



## The Second Nebraska's "Battle" of Chickamauga

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Full Citation: J R Johnson, "The Second Nebraska's 'Battle' of Chickamauga," *Nebraska History* 32 (1951): 77-93

Article Summary: The Second Nebraska's experiences at Chickamauga helped to goad the administration into reorganizing the military establishment. Much that was learned about medical care and sanitation at Camp Thomas helped to prevent the repetition of a miserable situation.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: Charles J Bills, George M Sternberg, Emil Olson, Silas Holcomb, William V Allen, William Jennings Bryan

Place Names: Camp George H Thomas, Chickamauga Park, Georgia

Keywords: typhoid, Second Nebraska (Nebraska National Guard), water supply, sewage disposal, dysentery

Photographs / Images: C J Bills



*J. Biles*

# THE SECOND NEBRASKA'S "BATTLE" OF CHICKAMAUGA

BY J. R. JOHNSON

The just historian who chronicles the events of the war with Spain, while not detracting from the glory and honor which belong to the brave men who fought up the hill at El Caney and San Juan, must also eulogize those heroes who fought with the gaunt specter of famine and disease in a southern camp.<sup>1</sup>

THERE is no particular individual in the Second Nebraska Infantry Regiment to single out for special honors but the organization as a whole is entitled to a place in the military annals of the state. The participants in the silent drama at Chickamauga Park, Georgia, passed through an ordeal requiring courage almost as great as that of the battlefield. These volunteers, in more than three months service at Camp Thomas, were the helpless victims of the unseen enemy of typhoid and other diseases. Improper sanitation, contaminated water, poor food, intense heat and unsatisfactory medical care added to their misery and suffering. Though the death rate was relatively low, very few escaped the ravages of disease of some sort. Many suffered for years from the effects of their experiences here. It would be difficult to arrive at a fair estimate of the real casualty list but, undoubtedly, it would be a long one.

The Second Nebraska was a part of the Nebraska National Guard at the outbreak of the Spanish-American War. Like the First Nebraska, it assembled at Camp Saunders (State

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<sup>1</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, August 31, 1898.

Fair Grounds) in Lincoln where it was formally mustered into the service of the United States, May 12, 1898.<sup>2</sup> The regiment left Lincoln over three railroads for Chattanooga, Tennessee, and from that point continued to Battlefield Station, Camp George H. Thomas, Chickamauga Park, Georgia, arriving May 22. The trip south was uneventful except for a warm welcome at every stop made en route. Since travel rations consisted only of coffee, bread and canned meats the delicacies heaped upon the men along the way were greatly appreciated. No one doubted that these young men would soon be doing battle with the hated Spaniards.<sup>3</sup>

The regiment numbered 1,020 on its arrival at Camp Thomas. Later recruits swelled its numbers so that there were 1,303 in the organization when it returned home August 31, 1898.<sup>4</sup> The regimental staff, appointed by Governor Silas Holcomb, was as follows:

Colonel—Charles J. Bills, Fairbury  
Lieutenant Colonel—Emil Olson, Kearney  
Major—William S. Mapes, Nebraska City  
Major—Ernest H. Tracy, Norfolk  
Adjutant—First Lieutenant William S. Harding, Nebraska City  
Quartermaster—First Lieutenant Frank H. Myers, Nebraska City  
Surgeon—Major Maurice A. Hoover, Kearney  
First Assistant Surgeon—Captain M. A. Rebert, Omaha  
Second Assistant Surgeon—First Lieutenant J. G. Mar-  
ron, Brainard  
Chaplain—Captain Joseph G. Tate, Lincoln<sup>5</sup>

The companies, home towns and commanding officers at the time of muster-in were as follows:

A—Kearney, Albert E. Soderquist  
B—Ord, Hjalmer Gudmundson

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<sup>2</sup> J. R. Johnson, "The Saga of the First Nebraska in the Philippines," *Nebraska History*, XXX (June, 1949), 139-162.

<sup>3</sup> *Report of the Adjutant General of Nebraska, 1897-1898*, pp. 129-132; *Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), May 25, 1898.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Reed, Victor C. Vaughan and Edward C. Shakespeare, *Report of the Origin and Spread of Typhoid Fever in U. S. Military Camps during the Spanish War of 1898* (Washington, 1904), II, Maps and Charts, Chart No. 34.

<sup>5</sup> *Report of the Adjutant General of Nebraska, 1897-1898*, p. 484; *Lincoln Evening News*, May 19, 1898.

C—Nebraska City, William H. Hayward  
D—Fairbury, John W. McDonnell  
E—North Platte, Herbert O. Evans  
F—Lincoln, Arthur E. Campbell  
G—Omaha, Charles H. Wilson  
H—Chadron, Allen G. Fisher  
I—Tecumseh, Hugh LaMaster  
K—Schuyler, Ernest H. Phelps  
L—Norfolk, Frank H. Beels  
B—Grand Island, George Roeder<sup>6</sup>

The officers of higher rank, especially Colonel Bills, came in for considerable criticism by the men of the regiment. Those of lower rank, most of whom had been chosen by their respective companies, were more in sympathy with the men and often shared their complaints. Col. Charles J. Bills, a lawyer and real estate man from Fairbury, was a brigadier-general in the National Guard and hoped to retain that rating. He was unpopular at the outset and failed to improve his standing during the weeks that followed. Many were of the opinion that he engineered the dismissal of certain officers in the Guard to make a place for himself and his friends.<sup>7</sup> After the regiment's return the criticism was even more pronounced.

They are sore at Governor Holcomb for the juggling by which the regiment was officered, when Colonel Bischof and Major Scharman were weeded out . . . to make room for Major Stotsenburg and Colonel Bills. One hears nothing but condemnation for this on every side, the distaste with which it inspired the regiment having not been abated by the long term of service under the latter's command. In fact they openly express the conviction that Colonel Bills is largely responsible for the fact they did not go to the front.<sup>8</sup>

It was further pointed out that Senator Thurston and Congressman Mercer received the impression from Colonel Bills that the Second Nebraska did not care to leave camp. There were complaints of the inattention of the officers to the needs of the men and of their failure to appreciate the

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<sup>6</sup> *Report of the Adjutant General of Nebraska, 1892*, pp. 329-330; *Ibid.*, 1899-1900, p. 46.

<sup>7</sup> *Nebraska State Journal*, May 12-13, June 12, 1898; Interviews: John F. Grau (2nd Lt., Co. E, 2nd Nebr. Regt.), October 17, 1932; Charles M. Sutherland (Clerk, Co. K, 2nd Nebr. Regt.), January 3, 1933.

<sup>8</sup> *Lincoln Evening News*, September 6, 1898.

fatigue incident to camp life. They "bitterly talk of the nonchalance with which they were called out for drill and dress parade on the very slightest pretext." One woman in camp called for a company drill, two women in camp brought out a battalion, while three such visitors to officers' quarters would call for a regimental dress parade.<sup>9</sup>

The right to "grouse" about his officers always has been a cherished and much-exercised privilege of the American soldier; and a considerable portion of the complaints against Colonel Bills may be written off as entirely normal. Yet, years of reflection only served to strengthen opinions formed while in the service.<sup>10</sup> Thirty-five years after the struggle an officer wrote:

Almost from the time we arrived at Chickamauga, Bills who was still smarting under his failure to be a brigadier in the Volunteers, naturally sought promotion as all officers did at Chickamauga. He was assigned as acting Brigade Commander of the Provisional Brigade which, as I recall it, sometimes had no regiment in it but ours. He set up Brigade Headquarters to which he moved and left Lieut. Col. Olson in actual command of the regiment<sup>11</sup>

Although Olson generally was recognized as an able officer, the Second Nebraska had no officers who measured up to Stotsenburg of the First or Vifquain and MacClay of the Third.<sup>12</sup>

Battlefield Station or Lytle was the last stop for the regiment. This "mushroom city" was, in many ways, like a frontier post. A correspondent gave this description of the boom town:

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Interviews: Jacob H. North (Pvt., Co. F, 2nd Nebr. Regt.), December 30, 1932; Herbert J. Paul (Pvt., Co. B, 2nd Nebr. Regt.), August 2, 1933; Claude Barnell (Pvt., Co. A, 2nd Nebr. Regt.), December 1, 1936; Grau, cited.

<sup>11</sup> W. H. Hayward (Capt., Co. C, 2nd Nebr. Regt.) to the writer, April 7, 1933.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. J. R. Johnson, "The Saga of the First Nebraska in the Philippines," *Nebraska History*, XXX (June, 1949), 139-162; "William Jennings Bryan, 'The Soldier,'" *Ibid.*, XXXI (June, 1950), 95-106.

Battlefield Station is a veritable Klondike or Cripple Creek. Six weeks ago it consisted of a depot and two or three houses. Today it has 200 buildings which are frequented daily by a varied crowd of men and women whose busy appearance shows better than anything else what the Anglo-Saxon is capable of . . . . Since the park was made the camping post of the regular army and later of the volunteers, it has grown steadily. Buildings of all kinds have been constructed along the railroad track. None are pretentious, all being one story in height and open at the sides and in front. They are filled with lemonade and cigar stands, cheap clothing and trinkets. All the leading eastern papers are represented by tents filled with correspondents. *Harper's Weekly* has two artists on the ground. The principal military supply houses have headquarters. Their employees are working day and night taking orders. One man has started a saloon where in a darkened room beer is sold by the bottle. A stable which is frequented by all the officers who require mounts may be found in the rear of a restaurant.<sup>13</sup>

This was the scene that met the eyes of the volunteers as they alighted from the train. Shortly, after a brief march, they set up camp in the southeast part of the park.

The Second Nebraska, with scores of other regiments of infantry and a few regiments of cavalry and artillery, were virtually dumped into Chickamauga Park.<sup>14</sup> This camp became the largest mobilization and training center in the United States at that time. In less than a month there were gathered here some 60,000 volunteers from all parts of the nation. The War Department believed it had selected an ideal place for an army camp. The country was rolling and afforded good drainage, a supply of pure water was available, and fever had been practically unknown in the region. Some 5,000 acres were wooded and it was here, in shaded but partially sunlit areas that the troops encamped, leaving the open spaces for drill and maneuvers.<sup>15</sup> However, it proved to be unhealthful. Insufficient investigation was made relative to the geological formation of the park. One physician reported:

Its soil is not suited for a large military encampment. It consists of a few inches of loam with an underlying

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<sup>13</sup> *Nebraska State Journal* (J. C. Mason letter), June 11, 1898.

<sup>14</sup> Hayward, letter cited.

<sup>15</sup> Franklin F. Holbrook, *Minnesota in the Spanish-American War and the Philippine Insurrection* (St. Paul, 1923), p. 34.

bed of dense clay, which extends everywhere to bed-rock. The ground remains damp after rain and cold even when exposed to the sun for a long time. Water collects in pools where it is held by clay. The weather is hot by day, cold and damp by night. The water supply is in part from artesian wells and springs but some of the troops have used ground water which has been exposed to infection.<sup>16</sup>

Poor management of the water supply and unsatisfactory sewage disposal soon brought about contamination that caused the rapid spread of disease. Difficulty was experienced in digging sinks of sufficient size and depth and in having proper material with which to cover the refuse. One critic commented:

There is no adequate reason why the regimental camp sites . . . should not have been changed every three weeks, and yet it is a fact that many a tent pitched there in May was not moved until the regiments dispersed in August. The records show that regimental medical officers petitioned time and time again for a change of camp sites, and that such petitions were in many instances wholly ignored . . . It sometimes happened that one regiment had its health endangered by drainage from other regiments.<sup>17</sup>

The Nebraska regiment, like most of the others, was located in a wooded area. It was assigned to the Second Brigade, which also included the Second New York and the First District of Columbia regiments. The Second Brigade was part of the First Division under Brig. Gen. Fred D. Grant, son of Gen. U. S. Grant. This division was included in the Third Army Corps.<sup>18</sup>

The principal problems of the Nebraska volunteers revolved around their physical well-being and the mental depression that deepened as they waited in vain for active duty. Each day in camp brought a new low in their morale. The water supply for drinking and cooking purposes was seriously inadequate from the beginning. One man relates that when the regiment first reached camp everyone was thirsty and soldiers were guarding the surface pools allowing

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<sup>16</sup> Dr. Carroll Dunham, "Medical and Sanitary Aspects of the War," *Review of Reviews*, XVIII (October, 1898), 418.

<sup>17</sup> Reed, Vaughan, Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, I, 285-286.

<sup>18</sup> *Report of the Adjutant General of Nebraska, 1897-1898*, pp. 129-132



no one to drink from them.<sup>19</sup> Water was at first hauled in barrels a distance of six miles round trip. Major Hoover, chief surgeon of the regiment, made the following statement on the water situation:

The main supply of water was from Chickamauga Creek, and after a couple of weeks iron pipes were laid on the surface and water carried by this means to the various camps, and often it was so hot that the horses would not drink it. Orders were given to have all water boiled that was used for drinking purposes, and later on a system of filtering the water was adopted, which proved a failure, as the amount of solid refuse was so great as to render the filter useless. Part of the water was carried from Crawfish Springs, which was undoubtedly pure at first, but later became unfit for drinking. Then water was brought from Blue Springs. A small lake formed where the water was taken, and this was frequently contaminated by hogs, cattle, and mules wading, wallowing, and standing in same, but it was the best we had or could get. The water supply—i.e., good pure water—was inadequate to the demand and very difficult to procure, and undoubtedly this was an important factor in the causation of typhoid fever and dysenteries.<sup>20</sup>

The Committee on Typhoid Fever, though recognizing that contaminated water contributed to the spread of the disease, believed that it was not the principal cause. Improper disposal of sewage was considered a greater menace.<sup>21</sup> Words can scarcely describe the loathsome conditions. Open, shallow latrines filled with vermin, and filthy kitchen sinks provided natural breeding grounds for flies. Nothing was available to cover the refuse for a long time through lime was ultimately furnished but not in sufficient quantities. "The space on the open ground available for latrines was limited so that before the end of the regiment's tour of duty there the same ground was being used a second time. This latrine field, as a result, became almost a solid mass of maggots and there were no screens, except tarpaulins, provided for the food either cooked or uncooked."<sup>22</sup>

It is not unusual for the American service man to complain about the food served, either in camp or in the field.

<sup>19</sup> North, interview cited.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Reed, Vaughan, Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, I, 286.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 206, 285-287.

<sup>22</sup> Hayward, letter cited.

He is used to a fine table at home and he naturally makes comparisons. Yet, the rations at Camp Thomas were so abominable that he cannot be blamed for "griping." Not only was the food of inferior quality but the company cooks were inexperienced. A correspondent wrote:

When the Second Nebraska boys landed in Chickamauga Park they were in good condition. Buzzacott ovens were issued them and there was not a cook in all the companies who knew how to operate them. The government had no bakery then and for three weeks the boys ate soggy bread, poorly cooked meat, largely the greasiest bacon that could be purchased, and raw tomatoes, or if cooked they were burned. Eating became a nightmare.<sup>23</sup>

Small wonder that dysentery took its toll. The men cast about for someone to blame for these conditions. Private Jacob North of Company F claimed the officers took the best cuts of meat and that the regiment was "supplied with potatoes, onions, and other vegetables that were half-rotten." If these were rejected ten days might elapse before a new supply, usually as bad as the first, would be received. The only alternative was to spend their pay at the regimental canteen where food, reasonably "fit to eat" could be obtained.<sup>24</sup> Sutler stands did a thriving business. Huckster wagons driven through the camps sold such things as milk, fruits and melons. The milk was often of doubtful quality and is believed to have helped spread disease. There was little inspection of such foodstuffs.<sup>25</sup>

Though beer was not sold in the Nebraska regimental canteen it was available in many others. Colonel Bills was praised back home for his stand against the sale of spiritous drinks. Many clubs passed resolutions commending him and the state president of the WCTU wrote him a congratulatory letter.<sup>26</sup> The majority of the men hardly shared this point of view. Edgar L. Davis, Educational Secretary of the YMCA, roundly condemned the army canteen:

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<sup>23</sup> *Lincoln Evening News*, September 21, 1898.

<sup>24</sup> North, interview cited.

<sup>25</sup> *Lincoln Evening News*, July 17, 1898; Reed, Vaughan, Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, I, 206.

<sup>26</sup> *Nebraska State Journal*, May 25, June 7, 12, 1898. Members of the regiment interviewed did not believe Bills merited the praise.

After an experience with it in Camp Thomas during the summer of 1898, I have no words in commendation. It is the curse of the army, or was in Chickamauga . . . . It is a black, indelible record of insubordination, cursing officers, fights, disturbances, etc., ninety per cent of which is directly chargeable to the infamous beer saloon.<sup>27</sup>

Sleeping conditions at Camp Thomas were entirely unsatisfactory. No cots or beds were ever furnished. The men slept on the ground in blankets made almost continually sodden by the heavy downpours of almost tropical rains. The heat was oppressive during the day causing much discomfort, but the men bore up well—probably because of their experience with hot Nebraska summers. The troops were plagued by a host of irritations such as dust, poison ivy, snakes, various breeds of insects, and especially the ever-present house-fly. Clothing issued was unsuited for a warm climate. The heavy, woolen breeches had wide-spreading legs around which the men wore canvas, laced leggings. Underwear and socks were hard to secure. Bathing facilities were limited, the usual place for taking baths being the Chickamauga River. The camp site was moved only once and then only 100 yards from its former position.<sup>28</sup>

National administrators and legislators, army "brass," state officials, prominent civilians, camp officers and the men in the ranks have all expressed themselves emphatically on health conditions at Chickamauga. The higher authorities were inclined to shift the blame for the horrible state of affairs to lower grade officers and enlisted men. These in turn declared the "higher-ups" to be at fault. Outsiders, generally, condemned the War Department officials. The evidence shows the Medical Corps to have been woefully inefficient in administration. Surgeon-General George M. Sternberg requested the governors to use national guard medical equip-

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<sup>27</sup> Edgar L. Davis, Letter, February 9, 1901, to the editors of the *Outlook*, LXVII (February, 1901), 370.

<sup>28</sup> Hayward, letter cited; *Lincoln Evening News*, July 7, 12, 1898; *Nebraska State Journal*, June 12, July 22, 1898; Reed, Vaughan, Shakespeare, *op. cit.* (Major Hoover's and Captain Robert's Reports), I, 174-178.

ment until regular army supplies were ready.<sup>29</sup> Like many states, Nebraska was lacking in this respect. The result was that hospital care, woefully inadequate in the beginning, never became satisfactory.<sup>30</sup> Captain Hayward made this observation:

In the beginning there was no hospital service rendered as we now understand the term. There were tent hospitals erected for each brigade or division commanded by Volunteer officer surgeons. There was no corps of trained hospital stewards. After a time each company commander received an order from regimental headquarters to assign two men from the company to act as hospital stewards. Naturally at that time we never thought anybody would get sick and I assume every Captain did what I did, to wit, assign two men who were poor soldiers, trouble makers and that I was anxious to get rid of. This practice, which I believe was generally carried out, did not give the inexperienced commissioned Medical Corps a very high personnel to work with. These tent hospitals would now be called field hospitals. There were certain institutions taken over for what would now be called base hospitals where the sick were cared for under a roof and in buildings with floors. I frequently visited these hospitals and believe they were conducted according to the then accepted ideas of hospital sanitation.<sup>31</sup>

Even if the sordid practices at Camp Thomas were in line with the "accepted ideas" of that day, the organization and administration of the hospital service at Chickamauga left much to be desired. Dr. Nicholas Senn, who spent four weeks there, praised the doctors but severely criticized the faulty organization and the lack of authority in the surgeon-general's office. Everything of importance had to clear the Secretary of War and the Medical Department depended "entirely on the Quartermaster's Department in forwarding and distributing medical and hospital supplies." Direct control by the Medical Department, he contended, would have avoided many of the "bottlenecks."<sup>32</sup> Both he and Susan B.

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<sup>29</sup> *Report of the Secretary of War for 1898* (Sternberg Report), p. 181.

<sup>30</sup> All members interviewed agree on this point. Barnell was twice a patient in the 1st Division, 3rd Corps Hospital and, also, a patient in the Sternberg Hospital.

<sup>31</sup> Hayward, letter cited.

<sup>32</sup> Letters from Dr. Nicholas Senn, Chief Surgeon, U. S. Volunteers, in *War Correspondence, Hispano-American War* (Chicago, 1899), pp. 61-65, 266-272.

Anthony complained of the antipathetic attitude toward using female nurses.<sup>33</sup> Others aired their views on the same subject. Mrs. Evelyn H. Belden of Sioux City, Iowa, president of the Iowa Equal Suffrage Association (who had a son at Chickamauga), was extremely bitter in her comments:

I found the condition of things far worse than I had expected. Yet the camp was at the end of a railroad, in the midst of a land of abundance, whose people were eager to contribute every comfort for the soldiers. I found the boys yellow and hollow-eyed who had left home strong and rosy. There were plenty of supplies right at hand, but it was impossible to get an order to issue them. Sick men lay for days delirious under a burning sun, because it took several days to get an ambulance to carry a fever patient to the hospital. Do not discount anything you hear about the horrors of Chickamauga or divisional hospitals; the worst has never been told.

She further complained of the "bloody red tape" and believed the real reason Sternberg did not want women nurses "was because they were not subject to the etiquette of silence that prevails in the army, and would be free to tell what they saw."<sup>34</sup>

Major Hoover, who was director of the 1st Division, 3rd Army Corps hospital, reported: "For six weeks we were practically without drugs and the Lord only knows what became of the requisitions. I drew up a recommendation covering our needs and made direct reference in it to the hospital in my charge."<sup>35</sup>

Governor Silas Holcomb and Adjutant-General Patrick H. Barry visited the camp, August 11 and 12. Barry called it "the one black spot of the war department," criticized the poor sanitary conditions, location of tents, manner of caring for the sick, crowded hospital conditions and especially the system of nursing. "Each nurse," he said, "had to care for about forty patients, most of them being in different tents." Even so, Colonel Bills was commended by the Governor for having "the cleanest and best kept camp" in the park.<sup>36</sup>

The health of the regiment became steadily worse during

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<sup>33</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, October 29, 1898.

<sup>34</sup> *Woman's Weekly* (Omaha), June 10, 1899.

<sup>35</sup> *Lincoln Evening News*, September 2, 1898.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, August 16, 19, 1898.

August. A member commented that the men preferred to stay sick in camp because of the revolting conditions in the hospitals. They had a horror of going there because so many failed to return.<sup>37</sup> Camp Thomas led all camps in deaths by disease to September 1 with 352 out of a total of 1,284. Typhoid fever was, by far, the chief "killer" with 515 attributed to that cause.<sup>38</sup> The Second Nebraska had 167 cases of probable and certain typhoid. No doubt many labeled as malaria were really typhoid. Of the twenty-six deaths in the regiment, twenty-two resulted from this disease. This was low as compared with some other units but since quite a number were afflicted after returning to Nebraska these figures may be misleading.<sup>39</sup>

The military routine at Chickamauga became extremely monotonous, especially as hopes for Cuban service faded. The volunteers had to rely chiefly on their national guard equipment for the first two months. Lt. Col. Olson was in actual command most of the time since Colonel Bills spent much of his time at Brigade headquarters. Drill was carried on with strict regularity and the regiment developed into a well trained organization, eager for active duty. Brig. Gen. Royal T. Frank, in his report on the Third Army Corps to which the Second Nebraska was attached, makes this summarization:

The operations of this corps during its two and a half months' service in Chickamauga Park were limited to completing its equipment, instruction, drill, and training necessary to prepare it for the more serious work of actual campaign, and to this work officers and enlisted men devoted themselves with a zeal and constancy that led to the most gratifying results. The daily routine consisted of schools for officers and noncommissioned officers, elementary drill, target practice, and battle exercises. In these the troops acquired a proficiency and effectiveness in the actual operations of war . . . . Owing to the unsanitary conditions prevailing at Camp Thomas, troops suffered much from sickness during the latter part of their service there, which led to the discharge and

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<sup>37</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, August 27, 1898; Paul, interview cited.

<sup>38</sup> *Lincoln Evening News*, September 2, 1898.

<sup>39</sup> Reed, Vaughan, Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, II, Chart No. 34, I, 178; *Lincoln Evening News*, August 26, September 21, 1898; *Omaha World-Herald*, November 21, 1898.

furloughing of many and impaired the health and strength of all.<sup>40</sup>

Many rumors circulated as to why the Second Nebraska was not sent to Cuba. One of these fixed the blame on Senator William V. Allen, whose son was a lieutenant in Company L. He had visited the camp and was said to have made an unfavorable report to the War Department to the effect that the regiment was ready in neither training nor equipment. Another charged Colonel Bills with reporting that the men were not in proper condition. Still another rumor credited the Bryan regiment with being given priority. After the peace, the enthusiasm waned though a rather large number still hoped to be sent to Cuba, Porto Rico or the Philippines for garrison duty. The majority, however, favored being mustered out and made no secret of it.<sup>41</sup>

Social life at Camp Thomas was quite dull. An occasional pass to Chattanooga, where entertainment and tasty food were available, helped to relieve the monotony. But, too often, bad company was sought and a great deal of venereal disease was contracted. These cases received little treatment by physicians and no segregation policy was adopted. There was a lack of religious influence in camp and the YMCA furnished little social diversion. Athletic activities were not encouraged, probably because of the intense heat. Morale sank to new lows as the days dragged by.<sup>42</sup> Visits by high officials usually meant a dress parade, an event not relished by the men. One of these took place when General Breckenridge and his staff called August 9. All the troops, numbering 40,000, were reviewed and the Nebraska unit received

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<sup>40</sup> *H.R. Document No. 3*, 55th Congress, 3rd Session, 1898-1899, p. 225.

<sup>41</sup> Grau, Barnell, Sutherland, North, interviews cited; Hayward, letter cited. Hayward commented: "Some 400 of the men from the various companies got together and asked me to create from their number a battalion of which I was to be the commander, to remain in the service and, if possible, go to the Philippines. I tried to work this out but the plan was defeated for reasons which are probably not interesting now. I do not believe anybody in our regiment envied the 3rd Nebraska in their task of going to Cuba to do garrison duty after the war was over."

<sup>42</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, February 18, 1899, quoting from the *Alger Relief Commission Report*; Sutherland, Barnell, interviews cited.

special commendation.<sup>43</sup> Secretary of War Alger waited until practically all the volunteers there had been transferred or mustered out before making his inspection tour. He hotly denied rumors charging him and his department with negligence. "Incompetent officers, generals, and colonels in charge" were declared by him to have been responsible for the appalling conditions there.<sup>44</sup>

The question of responsibility for conditions at Chickamauga or the failure of certain volunteer regiments seeing active duty cannot be answered to the satisfaction of all. Testimony varies widely. Criminal negligence probably did not exist, but events definitely prove the incompetence of the War Department. High officials were negligent in planning for the large encampment and took few steps to correct its faults. The blame cannot be properly shifted to the volunteer officers and men, though they did make mistakes from lack of experience. Without sufficient authority to make decisions they were at the mercy of a vicious system.<sup>45</sup> Captain Hayward stated:

I have always understood that the high officers, practically all of whom were from the Regular Army, had placed the blame for camp conditions at Chickamauga on the officers and men of the individual regiments and have made an odious basis of comparison between the Regular Army troops who were in the same camp earlier in 1898 and the National Guard or Volunteer Regiments which came later. The answer to this is perfectly obvious. The Regular Army troops were comparatively small in number, were there in the cool weather of the Spring and were only there for a short time before moving to new localities . . . . Undoubtedly the officers and men of the Volunteer regiments, certainly of some regiments, were inexperienced and, I assume, in some cases negligent but I have always thought the condition of the camp itself had more to do with the sickness than any neglect of duty on the part of the Volunteer officers either commissioned or non-commissioned.<sup>46</sup>

The location and condition of the camp seem, beyond question, to have been the responsibility of "higher-ups" and there the blame must rest.

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<sup>43</sup> *Lincoln Evening News and Daily Call*, August 13, 1898.

<sup>44</sup> *Lincoln Evening News*, September 23, 1898.

<sup>45</sup> *War Correspondence* (Senn Letters), pp. 31-32, 61-63, 265-268; Paul, interview cited.

<sup>46</sup> Hayward, letter cited.



August 24 was a happy day for the Second Nebraska. Orders were received to prepare for the return home and these came none too soon. A conservative estimate places the number of men sick in the park at 6,000 on that date. Seventy-nine incapacitated members of the regiment left Camp Thomas August 29 and reached Omaha two days later. Several hundred people were on hand to greet them but the home-coming was pathetic. "The appearance of the men aroused great sympathy in the watchers. Their cots had not been made or changed since leaving Chickamauga. Several men were unable to walk."<sup>47</sup> The main body of the regiment arrived September 3 and went into barracks at Fort Omaha where the ladies of Omaha served a bounteous feast. Many were in poor health and the sick list grew steadily larger. The more serious cases were placed in Omaha hospitals, thanks to efforts made by the *World-Herald*, and a field hospital was set up in camp for the slightly ill. The hospital at Fort Crook was put into operation as a precautionary measure. Considerable numbers of the troops were granted furloughs and these, together with those hospitalized, comprised about one-third of the regiment.<sup>48</sup>

Discipline and military routine were sharply relaxed after the return to Omaha. There was time for reflection, discussion and reminiscence. In their "bull" sessions the men roasted everyone "from the President, Secretary of War and his assistant, on down through the list including the governor, adjutant-general, Senator Allen, Judge Hayward, Colonel Bryan and last of all, and loudest, Colonel Bills." This last individual irritated them by a statement made shortly after the return. He said: "We have not had a great amount of sickness in the regiment, and the number of deaths have been wonderfully small." This was, indeed, an understatement and brought forth new blasts from the men.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *Lincoln Evening News*, August 31, September 1, 1898; *Omaha World-Herald*, August 31, 1898.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, September 1-6, 1898; Reed, Vaughan, Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, (Hoover Report), I, 178.

<sup>49</sup> *Lincoln Evening News*, September 6, 9, 1898; Grau, Paul, Sutherland, North, Barnell, interviews cited; Hayward, letter cited.

The Trans-Mississippi Exposition was in progress in Omaha and the members of the Second Nebraska were honored guests September 7, designated Military Day. Greetings were extended by Governor Holcomb, Adjutant-General Barry and Mayor Moores, with Colonel Bills responding. A banquet topped the celebration. On September 12 the regiment was given thirty days' furlough and it was believed they would not be called together again. However, at the close of the period they were ordered back to Fort Omaha. One member thought they were retained in service because of the Exposition and to grace the visits of President McKinley, General Shafter and other dignitaries. McKinley arrived October 11 during Peace Jubilee Week and made a speech at the Exposition grounds. The Second Nebraska acted as a military guard. Maj. Gen. Nelson A. Miles and other prominent men were guests of honor the following day which was Army and Navy Day. General Shafter and his entourage paid the city a visit two days later.<sup>50</sup>

The entire regiment, 1,078 men, was mustered out October 24 with the exception of 148 sick at their homes or in hospitals. Forty cases of typhoid were reported between the time of arrival in Omaha and the date of muster-out, eight of whom died.<sup>51</sup> Bitter feeling continued to the very end. Various threats had been made and certain unpopular officers were scheduled to "get their faces punched." A fine farewell dinner was served, "the unpopular officers smiled" and general harmony prevailed. The desire to return home outweighed that of settling old grudges.<sup>52</sup> Sickness continued to dog their steps and a month after the mustering out seventeen per cent were still on the sick list.<sup>53</sup> There had been considerable talk, following the return to Omaha, of organizing a battalion, to be headed by Lieutenant Colonel Olson, for service in the Philippines as a replacement for the First Nebraska. However, the plan did not materialize. It "seems,"

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<sup>50</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, September 8, 12, 13, 15, 1898.

<sup>51</sup> Reed, Vaughan, Shakespeare, *op. cit.* (Hoover Report), I, 178.

<sup>52</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, October 26, 1898.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, November 21, 1898.

the press reported, "to have melted into thin air, despite the efforts of several of the officers to locate it."<sup>54</sup>

The round of duty performed by the Second Nebraska in the "battle" of Chickamauga may seem like much wasted effort. This is not true for the publicity attending this nightmare helped to goad the Administration into a thorough job of "house-cleaning" in the War Department. Public opinion was aroused to such a pitch that a reform movement was soon under way resulting in legislation reorganizing the whole military establishment. Much, too, was learned about medical care and sanitation that prevented such foul conditions as prevailed at Camp Thomas from being repeated in the future. Even the men who lived through this ordeal got some personal satisfaction from it. Private North perhaps spoke for all the volunteers of the Second Nebraska when he said: "I wouldn't take a million for the experience and I wouldn't give two cents for more of it."

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, October 26, November 21, 1893.

