

A NEWLY DISCOVERED DIARY OF COLONEL JOSIAH SNELLING¹

The aura of romance and adventure is not confined to human personalities alone. Such an aura envelopes a leather-bound book which contains the diary of Colonel Josiah Snelling, who was stationed at the fort that bears his name from 1820 to 1827. More than a hundred years ago this small volume, like a wandering Aeneas, probably traveled the long and arduous journey from Detroit, Michigan, across Lake Michigan to Fort Howard on Green Bay, over the well-known canoe route up the Fox River, over a portage, and down the Wisconsin to its junction with the Mississippi, then up that stream by keelboat to the mouth of the Minnesota. By such crude methods of transportation the book doubtless reached Fort Snelling.

The diary is a treasured possession of Mrs. William Ritchie of Omaha, Nebraska, daughter of the Reverend L. A. Arthur of Minneapolis. Mrs. Ritchie's grandmother was a niece of Colonel Snelling's wife. A few months ago, a streamlined, air-conditioned train, equipped with radio and every other luxury, brought this much-traveled little volume back to rest for a few days in the shadow of the old fort whose early history it records. The entries are scanty and are written on leaves still crisp and unyellowed by age, with small spaces faintly lined to accommodate the fine penmanship of the time. In spite of a lack of continuity of both time and material, the diary tells a revealing story, not only of the period but of the man who wrote it.

The first entry reads: "John Tully, aged about ten years, died at Fort Snelling & was buried on the 27th day of April,

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1827." John had become a member of Colonel Snelling's family in 1823, after he was rescued by soldiers from a band of Sioux Indians encamped at St. Peter's. His father, mother, and infant brother had been killed by the Sioux and John himself had been scalped. The Snelling family had nursed him back to health, only to have him die some years later of an infected foot. The next entry is that of April 28, 1827: "In the evening the remains of my daughter, Elizabeth, and Col. Leavenworth's infant were removed from the old burying ground to the new one on the ridge." Elizabeth was thirteen months old when she died. Her grave is still to be seen in the Fort Snelling cemetery. When the new Fort Snelling Chapel was built a few years ago, the fort Sunday school gave a baptismal font in memory of this little child of the long ago.

In the entries that follow there is recorded a strange mixture of fort activities and financial affairs, both personal and military. There are long lists of personal properties in which horses, cows, calves, harnesses, wagons, iron pots, and candlesticks are cheek by jowl with coral earrings, gold watches, French china, and silver spoons. Auctions of the effects of deceased soldiers are faithfully recorded with the sums received for each article and the names of buyers. The effects of Lieutenant Andrews, deceased, included one old trunk, a uniform coat and wings, sword and belt, one old pistol, three vests, two cotton shirts, one brass candlestick, two iron candlesticks, a tin kettle, three tin pans, two beaver skins, and a small bundle of trinkets. All were sold for \$26.79 $\frac{3}{4}$.

The estate of Dr. Edward Purcell, an army surgeon who served at the fort from 1819 to his death in 1825, was put up at auction and on January 9, 1827, the auctioneer's fees of \$12.98 were entered by Colonel Snelling. The part of the estate administered by the colonel was pitifully small. On January 5, 1827, the amount brought forward in the diary from some other record was \$259.68 $\frac{3}{4}$. On Octo-

ber 2 of the same year, the doctor's watch was sold to B. Ward for \$35.00, making a total credit of \$294.68 $\frac{3}{4}$. Subtracting the auctioneer's fees and \$9.00 for "washer-woman's bill during his last sickness," the balance due the estate is placed at \$272.70 $\frac{3}{4}$. The only other mention of Dr. Purcell's name in the diary is in a list of the colonel's possessions, which includes the item: "Sleigh Dr Purcell to Mary \$10."

Immediately following his first two entries Colonel Snelling records on May 3, 1827: "Reenlisted Wm. Brewster of Comp. D. and paid him six dollars." Next there is a regimental order from Fort Crawford, on the site of the present city of Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, dated July 12:

The acting Asst. Com[missary] Lt. Jameson will cause to be baked six thousand rations of hard bread by four o'clock P. M. tomorrow.

By order of Col. Josiah Snelling.

M. G. MERRIL, Act. Adjt.

A copy of a letter sent to an irresponsible officer is dated from Fort Crawford on July 13, 1827:

SIR: I have thought proper to place Company B under the command of Lt. Denny. You will remain behind, considering yourself on furlough until we return. I will explain my reasons for this measure when time and opportunity offer.

Yr. obt. st.,

J. SNELLING, Col.

To MAJ. T. HAMILTON.

The sequel to this order is found in a letter written by Colonel Snelling to the major from a keelboat on August 10, 1827:

MAJOR: Seven years ago you were transferred by mutual consent with Major Larrabee to this Corps. I was advised at the time by Gen'l Atkinson that it was his last hope of reforming your habits. How far you have met his expectations, is best known to yourself.

I have connived at your derelictions from duty too long. On an important expedition you have allowed the command of your Company to be taken from you, when danger & honor should have been courted, & given to your 2nd Lt. without even asking the reason why.

Always satisfied if you had free access to the whisky bottle. In truth and candour you are no longer fit for the station you hold, & I am obliged to offer you this alternative. Resign with a year's furlough, *or*, stand a trial.

With gt. respect, Yrs.

J. SNELLING.

Instead of progressing in time, the diary often moves back to records of transactions made in earlier years. Under date of August 13, 1825, the colonel records the purchase of the Brooks farm near Detroit for \$2,000. In the same entry are included items for repairs and extensions. Recording the deed cost \$1.00. Whitewashing a chimney and laying hearths, "same for kitchen and pot hooks," came to \$56.40. Lumber, carpenter work, nails, screws, door bolts, door handle, paying a certain Martin for relinquishing a lease, and a bushel of clover seed made a total of \$359.52. After Colonel Snelling's death, his wife sold this farm for \$9,000. The purchase of lands seemed to be Snelling's favorite form of investment. On July 1, 1823, he bought Predeville farm near St. Louis for \$2,000, and paid \$10.89 in taxes for 1823-24. On May 29, 1825, he "Purchased a Qr Section of land in Illinois of Lt. Green for \$20.00." There is also a record of what the colonel calls his "Snelling Farm," which, with improvements, cost him \$4,589. This was evidently near the fort, and among the improvements listed was "Work on a turnpike, \$640.00." In investing in land, Snelling was following the trend of his times. From Washington's day through the early years of the nineteenth century, men had the same passion for acquiring land as did the forty-niners for acquiring gold, or the twenty-niners for acquiring stocks.

In anticipation of his transfer to Jefferson Barracks, Snelling made an "inventory of Property left at St. Peters with Lt. William E. Cruger." In this list appear the names of three of his horses, "Bonnaparte," "Nez-Blanc," and "Cottonwood," each valued at fifty dollars. In one place the inventory goes back of horse and buggy days to list a

"Tillbury bt. of Taliaferro, \$160." This included harness, cushions, and lamp. Five sledges or sleighs are entered under their French name, "traineaux." Two cowbells and two "sithes" jostle with more aesthetic articles, such as a mantelpiece clock, a spyglass, and four chairs. On one occasion, after the single word "Property," Snelling jotted down the sum of \$6,652.

One of Colonel Snelling's biographers says that he was "the perfect type of the rough and convivial old Colonel of fiction, improvident in his habits and usually in debt, considerate and intelligent when not under the influence of drink." Judging from his financial transactions, it would seem that the word "improvident" would hardly apply to him. If Colonel Snelling was a hard drinker, the diary does not disclose it. There are only two items among all the entries which record the purchase of whisky, in both cases in two-gallon lots. His debts, when culled from all the entries in the diary, total only a few hundred dollars.

One can judge as he runs through the pages of the diary that the fort commander was indeed a considerate man. Witness the softening effect to that stern letter of dismissal of Major Hamilton from the service, when the colonel signed himself "With gt. respect, Yrs." This same quality is shown in a regimental order sent from the "Kiel Boat Rock Islander" on August 6, 1827. After giving precise orders for the disposal of troops when their boats landed "at the Prairie on which Wabasha's village is situated," Colonel Snelling continues: "They will not attempt concealment, but go directly to the village by the common path, and inform Wabasha or any of his chiefs who may be present, that although we approach in force, we have no hostile intentions. Our only object is to return to St. Peters unmolested." If the Indians should prove hostile the colonel ordered that "no quarter" should be given "but to women and children whose persons should always be sacred in the eyes of an American soldier."

Dr. William W. Folwell, in his *History of Minnesota*, throws light on a speech which Colonel Snelling records and which he prefaces by this note: "Literal as translated. L. Taliaferro Agt. of a speech delivered by Strong Earth a chief of the Sandy Lake Indians of the Chippewa nation to Col. J. Snelling on the 30th of May 1827." Dr. Folwell relates that in 1825 a peace had been concluded between the Chippewa and the Sioux. But it seems that the Sioux held their treaties in no more respect than do the civilized nations of today. Dr. Folwell states that twenty-four Chippewa who had come to confer with Taliaferro, the Indian agent, were given permission to camp under the cover and protection of the fort. In a few days there appeared a band of nine Sioux, who were hospitably received by the Chippewa, ate of their food, and smoked the pipe of peace. On leaving about nine in the evening, the traitorous guests turned their guns on their hosts, killing two and wounding seven. In tragic protest of this betrayal, Strong Earth, the Chippewa chief, appealed to the fort commander, who later wrote out the translation. It says:

FATHER: You know that two summers ago, we attended a Great Council at Prairie du Chien, where by the advice of our white friends, we made a peace with the Sioux. We were then told that the Americans would guarantee our safety under your flag. We came here under that assurance. But, father, look at your floor. It is stained with the blood of my people, shed under your walls. I look up and see your flag over us. If you are a great and powerful people, why do you not protect us? If not, of what use are all of these soldiers?

An interesting military order is dated from Fort Crawford, July 21, 1827. It reads:

The present state of affairs renders it necessary that decisive steps should be taken with the vagrant Indians who infest this neighborhood. Half breeds not claiming citizenship, & Indian women of any grade or colour not having husbands, will depart in 24 hours on pain of military evacuation. The commanding officer is fully aware of the responsibility he incurs, and will always be ready to answer for it before a competent tribunal; but he will not suffer spies to be smuggled

into his camp under the petticoats of a strumpet. . . . Certificates of marriage will be required of those females who are permitted to remain.

That affairs of honor were still settled by blood in 1827 is shown by the following letter :

SIR: I have contrary to my duty and my principles and to gratify the bad passions of a bad man, consented to waive my rank to Lt. Baxby and expect to receive a message from him today. As you have agreed to appear on the field as my friend, I think proper to dictate to you the following terms of combat, from which I will not depart. The duel shall be fought at four paces with pistols and the firing shall continue until one of the parties is killed or disabled. I do not go out for a show and I will have no spectators or surgeon. I will consent to no reconciliation or shaking of hands. When I think a man a rascal I never take his hand.

J. SNELLING

To LT. G. LOW

This duel is not mentioned by Snelling's biographers. As the letter was sent in September and as Colonel Snelling was transferred to Jefferson Barracks near St. Louis in October, it is possible that the duel never was fought.

An interesting record dated October 20, 1826, tells of paying \$5.00 to "James White as Pilot of a boat over the rapids." J. B. Luger was given \$50.00 for "carrying mail." The colonel's postage bill for what he styles "public letters" was \$165.25. Before leaving Fort Snelling for his new appointment at Jefferson Barracks, the commandant cleared up some last items of business. On September 9, 1827, there is this entry: "Lt. Green left Ft. Snelling in a bark canoe. Sent by him to Tyler Warren \$7.29 for my last postage account."

The following entries trace Snelling's movements from the time of his removal from Minnesota :

Oct. 2nd, 1827. Left St. Peters in the Steamboat Josephine, Capt. Clark. Passengers, Mrs. Snelling, three children, female servant Olympia, and myself. Majr. Gen'l Gaines, Lts. Hunter, Green, Clark, & Capt. Clark.

Oct. 4th, 1827. Arrived at Prairie du Chien and sailed the same day for St. Louis.

Oct. 5. Stopped nearly all day at Galena, Called Fever river lead mines.

Oct. 9th. Arrived at St. Louis early in the morning.

Oct. 10th. Took lodging at Mrs. McNous for Mrs. S. \$4 per week. James \$2, Marion \$2. Mary (slave) \$2. Total \$10. Wood and candles to be furnished by me.

In an entry of May 14, 1827, Snelling notes: "Negro woman (Mary) and the child Louisa bt. of Mr. Bostwick of St. Louis for \$400."

In May, 1828, Colonel Snelling asked leave to go to Washington to bring home his daughter, Mary, who had been living with her uncle, Captain Thomas Hunt, while attending school. The diary evidently took the long journey with its owner. There are just two Washington items recorded in its pages. The first, dated June 1, 1828, reads: "Commenced shaving by the month with Mr. Sheppard, Pennsylvania Ave." The second item is a brief indication of the tragedy which came to Colonel Snelling between June 1 and 10. The sudden death of his beautiful daughter after attending a party is recorded in this last entry: "Books packed in a small trunk at Washington June 10th, 1828. Principally Mary's." A list of volumes follows.

Colonel Snelling died in Washington in the following August. As he was born in Boston in 1782, he was forty-six years old at the time of his death. According to one historian, Snelling's summary of his own career was:

I have passed through every grade to the command of a regiment. I owe nothing to executive patronage, for I have neither friend or relative connected with the government. I have obtained my rank in the ordinary course of promotion and have retained it by doing my duty.

HELEN DUNLAP DICK

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA



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