

VILLAGE VIEW

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On November 11th Americans celebrate Veterans' Day. This is an appropriate time to share a letter from Henry, a soldier and a native son of Osterville, while he was a patient in Carver Hospital near Fredericksburg, Virginia. Addressed to George, the village storekeeper, and signed by Henry, the Union Soldier during the Civil War, the letter is dated August 28th, 1863, and reads:

"I received your letter today with much pleasure, and as my time now is of no account (or hardly ever was) I will answer by giving you a short description of our Hospital and arrangements. The grounds are triangular in shape and contain about eight acres surrounded by a high fence with three gates. A guard is at every gate and it is hard work to get out. There are about eighty wards or buildings for the sick. They are about thirty by one hundred feet, low and whitewashed.

"In each are about twenty beds with cast iron frames. The wards are kept clean and everything is neat as wax. One man does nothing but tend to the sick and keep the ward in order.

"The day I got here I was dirty, lousy, had on a ragged shirt and stockings, no handkerchiefs or towel. Along came our state Agent, and he furnished me and others with all things necessary together with a bag of sewing materials. You can believe they came extra acceptable.

"The boys from other states say there is no state like Massachusetts for looking out for her soldiers, and I think so too. Our agent comes around once or twice a week and brings to the very sick, wine, jellies and anything they may need, and his coming is looked for with interest.

"I believe Osterville has never sent but little to the Sanitary Commission, but she has enough at home to look to, with so many widows and orphans. I trust this war will make no more.

"We live quite well here, but not so well but what the boys spend a lot of money with the apple women and suttlers. The suttlers must make a fortune. What would you think to have your counter thronged with men, all trading with cash, and you getting double price for everything? So it is. Some boys spend all their money with the suttler.

"We are rather lonesome, but we have a brass band started, playing one evening in the week. Meetings on Sundays are quite well attended; the men are away from home, and a meeting is a place that makes a man think of home.

"Every night President Lincoln goes by with his escort of twenty men. He generally rides a grey horse and is not, to me, a bad-looking man. If Fred Scudder had had dark eyes, he would have looked like him. He looks about used up, but I guess he will see this war through. Not a man but respects him in the army.

"Not so with the army officers; Hooker was DRUNK at Fredericksburg. It is a fact. Liquor has killed more men than bullets. The officers get down a dram, they they forget the men and march them to death. Our Ry. (regimentary) Officer went runaway from whiskey. Uncle Sam tries to do his duty but he gets dreadfully cheated by officers and men. The officers resign when they get tired or sick, but the men play off. There are thousands that do it. Some of our men put pepper in their eyes so they need not go into the fight at Gettysburg.

"Blinker's division, that ran at Fredericksburg here, ran in every fight. They are Dutchmen, the rowdies of Philadelphia and New York, and they are bound to rob every defenseless house they come to, Union or Reb, but that is only one division. Most of the men I know would make good citizens. The last men that came out are a better class than the first.

"I get acquainted with men from every Union state, and it is pleasant to talk about the different ways of living we have, but every man thinks his own State is the best, and for farming. I guess Osterville is about the poorest place in the Northern States.

"I was in hopes to have seen some volunteers or drafted men from our town, but it seems all of the men are out here. I did not know so many were feeble before, or that it was so easy for men to raise three hundred dollars in cash. If I had had \$1,000 and nothing to do with it, I would not for \$500.00, let a drafted man have a dollar. That is the way I, and others, feel about it. I feel now just as I did when I enlisted. That it is the duty of every man to do what he can to put this rebellion down.

"If any man is going to stop at home it will be some time for it. It is not any man out here that came for money. Many of our Ry. were making money when they left home. I say, if we leave all and come out, the folks at home that won't come should be made to pay us.

"I should have liked to have been to that town meeting. I guess all of the Barnstable boys will say they have earned their money, and I am afraid the boys are catching it now. Still, I should like to be with them. I should hate, if I ever get home, not to say that I was at the fall of Charleston. Many of our Ry. are in the hospitals; I think owing a good deal to the officers in not furnishing better food and marching us so hard.

"I am better, yesterday and today. I have to be careful how much I eat; we all have good appetites and the diarrhea at the same time. My throat troubles me. It is sore inside. I would like to get a furlough, as I think if I was in Osterville I should now get well, but that is something not easily got.

"Now I will write a little about our affairs. Tempy wrote me some time ago how much I owed you. I was sorry to see it was so much, but, as you are the only one I do owe, it is not so bad on my account, but I suppose you would like your pay. I hope my expenses will soon be less.

"Next winter, if I am not at home, I shall not pay so much for hired help, and if I can't pay you any other way, there is one more bank, at any rate, good for me yet, and you shall receive the benefit of that.

"You must take what you can from the firm (that is, if you can get anything), and sell as cheap as you can, not listen to Mr. Scudder. I would not trade with either of the Sears for anything, so you see you will get my trade, and I hope you nor I will either be the loser by it.

"Give my children a stick of candy once in a while and charge it to me. I have written this in a very short time and very poorly (my habit). I hope you will be able to make it out. Give my respects to all Union friends."

There's not much to add to Henry's words, for we know little of him, other than what he himself reveals. He is a stick soldier, far from home and among strangers. Back home, his wife and children are living on his credit, incurring debts he intends to repay when he can. He respects his Commander-in-Chief, but not those who give him orders. He believes firmly in the cause he's fought for and disdains those who purchase the privilege to escape military duty.

I cannot confirm that he returned to Osterville; this fragment may be all that's left of the man who grew up in this village, married, fathered children, and enlisted in the army to do his part in putting down the "rebellion" of the seceding Southern states. That he believes he and his compatriots have been badly led is evident; that he believes in the righteousness of the Union is also evident.

If, when the Civil War was over, he came home, he probably paid George, the storekeeper, who saw to it Henry's children had a stick of candy now and then, and Tempy's pantry shelves were never bare. The years Henry was away must have been difficult ones for his wife, left home alone to raise the children.

Now, as we commemorate Veterans' Day, is a good time to think about our lives today and sort out our own priorities. It's a good time to reach decisions about what is, as well as what is not, especially important to us.

Doesn't Henry's letter make you wonder how you'd feel if you were in his shoes? Where would you stand, if you were Henry?