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The Herald

Memories of a Bethel Soldier

Vivid Civil War Recollections Of Fairbanks Back in Print

By Chris Costanzo

One hot August morning in 1862, Bethel's Charlie Fairbanks, just 16 years of age, quit his chores on the family farm on Sand Hill Road the minute he heard an army recruiter had come to Bethel. He went straight into the village to sign up as a, private in the Union army.

Many years later, near the end of the 1800s, at the urging of family and friends, Fairbanks published an account of his Civil War experiences. Last fall, Bethel's Janet Burnham, while going through the archives of the Bethel Historical Society, stumbled across the account, along with a number of Fairbanks' letters from that period.

Burnham compiled and edited the material, adding editorial comments, photographs of the era, and maps that she drew herself to illustrate Fairbanks' adventures. She then reissued Fairbanks' memoir through her Bethel publishing enterprise, My Little Jesse Press. Printed this past June, the book is entitled "Notes of Army and Prison Life 1862-1865, by Pvt. Charles Fairbanks, Co. "F" 2nd USSS, & Co. "G" 4th Vt. Vols."

The result is an extremely readable, straightforward, riveting account of Charlie Fairbanks' military service, beginning with his adolescent inspiration to go to war, as his older brothers had done; through the numbing hardship of wretched living conditions, forced marches, inadequate clothing, meager supplies, scant food and the horrors of battle.

Like many a Bethel lad, Fairbanks was handy with a gun, and immediately qualified for a sharpshooter unit. At first he thought it was grand to be outfitted in a fine new uniform and taken to Washington, where he witnessed the capitol dome under construction and later to experience the fun and joy of "camping out" with new friends and comrades. Then came the sub-standard rations,

poor hygiene, lice and ticks, disease, and the increasingly raw weather, all of which took their toll.

And of course there was the fighting. Fairbanks discovered the horrors of battle at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, and was on the front lines at Gettysburg, when he was captured in the summer of 1863. Following that came the rigors of captivity, a 200-mile barefoot march to Richmond for incarceration, with near starvation and close brushes with death.

Paroled later in the year, Fairbanks went through months of recuperation. He then rejoined his regiment in late spring 1864 and fought in the battle of Cold Harbor, as well as taking part in fighting around Petersburg. In the spring of 1865 he participated in the capture of Petersburg and Richmond.

Although the book has an appeal for adults interested in the Civil War era, Burnham has aimed at a young audience from the late elementary years through high school. Fairbanks writes in a straightforward style that is easy to read, with no affectation, no sentimentality and no flowery digression. The 160 pages are double spaced, and the text is helped immeasurably by Burnham's drawings, the inclusion of photographs, and good organization.

There is a definite rhythm to the work as Fairbanks alternates between blunt, raw facts, personal feelings, and descriptions of bravery and kindness, and of foolish mess and cruelty on both sides of the conflict. Even though Fairbanks opens his memoir recalling his youthful dreams of military glory, the writing reflects his quick maturation under the intense experience of war. The book will quickly disabuse the young reader of any notion that war is somehow a glorious undertaking.

The book is available through the Bethel Historical Society, as well as local historical groups and museums.