

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

TWO KNUTE NELSON LETTERS

In 1911 the late Senator Nelson wrote two letters of unusual interest for the biographical information which they contain. The first of these, obviously written to a former Confederate soldier, gives a general sketch of his career, and the second relates an interesting incident at the beginning of his military service. These letters are here printed from copies presented to the Minnesota Historical Society by Governor Preus, who used them in the preparation of his illuminating address published in this number of the BULLETIN. They form a valuable addition to the society's growing collection of Nelson Papers. The enclosure mentioned in the second letter has not been found.

KNUTE NELSON TO D. B. ARNOLD, August 4, 1911

WASHINGTON, D. C., August 4, 1911.

HON. D. B. ARNOLD,

Batesville, Mississippi.

DEAR FRIEND AND FELLOW SOLDIER:

You can scarcely realize how glad I was to receive your very kind and interesting letter of July 28th. It carried me back to the days of Port Hudson, and to the experiences you and I had in those days, and to your kindness and good will to me.

I should have gotten on the track of you long before if I had only known your given name, but I had forgotten that and so I was groping about as best I could to find you, but without success until I received the letter from your brother's wife.

My heart goes out to the old Confederate soldiers, not only because of the trials they had during the war, but even greater trials they had subsequently, and the difficulties they had to contend with.

On my return home from the army I went back to the academy I was attending at the time I enlisted and finished my course there,

and then I entered a law office at Madison, Wisconsin, and read law with Senator Vilas, who was a member of Cleveland's cabinet as Postmaster General and Secretary of the Interior.

I was born in Norway in 1843, and came to the United States with my mother in 1849. We resided about fifteen months in Chicago, and from there moved up into Southern Wisconsin, which was my home until '71, and in which state I enlisted and served in the Fourth Wisconsin Regiment, Company B. The regiment was an infantry regiment for two years and then it was converted into a cavalry regiment, and inasmuch as there were just three cavalry regiments in the State we retained the same number and became the Fourth Cavalry, as we had been the Fourth Infantry. At the time of the charge of Port Hudson we were mounted infantry, and cooperated with the cavalry, although we had not gotten our cavalry equipment.

At the time of the charge on the 14th of June, being one of the oldest regiments in the service, what there was left of us was selected to lead the charge on that day. We left our horses in a ravine about a mile or so back of your breastworks and led one of the charging columns in skirmish order. I got within about eight or ten rods of your breastworks when I was wounded, and I lay there until dusk, when the pickets your people mounted outside came and picked me up and carried [me] inside where I became your associate, as you remember in that hospital tent.

But going back to my experience since the war: I was admitted to the bar in 1867 at Madison, Wisconsin, and commenced to practice law on my own hook. I was doing fairly well, but my health had been poor ever since the war and continued so, and I was advised by my doctor to go to Minnesota. I had an old Wisconsin friend who was register of the Land Office at Alexandria, Minnesota, then on the outer verge of settlement in that State, and on his advice I moved to that place, which has since been my home.

I had a wife and two children when I reached Alexandria, and about three or four hundred dollars worth of law books and about one hundred dollars in cash. I took a homestead of 120 acres adjoining the town and have been living on that homestead ever since, and have added to it until now I have about 500 acres in the farm. I devoted most of my time to the practice of

law, but, of course, in a new country it was rather scant and limited at first, although I managed to get on one side or the other of about every case of importance in the six or seven counties in my part of the country. For about twelve years I was in active practice, and did pretty well; then I got into politics and from the Congressional Directory which I sent you will see what my political record has been since.

I was married in 1867. We have had six children and they are all dead, except one, my oldest daughter, who is an old maid and is still with us. I had only one son who was a good bright boy. He served one term in the Legislature and voted for my second election; was in the hardware business on his own account in a small town several years in Minnesota; finally five years ago he moved to the Pacific Coast. He was in good health when he moved out there, but was taken sick with consumption, grew weaker and weaker, and we finally sent him to Colorado Springs in hope he might recover, but he lingered about a year in a sanatorium and finally died three years ago. He was then some 32 or 33 years old. Since his death I have felt rather lonesome and the world has not seemed as bright to me as it did before and I have not had the ambition to dig and work as formerly.

Of course, you can realize, poor as I was, and with no friends at court, and foreign born, that I have had quite a hard road to travel, but have worked hard and the American people have been very kind and good to me, more than I deserve. I am now about your age, that is, I was 68 years the second of February, last. I am in fairly good condition, but I have gotten quite gray in hair and beard. My mother remained at our old home in Wisconsin, and died last November at the age of 96 years. My father died when I was three years old and I came with my mother to this country in 1849, and when we landed at the port we were \$45 in debt, so you see I had not much to start with.

I am giving you these details because of the friendship I have for you and because of the feeling of comradeship. I wish you would remember me to old "Pud." I enclose \$5 which I wish you would kindly hand to him. I will send you a map of Minnesota, from which you can see what part of the State I live [in].

I should be more than glad to have you visit me at my home in Alexandria. I live on a farm and live like a farmer, and I could give you such accommodations as you might expect from a farmer.

With my very best wishes to you and yours, I remain

Yours most sincerely,

[KNUTE NELSON]

KNUTE NELSON TO F. C. AINSWORTH, December 12, 1911

December 12, 1911.

MAJOR GENERAL F. C. AINSWORTH,

Washington, D. C.

MY DEAR GENERAL:

As a preliminary and key to the enclosed letter, I beg leave to make the following statement:

In May, 1861, and for sometime prior thereto there was a state militia company organized and existing at Ft. Atkinson, Jefferson County, Wisconsin, called the Black Hawk Rifles, under command of the officers referred to in the letter herewith.

In May, 1861, I was attending as a student Albion Academy at Albion, Dane County, Wisconsin, about fifteen or sixteen miles from Ft. Atkinson. In the latter part of May of that year, Captain Lohmiller came over to the Academy with a band and regiment, a few of his most respectable men in uniform, where some nineteen young men, myself included, nearly all under 20 years of age, were and induced us to enlist in his company.

We immediately started for Ft. Atkinson to join his company, and were duly enlisted in it. We remained there about a month and then the company was sent to Camp Butler Racine to form a part of the Fourth Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry, then being gathered at that point. We Albion boys found, after joining the company, that we had gotten into a hard crowd; the captain was an easy-going beer-drinking German, who kept little track of his company or his men; the first and second lieutenants were bummers and toughs of the first water; Hummel was a German, Rohr an Irishman. When they were not drunk they were continually swearing and God-damning the men. A large share of his men were of the same character, and we boys saw that we

had gotten into the worst kind of a gang. What to do about it we didn't know.

Finally when the United States mustering officer came to Racine to muster the regiment into the Federal service, and commenced to muster in the Black Hawk Rifles, we Albion boys stepped out of the ranks and refused to [be] mustered in with that company. The colonel of the regiment, the mustering officer and the other officers interested talked rather bullying and threatened to put us in the guard house, etc., but we simply told them we wouldn't be mustered in with that company. We were perfectly willing to go into the service, and be mustered in then and there if we would be put in some other company in the regiment. The result of it was that our refusal to be mustered into the Black Hawk Rifles broke up that company and it was not mustered in. We nineteen boys were scattered around in other companies, some eleven or twelve of us going into the Ripon Rifles, a company gotten up at Ripon, Wisconsin. It afterwards became Company B of the Fourth Wisconsin, in which company I performed my army service.

What became of the balance of the Black Hawk Rifles I never knew. My understanding has been, until I received the enclosed letter, that the company was broken up and never entered the service. The writer of this letter was one of the original Black Hawk crowd.

I wish you would look up your records and see if you can find any trace of him, and any trace of the company. He was never, to my knowledge, a member of Company B, Fourth Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry, afterwards Fourth Cavalry. That company consisted of what was known as the original Ripon Rifles, commanded by Captain LaGrange, Lieutenants Ross and Carter. LaGrange afterwards became Major or Lieutenant Colonel of the First Cavalry, then Ross became captain and after him, Carter. What became of the remnants of the Black Hawk Rifles, to which the writer of the enclosed letter belonged, after the Fourth Regiment was mustered in at Camp Butler, I do not know. The company certainly did not become a part of the Fourth Wisconsin.

Please give me all the information you can about the military record of Mr. Ruosch, and return his letter with your answer.

Your truly,
[KNUTE NELSON]



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