

R. Dutton Silsby (1829-1894)
Civil War Letters, 1862-1863
MSA 521

Introduction

The collection is made up of photocopies of transcribed Civil War letters between R. Dutton Silsby, a sergeant in the 13th Vermont Infantry, and his wife Marinda of Moretown, Vermont. The photocopies were obtained by the Vermont Historical Society from Nebraska State Historical Society after Edward G. Longacre submitted a manuscript in 1973 for possible publication in *Vermont History*; the manuscript was never published and in 1978 the decision was made to put the copies of the transcriptions in the library. The collection occupies .25 linear feet.

Biographical Note

Russell Dutton Silsby was born in Waitsfield, Vermont, on April 8, 1829, the son of Asaph Silsby (1800-1884) and Betsy Currant Gibson Silsby (1802-1829). By 1860, Dutton was living on a farm in Moretown, Vermont. He had married Marinda Brown Mason in Acworth, N.H., on September 9, 1852, and they had seven children: Ithiel, Martha (b. 1854), Mary (b. 1855), Ellen (b. 1858), Elizabeth (b. 1865), Horace (b. 1868), and Herbert (b. 1873). Dutton served as a Sergeant in Company B, 13th Vermont Volunteers Infantry. In the 1880 census Dutton is living in Morgan, Iowa, and daughter Martha is in Marvin, Iowa. He died May 1, 1894, in Iowa.

Scope & Content Note

The collection is made up of photocopies of transcribed Civil War letters between R. Dutton Silsby and his wife Marinda of Moretown, Vermont. The bulk of the correspondence is from Dutton to his wife, but some of the return letters have also been included. The collection includes a letter by daughter Martha describing her childhood in Vermont. Martha was the transcriber of her parents' letters.

Dutton Silsby's letters give a very good description of Army life. He writes in good detail, he is interested in all aspects of his military experience, and he has interesting observations about what the war has meant to the civilian population in Virginia. Most of his service was involved in guard duty along the Potomac, and he did not see a great deal of combat, but he did have one experience that he described in detail. While on a foraging venture near Fairfax Station in May of 1863, he was captured with two other men, taken to Gainsville for two days, and then paroled. He expected to be sent to Annapolis to the parole camp for future exchange, but that never happened, perhaps due to the short time he had remaining in his enlistment. For the rest of his service he was not able to participate in combat, both because he had not gone through the exchange process, and because he faced a possible court martial for "informally accepting a parole without the consent of a commissioned officer." Thus, even though he was on the field at Gettysburg, "myself and the other paroled prisoners are ordered to the

rear. I have the Adjutant's horse to ride and take care of." He gives good descriptions of the noise of battle, and his frustration that he could not participate. He never did face a court martial, as he claimed the requirement that an officer approve an enlisted man's parole had not been in effect when he was captured.

Dutton rather liked life in Virginia, except for the existence of slavery. "Just think not to see a flake of snow before the 3rd of Nov. – Good! Good! Good." He speaks of the availability of deserted farms, uncleared land, and the good soil. He writes a very detailed letter about his visit to Mount Vernon. He also describes in detail what his duties are and what it was like to live in the various camps where he was stationed. He gives excellent descriptions of the desolation of war, the torn down fences, burnt houses with just the chimney standing, and the fact no crops had been planted for two years. When one of the Union cavalry pickets was shot dead and his saddle found in the cellar of a nearby house, he says "the house will be stripped and burned today."

He is always optimistic, never complains, shows great concern for his wife and children at home. It seems that he was only paid twice in all his months of service. The speed of the mails seems remarkable. His wife writes from Vermont on the 15th, he responds from Virginia on the 19th. He feels no compassion for those facing the first military draft, indeed he feels that those on the home front show more concern for those in the army as the draft nears, hoping that soldiers will reenlist so the home front will not have to serve.

The exchanges between husband and wife are warm and caring. She is concerned to find out just when he will be returning; he speaks of government red tape. He is often enquiring for the health of the children, and the events at home, though not much about the running of the farm, except to be sure his father is not overworked. Both parties write good, clear letters.

Inventory

MSA 521:01	Typed excerpts edited by Edward G. Longacre
02	Dutton Silsby to wife Marinda, Oct 1, 1862- Nov 16, 1862
03	_____, Nov 17, 1862- Jan 1, 1863
04	_____, Jan 5, 1863- March 13, 1863
05	_____, March 15, 1863- June 6, 1863
06	_____, June 9, 1863- July 14, 1863
07	Marinda Silsby to Dutton Silsby, Oct 1862- June 1863
08	Martha Matilda Silsby Marvin, letter, 1884

Ethan W Bisbee
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