</sup> This place and the surroundings are settled with Indians, Frenchmen, and Yankees; in general there are a great many Indians here, and they bring us plenty of fish, prairie fowl, wild ducks, and geese."

He had good words for Fort Snelling and its environs and much preferred the new situation to Fort Ripley. "We were ordered

<sup>4</sup> St. Peter's was the original name of Mendota. In 1849 it was the headquarters for the fur trade of Pierre Chouteau, Jr., and Company of St. Louis with the Sioux, Winnebago, and Chippewa Indians. St. Paul was already the largest town in Minnesota Territory, with a population of 910, according to the census taken in the summer of 1849. The original census returns are in the Minnesota State Archives.

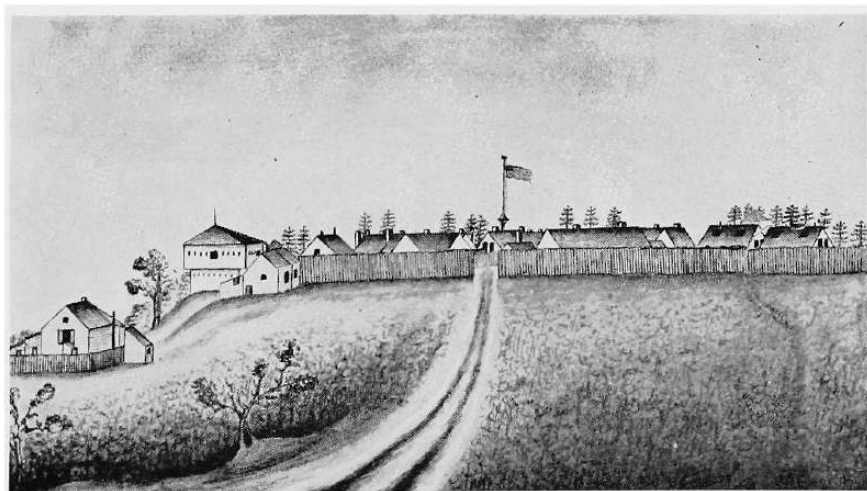
<sup>5</sup> Fort Snelling, according to the adjutant general's report dated December 3, 1848, had two companies of the Sixth Infantry, with a total of 7 officers and 190 enlisted men present for duty. See 30 Congress, 2 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 1, p. 184d (serial 337).

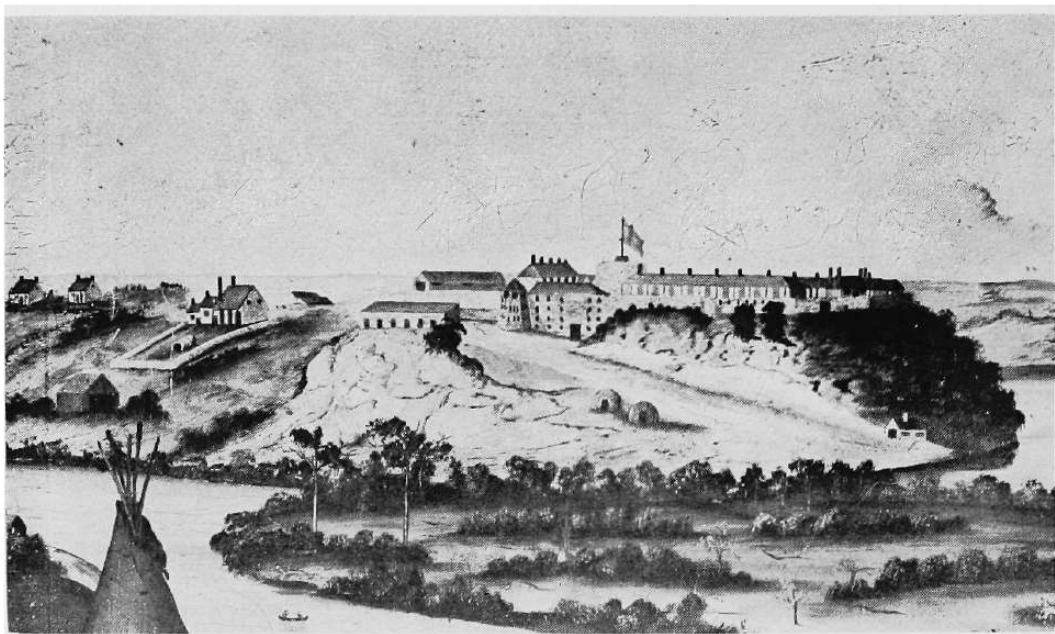
this spring again to our old post, Fort Marcy, now Fort Gaines," he wrote, "but through the death of our general we received the order to remain here, which we like very much, although we are plagued with the hardest tasks and guard duty."<sup>5</sup>

BUT Otto sets forth in his letters enough damning information about his life—or at least his reactions to it—to indicate anything but an attractive existence. His list of grievances, taken together, indicates a pretty unhappy and disillusioned soldier. The severity of the Minnesota winter got first billing: "The winters are very cold here, particularly this one," wrote Otto; "we are in thick stone buildings and each 2 men had 3 woolen blankets and haysacks, and yet we had to make fire in the middle of the night in order not to freeze. We sometimes had to relieve one another at guard every  $\frac{1}{4}$  or  $\frac{1}{2}$  hour." And again: "I had then, like many others, frozen my ears, nose, and face. But God gave me his assistance."

Any soldier who entered the army in those days expecting a life of leisure and ease was sorely disappointed at the frontier posts. The forts were still in the wilderness, and Fort Ripley and Fort Snelling had to provide their own firewood, water, and hay for the livestock. The inspector general of the army complained again and again that

FORT Ripley,  
about 1863





FORT Snelling in 1852, detail from a painting by James Mc C. Boal

so much time was spent on menial tasks that the instruction and military spirit of the soldiers suffered severely. It is therefore not surprising that Otto listed among his grievances: "we were plagued much with the hardest labor" and "we had to procure from a distance of 2 miles wood, hay, and water, where one's life was not safe one minute not to slip and fall down with the wood, which we had to throw down from the bluffs."

FIVE YEARS was the term of enlistment when Otto entered the service, but after less than a year the full term seemed like an interminable time stretching out ahead of him, and an unprofitable time, too. "One also has no prospects to save anything," he complained, "for in order not to freeze one has to get more extra clothes and shoes than he gets here, and these are very dear here. One also has to provide himself with other provisions, if he does not want to get the scurvy, for we get fresh beef with potatoes only on Saturday and Sunday. The other days (that is, every day) we get boiled pork and bean soup; in the morning cold pork, bread, and coffee; in the evening

one slice of bread with coffee. Now you can think what soldier life is."

Another disturbing factor was the fear that his talents were being wasted and that his skill in his trade as painter would deteriorate. Occasionally he made use of his special abilities at the fort. "I have also painted the window curtains of our Captain [Samuel Woods] and of the orderly sergeant. The sergeant was much pleased with the job and said it was a pity that I was a soldier, while I could earn my bread so well."

But greater opportunities lay outside the fort, and Otto told his wife: "Every day in the little town of St. Paul I could get \$2 from a master, who has often come to see if I was free. I could also get \$10 in Galena, St. Louis, and Louisville, but my hands are tied, and 5 years of my life are gone, without helping my children at all. And to get a place in the army the prospects are rather

---

"Otto is complaining that, in the selection of men for advancement, preference was given to soldiers who had served in the Mexican War. The act of 1847 granting land bounties to soldiers who served in that war specifically stated that they were not to be given to volunteers "discharged without being marched to the seat of war." See *United States Statutes*, 9:125.

bad, since those are always chosen who have been in Mexico; no land is given any more."<sup>6</sup>

As if this were not enough, Otto found the Irish (who entered the ranks of the army in even larger numbers than the Germans) a great nuisance. "Then we have many Irish in our company, from whom we have to bear much; when they are intoxicated, they knock everything down and want to do nothing but fight; the guardhouse is always full of them. Thank God, I have not come into the guardhouse; as far as I know, our Captain loves me much, and all the sergeants and corporals, too."

THE PROSPECTS were not encouraging. "The only thing which keeps me up," he wrote, "is the cleanliness, for lice I have not met with in anyone." But that was a small blessing to set against the hardships of frontier garrison life, the wasting of his talents, and the lonely separation from his family. He begged his wife to do what she could to get his release from the army for the sake of his children, even if she herself did not want his return. And he had reformed, he wanted her to know: "I am no drunkard any more and have learned to work, and if I were free, I could at least do something for my poor children and save, in order to enjoy my old age, if I should

reach it." He insisted that he was still a faithful husband. "I am still innocent of adultery, as I was before," he wrote, "although the temptations for it are strong enough here."

His wife, however, did not heed his plea. His letters to her and to friends in Detroit were unanswered, and his unhappy state of mind soon made the army unbearable. If there was no possibility of a legal release, there was still one course open, a course adopted by so many others: desertion.<sup>7</sup>

"As we were plagued with too much labor," he wrote to his friend from Galena, "8 men of our company deserted, as also 12 or more men from other companies. I determined therefore also to desert and luckily got away. Five dollars, consisting in a gold piece, brought me to Stillwater in Minnesota Territory, after passing 2 days among the Indians. I worked there 14 days on a farm, but received no pay. Finally I got work in my trade, which paid very well. I decided to go to St. Louis, but I came no farther than here, for the cholera is very severe in St. Louis. It is also here; every day 5-6 die with it. Perhaps I shall get it yet, but I care little. Although I have work enough, I still live discontented on account of my children; I already wrote 3 letters to Detroit and could not learn anything from them."<sup>8</sup>

He urged his friend to send him word of his family, and he begged him to say nothing about the deserting, "for it could do me harm, for the law is now a shooting."<sup>9</sup>

The letters are personal documents which describe the heartaches of a lonesome and forsaken man. The army was not the haven he sought nor the chance for gain and advancement which he had hoped it would be. The letters, too, are a window into the existence of a private soldier in the frontier army which helped to build Minnesota. In their brief compass, they tell more about the trials of a soldier and the reasons why soldiers deserted than reams of analysis drawn up by the army boards and officials who considered the problem.

<sup>7</sup> Desertion was widespread in the army in those days. Secretary of War Jefferson Davis reported in 1853 that the average annual loss by desertion after the Mexican War was sixteen per cent. See 33 Congress, 1 session, *Senate Executive Documents*, no. 1, p. 7 (serial 691).

<sup>8</sup> The Registers of Enlistment indicate that Otto deserted on June 22, 1849. He appears to have used the pseudonym of A. Hoffmann after his desertion.

<sup>9</sup> This is an exaggeration, although Otto may have believed it. According to an act of Congress, passed in 1830, "no officer or soldier in the army of the United States shall be subject to the punishment of death for desertion in time of peace." See *United States Statutes*, 4:418.

THE LITHOGRAPH by H. A. Ogden on page 14 appears in *The Army of the United States*, published by the Quartermaster's Department in 1889. The pen and wash drawing of Fort Ripley on page 15 and the oil by James Mc C. Boal on page 16 are in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society.





Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).