

CIVIL WAR REMINISCENCES

By

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These are neighborhood stories told by my grandmother who, as a young girl in Civil War days, lived with her parents, the Gilbert Vandenberghs, on their farm, now the site of the Knights of Columbus club house on Little Falls Road and the Stratford Hills subdivision.

Across Little Falls Road toward the south, was the home of the Minor family, who were southern sympathizers. They lived about where 27th Street, North, and Florida Street are now located. The Minors had two daughters who were the belles of the County.

At this time a company of Union soldiers, known as Reserves, were stationed on grandfather's place for the defense of Washington. The name "Reserve Hill Farm" came from this situation. On another hill toward the west Confederate soldiers were posted.

Both Union and Confederate soldiers frequently visited at the Minor home, at different times, of course. One day, a group of Union men strolled over to the Minor house and were invited to stay for tea. At first they refused because they were there without permission, but one daughter said she would prepare tea while her sister kept watch for Confederates. As soon as the men agreed to stay, the second sister went to the attic and, from a window facing the Confederate lines, waved her apron signaling them to come over. She waited until the Confederates marched into the front yard, then she rushed in, and informed the Union men that the Confederates were coming and that they should hide. In those days the kitchen doors were usually quite wide. Outside the Minor's kitchen door two rows of walnut trees led to a spring a short distance away. When the sister gave the alarm, the men started for this door, but were told to hide in the cellar. They would be seen by the Confederates already in the yard if they tried to escape by way of the walnut trees. All but two men reached the cellar, and those two jumped behind the kitchen door. They heard the girls say, "They are all in the cellar and have no side arms." As soon as the Confederates went to the cellar, these two men ran out the door to the spring and through the woods back to camp to report to their commander. He immediately had the assembly bugle sounded. He told the men that some of their companions had visited the Minor girls without permission and had been taken prisoners. He instructed four men to go to the barn and get as much

* John Leonard Saegmuller (1875-1961), eldest son of George N. Saegmuller, was born at "Reserve Hill Farm" in a house that stood at the present-day crossing of 30th Street, North, and Florida Street. He wrote these stories during the 1950s.

straw as they could carry, and another four to get kerosene from the commissary. He then marched the company over to the Minor home. When the daughters came out, he said, "Young women, you have done a despicable act. I know my men had no business coming over, but this does not alter the case, and I give you one hour to take whatever you can carry, as I intend to burn the house at the end of that time." Turning to his men he said, "You four place straw at the four corners of the building, and you four throw kerosene as high as possible on the corners. Young women, your time has started." He announced every ten minutes how much time had elapsed. At the end of the hour he called the time, asked if they were all out, and then gave the order to set fire to the house.

Part of the foundation was still visible when I was a boy.

One early spring day, an Army four-horse team was hauling a load of saddles up Little Falls Road along Grandfather's farm, when the wagon wheels sank in mud up to their hubs. In those days the roads were only made of dirt and not improved in any way. The driver began to throw off saddles until the horses could pull the wagon out of the mud. Then he drove off leaving the saddles he had thrown off into the field. Grandfather found them late that afternoon and had his man store them in the barn.

A week or so later, a young captain rode up and told Grandfather what had happened. He asked if Grandfather knew anything about the saddles, and was told that they were all in the barn except one which Grandfather took for saving the others.

This saddle remained in our family for many years.

The first Confederate soldier killed in this section was shot in the field just west of Mother's home. Union soldiers, under General Burdan, equipped with rifle sights, patrolled the ridge running south from her house. Three Confederates wandered into the field below. One of them took off his coat and cap and placed them on the end of his gun. Then he hid behind a tree and stuck the gun out to worry the men patrolling the ridge. The Union men watched the antics of this soldier for some time. Then one of them said, "When we meet next time and Johnny shoves his cap and coat out, you fire and I'll get him when he jumps back." When they met, two shots rang out, and they saw the Confederates roll their friend up in a blanket and carry him off.

During the Civil War, the woods stretched almost to the Vandenberg home. The Confederates often sent word to Grandmother that they would pay her a call some time, and she always sent back word that when they came she would serve them tea. One day Grandfather ran in and told her that they must leave, as a detachment of Confederates was coming, and a fight was sure to follow with the Union soldiers nearby. They were



The Gilbert Vandenberg home which stood on Little Falls Road at the present site of the Knights of Columbus building

Union sympathizers, and Grandmother was a very good practical nurse. Grandfather feared that the Confederates would take her away to nurse their men.

Grandfather had already picketed his horse down in the woods. They had almost reached the woods when Grandfather said, "Sarah, I forgot to get my rifle. You go on while I run back for it." She said, "No, you go on and I'll get it." As she went out the back door with the rifle, the Confederates marched into the front yard. Grandmother had just baked bread and put a dish of pudding in the oven for dinner. After the Confederates left, my grandparents returned to find a note from the soldiers informing them that the bread was delicious, but that they were afraid to taste the pudding for fear it had been poisoned.

When Lincoln was shot, people thought that Booth had escaped to Virginia, and a search of the country outside Washington was ordered.

A young captain with his company arrived at Gilbert Vanderwerken's farm which adjoined Grandfather's property. When Mr. Vanderwerken came out, the captain asked if he had heard about Lincoln's assassination, and was told, yes. The captain then said, "We have orders to search all buildings." Mr. Vanderwerken replied that Booth was not there and

that a search would be made over his dead body. The captain immediately ordered his house surrounded. When his aide reported that this had been done, the captain drew his revolvers and said, "Mr. Vanderwerken, you will now go through your house and open every door." After the search, Mr. Vanderwerken turned to the captain and said, "I told you he was not here." The captain replied, "I knew it, but I wanted to let you know who was the boss."

As the soldiers left, they rode through Vanderwerken's beautiful wheat field. It is said that they rode ten feet apart, and after they passed through, the field looked as if a cyclone had struck it.

After the war, Mr. Vanderwerken owned a large amount of property and several buildings around his house. In order to protect his place, he employed several men as guards, particularly at night. One day a man applied for a job. When Mr. Vanderwerken asked the man where he was last employed, he was told, "In the penitentiary." Asked what for, the man replied, "For theft." Mr. Vanderwerken said, "It takes a thief to catch a thief, so I will make you captain of the guard."

Next morning the new captain had disappeared, as well as the guns of the guards.