

This is from Walter
Letters from a Civil War soldier of the
24th Michigan of the Iron Brigade 1862-1865

Annotated by Susan E. Clarkson, Ph.D.



What was it really like to be a soldier in the American Civil War? Read “*This is from Walter*,” a book of letters home from a soldier of the 24th Michigan of the Iron Brigade written between 1862 -1865. The Sanilac County Historical Society published this glimpse into the life of Walter Niles of Croswell in 2012.

Walter was just 20 when he and a friend volunteered for the Union Army in 1862. According to the forward, “the 24th Michigan fought at Antietam, Fredericksburg, Port Royal, and Chancellorsville before marching to Gettysburg. Both were wounded that day on the battlefield. Walter lay on the field for three days, trapped behind Rebel lines. A Confederate surgeon removed the bullet lodged in Walter’s back and gave it to him. When the Rebels retreated, he was left behind with other wounded soldiers in a makeshift hospital at McPherson’s barn, where he was rescued by Union forces.”

On July 6, 1863 he wrote, “I cannot say I am well but I am not wounded as bad as you will imagine me to be. You need not feel more than usual uneasy for I am well taken care of. You spoke as if you would come where I was if I was sick but it will be no use for we have plenty (sp) to take care of us and it would be spending money for nothing you could not get out if you was to try”.

Like any young man at war, Walter asked for news of loved ones and asked for care packages. He complained about the food, marching, and conditions in the camp, including lice “as thick as hoppers”. He also said they weren’t getting paid on a regular basis and noted the mud was almost knee deep. He noted who was writing him and that he had see a copy of the Jeff (the Jeffersonian newspaper, which was then printed in Lexington and is still in existence). Walter was discharged from the army in July 1865. He returned home to Davisville (now Croswell) and returned to work at the sawmill. He married twice (his first wife died) and had four children.

Walter and his friend returned to Gettysburg for the dedication of a monument to the 24th Michigan Infantry, and was among the over 50,000 veterans who returned for the 50th anniversary reunion of the battle. He died at the age of 81. His grandson, Walter J. Niles of Croswell, donated many items to the Sanilac County Historical Museum in Port Sanilac in 1974, including the 97 letters transcribed in this book and the bullet from his back.

Susan Clarkson of Croswell decided to make Walter’s letters a project. She has been a member of the Sanilac County Genealogical Society since 2002. In addition to helping people find their ancestors, genealogists help people better understand what life was like in earlier times. She chose the letters, which had been languishing in the museum because there is a lot of interest in the Civil War. “You hear a lot about different aspects of the Civil War, and people mark the anniversaries of different battles and events of the conflict. Walter Niles from Croswell was a genuine Civil War soldier who fought in several battles and was wounded at Gettysburg. His letters home to his family tell us what it was like to a soldier in that war.” Clarkson wrote the notes explaining or commenting on the letters after she and Ella Klein of Croswell scanned the original letters. They were transcribed by Sue Spellmeyer of Port Sanilac.

The book may be purchased for \$16.00 at the museum, or the General Store in the Historic Village during special events.

Sanilac County Historic Village & Museum
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