

A DAY IN THE LIFE *of* Cecelia O'Brien

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 1850, and Cecelia O'Brien was daydreaming again. There were clothes to wash, dry, and get ready for the ironing tomorrow, but the work hardly relieved her boredom. Here at Fort Snelling one day was like another. She stared at the light glaring in through the high basement window and listened idly to Mrs. Kirkham's footsteps and the cries of the baby coming from upstairs.

Kate Kirkham, the well-bred wife of Capt. Ralph W. Kirkham, had taken in

Cecelia as a laundress and mother's helper a few months before. Not that the girl was orphaned or destitute. Cecelia's mother, Catharine, lived and worked just across the river in Mr. Sibley's fine stone house in Mendota. But Catharine had decided that when Cecelia turned 13 she would have to earn some money, so she rented out her daughter for a few dollars a month. The captain had at first objected—the army only gave him \$5 a month to pay for domestic help, and he had to foot the bill for any extra.¹

Cecelia had looked forward to the change. Truth to tell, she'd been more than a little frightened by all of the Indians and rough French-speaking characters in Mendota. And surely life in that castle high up on the bluff would be exciting. The accommodations—a shared bed in the cellar kitchen of an officer's apartment—couldn't be any worse than what Cecelia had known since she was born. Best of all, she had heard—correctly, it turned out—that many of the soldiers there hailed from Ireland, as she did.

Mendota as seen from Fort Snelling; Henry Sibley's two-story stone house is at center. Sgt. Edward K. Thomas painted this oil, *Fort Snelling*, in about 1850 while stationed there.



But the soldiers paid little attention to her and seemed to be as bored with the routine in the garrison as she was in the Kirkhams' basement. Laundry, even for a small household, meant hauling and boiling water, keeping a fire going in the wood stove, scrubbing, wringing, drying, and—worst of all—ironing, that back-breaker of a Saturday chore, squeezed in between bread-baking duties. At least baby Julia's soiled clouts did not have to be ironed, but everything else did. She had always thought of herself as stronger and more grown-up than other girls—her father had always said so—but now she just felt tired. Except for the occasional sewing lesson or a Sunday in Mendota with her mother, her days were broken only by daydreaming and memories.

"In old Ireland, every man was a soldier." Cecelia's father's words came back to her often. He'd been anxious to get out of the king's army—just another way for the English to grind down the Irish, he had said—and get to America to sign on with the U.S. Army, where an Irishman could be a hero. He was consumed by the idea, reading what little he could find about America and the war with Mexico. When he read about the triumphs of an American army officer named O'Brien—well, that sealed it. Brushing aside the scoffs of his wife, he immediately made plans to emigrate. It was high time to leave: Black '47, a year of legendary cold and snow, famine and horror. But he never made it to his American dream, dying at sea and leaving Cecelia and Catharine to fend for themselves.²

Catharine O'Brien could have stayed in Boston where she and her daughter had landed late in 1847. The demand there for servant girls was high, since no one but an Irish immigrant woman was willing to work in a degrading state of servility in someone else's home. Pay for ser-

vant girls was about \$5 a month, but Catharine assumed it would be even higher in a frontier boom town. So she and Cecelia made their way to raw, bountiful Minnesota Territory, a place where even an Irish widow pushing 40 could make a living.³

They had landed in St. Paul on the first steamboat of the season—on April 19, 1850—along with 500 other eager immigrants. Knee-deep waters from a heavy spring flood filled the streets and some of the warehouses along the levee. Just about every building was made of wood, and all looked like they'd been built a day or two before. Catharine and Cecelia felt lucky to find some space in a still-unfinished boardinghouse in this town that seemed to be bursting its brand-new seams. What most amazed them were all the different kinds of people. It sure wasn't Dublin, where everyone looked and sounded the same.⁴

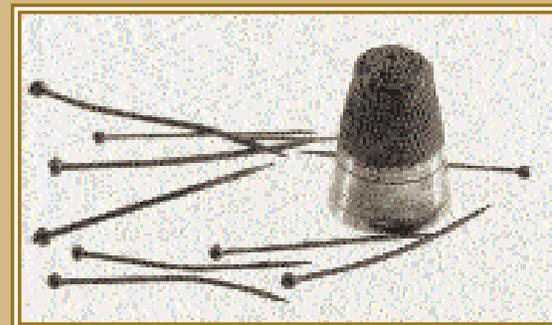
Cecelia liked the hubbub, since so much of it seemed to come from children—hundreds of them! When she went to work at Fort Snelling she imagined she would be the only girl there. In fact, quite a number of children lived in the garrison. There was Rose Angelica Gear, whose father—the fort's chaplain, Rev. Ezekiel Gear—was so grand and imposing. Henry Eskeltson, an Irish boy of 12, lived with his mother and his soldier father, but Cecelia hardly ever saw him. Everyone said that he'd gone wild, like a lot of other boys. Ann McGee, another daughter of Erin, was just about Cecelia's age. Her father was a soldier, too, but unlike most of the others had a sizable family living with him. A soldier's meager pay meant that hiring help was out of the question, so Ann—the oldest of four—became the family's servant girl. Cecelia could count none of these children as friends. Friends were for girls who had time. She was no longer a child, and she sure didn't have any time.⁵

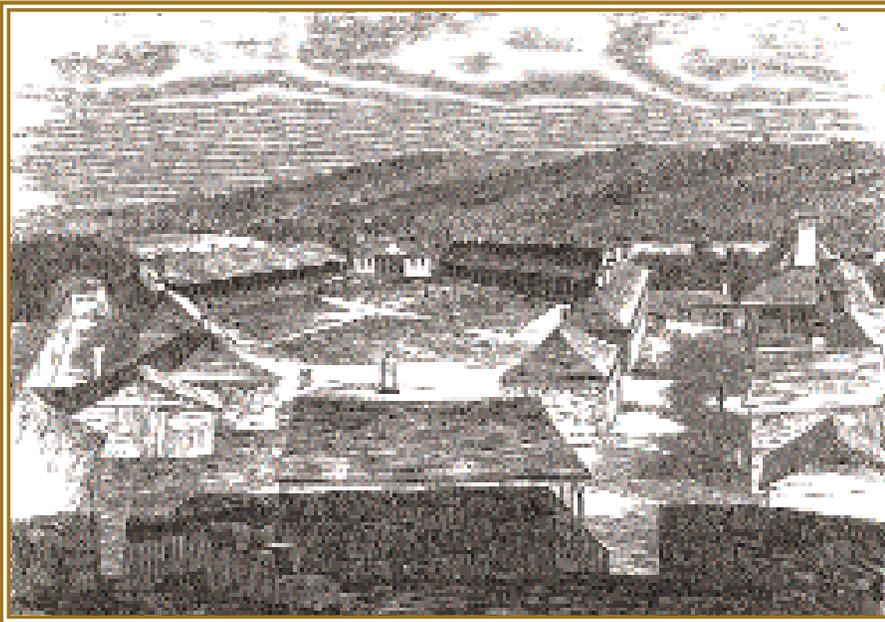
Cecelia snapped out of her daydreaming when Mrs. Kirkham called her upstairs to meet a visitor. Now this was unusual, Cecelia thought. Not even those nosy Kirkham relatives who had come out recently from Boston on a tour of the river valley had wanted to meet the hired help.

Sitting stiffly in the parlor with both the captain and Mrs. Kirkham was a neatly dressed man who was introduced as Mr. Henry L. Tilden. He was talking about how tired he was, having spent most of that day and the one before at the garrison enumerating for the U.S. census, counting all of the people in the year-old Minnesota Territory. Cecelia was surprised to hear some of the questions he was asking the captain, such as how much his property was worth. She was even more surprised to hear the captain, after shifting in his chair and clearing his throat, reply that he thought it to be about a thousand dollars. A thousand dollars! Cecelia couldn't even count that high and was sure she would never see that kind of money in her lifetime.⁶

Daydreaming again. The autumn light was fading. Mrs. Kirkham motioned to Cecelia to light the lamp on the table so Mr. Tilden could see as he carefully copied the Kirkhams' answers into his ledger-like book.

Brass thimble and plated-brass pins with hand-wound heads from early Fort Snelling





Engraving of Fort Snelling from *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, July 1853. The officers' quarters are immediately to the right of the commandant's house at rear, center.

Mrs. Kirkham answered for Cecelia, but on her last word she was interrupted by a snort from Mr. Tilden. "Irish?" he repeated. He could hardly disguise his disgust. "Why, that's—what? Let me see. . . Yes, the eleventh one today. What a way to end the day!" The Kirkhams looked uncomfortable but made no move to stop his tirade, issued freely, as if Cecelia had disappeared into the stone walls.

Mr. Tilden said that cities back East were flooding with dim-witted, ape-like, drunken, lazy, starving Irish. He told a joke he had heard in a minstrel show about a Negro complaining that his master was treating him as badly as if he were a common Irishman. Capt. Kirkham, in answer, could only say that he hoped Mr. Tilden would be able to sleep off some of his disgust with Paddies, since nearly half of the people he would be counting tomorrow in the rest of the garrison were Irish. The captain considered warning Tilden that he would also be meeting a couple of Irish convicts in the guardhouse, but then thought better of it.⁷

After Mr. Tilden left with the captain, Mrs. Kirkham tried to smooth over the enumerator's rough words,

telling Cecelia that he hadn't meant anything by it, but Cecelia's mind was already somewhere else. She thought about her father, who had so fiercely held to a vision of Americans as heroes, a picture that today, in this place, had become a little more tarnished. 🍀

—Brian Horrigan

NOTES

¹ Patricia C. Harpole and Mary D. Nagle, eds., *Minnesota Territorial Census, 1850* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1972), 14, lists 13-year-old Cecelia O'Brien, born in Ireland, as a member of the Fort Snelling household of Capt. Kirkham, along with his wife, daughter, and 20-year-old Fanny Bisoiner. A 40-year-old Irish woman named Catharine O'Brien is listed in the Sibley household in Mendota (p. 11). This fictional account uses the actual names and ages of Fort Snelling residents and the census enumerator.

² The quote about soldiering is from Thomas D'Arcy McGee, *A History of the Irish Settlers in North America from the Earliest Period to the Census of 1850* (Boston: Patrick Donohoe, 1852), 191. U.S. Army Capt. John Paul Jones O'Brien, born in Philadelphia of Irish parents, was deco-

rated for his role in the Battle of Buena Vista in 1847; F. B. Heitman, *Historical Register of the United States Army* (Washington, D.C.: National Tribune, 1890), 497.

³ Thomas Hamilton, a British traveler in the U.S., wrote in 1834: "Domestic service . . . is considered degrading by all [Americans] untainted with the curse of African descent"; quoted in David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991), 145–46. For more on Irish immigrants and domestic service, see *Wages of Whiteness*, 133–63; Hasia R. Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 80–94. For a full-scale fictional treatment of an Irish servant's life in the 1850s, see Mary Anne Sadlier's *Bessy Conway; Or, the Irish Girl in America* (1861). The complete text, along with commentaries on Sadlier's work and historical context, can be found online at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/hypertext.html>.

⁴ On the steamboat and the buildings, see J. Fletcher Williams, *A History of the City of Saint Paul to 1875* (1876; reprint, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1983), 259, 224.

⁵ For the names and ages of children at Fort Snelling, see Harpole and Nagle, eds., *Minnesota Territorial Census*, 14–15. On wild boys, see E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 31–55; Col. John H. Bliss, "Reminiscences of Fort Snelling," in *Minnesota Historical Society Collections* 6 (St. Paul, 1894): 335–53.

⁶ Henry L. Tilden enumerated Dahkotah County, which included Fort Snelling and vicinity; Harpole and Nagle, eds., *Minnesota Territorial Census*, viii. The census also recorded the value of a person's real estate in dollars. On Kirkham's property, presumably in his native Massachusetts, see *Minnesota Territorial Census*, 14.

⁷ On anti-Irish attitudes at midcentury, see Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 133–56. The minstrel-show joke is quoted in Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 42. For the Irish soldiers at Fort Snelling, see Harpole and Nagle, eds., *Minnesota Territorial Census*, 14–17.



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](#).