

SUNDAY MAGAZINE

Off the farm and into Civil War combat

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By Nancy Graff

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"Notes of Army and Prison Life: 1862-1865" by Pvt. Charles Fairbanks, \$14.95, My Little Jessie Press, 2004

Charles Fairbanks left Bethel in August 1862 to begin life as a soldier in the War of the Rebellion. He was the youngest of seven brothers, two of whom had already joined up. One had walked away from milking the family cow on the evening of April 12, 1861, when he heard news of the fall of Fort Sumter. Later, when Fairbanks and his next-oldest brother, Alf, learned a recruiter was in town scouting for sharpshooters, they abandoned their father in a hayfield intending to sign up. Alf was just shy of 18, the minimum age for enlisting, but his shooting skills were so good the recruiter overlooked the discrepancy. Charles was barely 16, and the recruiter initially refused to consider him, but when young Fairbanks put 10 consecutive shots in a 10-inch target from 100 yards, including one in the bull's eye, the recruiter sent him home with a waiver to sign that would fudge his age and allow him to become a soldier.

Understandably, his father refused to sign what he called his youngest son's "death warrant," but when Fairbanks threatened to run away and enlist anyway, he finally received his father's blessings and prayers. By nightfall he was on his way to Woodstock for training; three weeks later, this country boy who had never been far from the family farm was in Washington, D.C., a private in Co. "E" 2nd. U.S. Sharpshooters.

Thirty-four years later, just as the 20th century was dawning, Charles Fairbanks' daughter prevailed upon her father to write a memoir of his three years in the service. This was not an easy thing for him to do. He was not old, only 52 or 53, but the memories were far from fresh. Also, he had come home at the end of the war in fragile health that plagued him still. He had resisted earlier pleas from friends to record his memories, perhaps because they evoked fewer recollections of triumphs in battle than recollections of debilitating experiences as a prisoner of war. But finally he honored his daughter's wishes.

"Notes of Army and Prison Life, 1862-1865," by Charles Fairbanks, is a little gem for anyone interested in the state's Civil War history. Compiled and edited by Janet Hayward Burnham and published by one of Vermont's many small presses, My Little Jessie Press of Bethel, it takes no more than an afternoon to read. Indeed, to give the book heft, the editor has filled the left-hand page of every spread with photographs or illustrations, everything from portraits of Fairbanks to photographs of Southern prisoner of war camps to a line drawing of a breech-loading Sharps carbine. However, Fairbanks's text and letters are capable of standing alone.

Books about prison of war camps during the Civil War, especially Confederate prisoner of war camps, are harrowing. "Andersonville," a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel written by MacKinlay Kantor, in 1956, is a classic, the equal of any prisoner-of-war-camp book written about any war since then. Its descriptions of men starving and dying of brutality and disease in the South's most notorious prison camp are horrific. One comes to understand how the South's near bankruptcy in pursuit of its war ambitions left it without resources to support and treat its own soldiers, let alone its prisoners of war. Ultimately, more soldiers died of disease during the Civil War than of injuries.

Fortunately for Fairbanks, his experience as a prisoner of war was not fatal, but the effects lasted a lifetime. He was captured July 2, 1863, at Gettysburg after a 32-mile march the day before. Sent forward to draw fire while Northern troops took positions to defend Little Round Top, he and 10 other sharpshooters were overwhelmed and captured by the enemy. That night the prisoners were forbidden to have fires because they would have revealed the Confederate positions. Already famished by scant rations during their march, the men spent the night in the dark, without food, listening to the moans and screams of the wounded still lying on the battlefield. Fairbanks called it the worst night of his life, and it is no wonder. It must have seemed like the Seventh Circle of Hell. The next day, having traded his shoes for eight corn cakes, which he shared among his comrades, he and the other prisoners started a 14-day, 200-mile march first to Libby Prison and then to Belle Island, outside Richmond. The rest of Fairbanks' memoir details his experience as a prisoner, then as a hospital patient and finally as a soldier returned to his unit. The book concludes with some letters Fairbanks wrote during and after the war. All in all, this is a surprisingly insightful analysis of the war effort from the perspective of a lowly field private and a brief, but moving, tale of a decent and generous young man who evinces no regrets for the sacrifices he made for his country.

Many Vermonters know of Gov. Erastus Fairbanks (apparently no relation), who gathered the Legislature before him in Montpelier in April 1861 and pledged to the Union cause so many men and so much money that most other Northern states were left shamed. The governor's gesture was big and dramatic and remembered through the ages. But Charles Fairbanks's sacrifice was equally deserving of our admiration. And so were the sacrifices of his parents. At least five of their seven sons served in the War of the Rebellion, and although none died, four suffered some degree of permanent disability from injury, starvation or typhoid.

Published first-person narratives of Vermonters who have played important parts in the state's history are rare and wonderful finds. Among the best is "A Narrative of the Sufferings of Seth Hubbell & Family," written by one of Wolcott's first settlers. Hubbell's memories of trying to carve out a homestead for his family in the Vermont wilderness of the 1790s evoke nothing but awe. Janet Hayward Burnham founded The Little Jessie Press to publish children's books, and when she found a copy of Fairbanks's self-published memoir in the files of the Bethel Historical Society she thought it would be an ideal way to teach children about the Civil War. Indeed, it is. Even for adults, however, Fairbanks's memoir of his Civil War service is a valuable addition to this special genre.

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