

Civil War Soldiers, Homesteaders, and Dakota POWs: In Letters

Christie Family Letters

This cluster of primary sources is comprised of letters of correspondence within the Christie family during the Civil War. Civil War era letters sent from soldiers offer some excellent insights into the daily lives and experiences the individuals who wrote them. The strengths of these primary sources, or rather letters from soldiers during the Civil War in general, is that they provide first-hand perspectives of the daily activities of soldiers and the army. However, as the Christie family's letters reveal, there are also weaknesses associated with these primary sources.

Thomas, William, and Alexander Christie's letters offer a wealth of information relating to life in camp, general maneuvering and engagements in which each was involved, and even the geography and conditions each encountered during their services. Primary sources like these are invaluable in their ability to bring to life daily realities, both mundane and exciting, of Civil War soldiers. These letters must necessarily be situated in context, though, which is where they must also be handled with skepticism. Personal letters from soldiers, like the Christie letters, are littered with examples of personal opinions, misunderstandings, and editorial interjections. These letters should not necessarily be interpreted to represent an aggregation of all soldiers, and certainly not Confederates. After all, the Christie's were Union soldiers who (specifically William) expressed pride in fighting for the Union and against slavery and secession. Furthermore, historians and/or general readers must consider the writers' motives and condition when the letters were created. For example, several letters acknowledge that the writer is hurried, unskilled in composition, bored or disinterested, or that the writer unsure of the full scope of events about which they are writing due to the slow pace at which information was disseminated. For these reasons, these letters, like so many others written during the Civil War, need to be situated strongly in context.

Norwegian Immigrant Letters

The letters sent from Norwegian immigrants back to their families in Norway during the 1860s offer insights into the lived experiences and perspectives of immigrant communities in Minnesota during a period of extreme local and national turmoil and change. These letters in this cluster of sources speak to the experiences of farmers during the homesteading period, how the Civil War was understood by foreign immigrants who lived far from the fighting in the east, and even fear and trepidation towards Dakota Indians in Minnesota. Personal letters from immigrants allow historians and readers to understand the perspectives of new Minnesotans during this era, as well as their hardships and successes in establishing new lives. However, these letters also reveal the limits to new immigrants' realization of long-standing political divisions.

These letters offer us a valuable narrative experience of the difficulties immigrants in establishing themselves and sustaining success in Minnesota. As immigrant communities, like Norwegians, began and developed within Minnesota, cultural norms were sometimes disrupted or difficult to maintain due to isolation. The letter Anders Helgesen Skare provides an example of this, as his assertion that he ought to receive compensation from his father's estate, which was customary, seems not to have been honored at that point. Another letter, from Hellig Olson Lehovd, demonstrates how immigrants sought to remain maintain cultural ties and traditions, as he had chosen to create his farm in a Norwegian community. The practice of settling in cultural or ethnic neighborhoods/enclaves has been a common practice throughout history for most immigrant groups. These letters also reveal the hardships faced by immigrants in coming to assimilate into a new monetary system, strained heavily by war, that did not match the system of commerce to which they were accustomed in Norway.

The Civil War and the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862 are also subjects within this cluster of letters. The obvious weaknesses of these letters in speaking about these conflicts, especially in terms of the Civil War, is the writers' misunderstandings of American politics and American

history. As new immigrants, familiarizing themselves with the national struggle over slavery that dated back to the Constitution was not realistic. Also, as the readings suggest, their political system and language lacked necessary words to even accurately describe the situation in the United States. The letters acknowledge fear of Indians due to news of the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862 that had occurred nearby, but also acknowledge that it is to the benefit of the settlers that the Dakota have been pushed away. In this sense, these primary sources demonstrate that in the case of these violent conflicts, perspective depended greatly on proximity, personal gain, and varying degrees of cultural understanding.

Dakota Prisoner of War Letters

This cluster of primary sources contains an amazing wealth of information about the realities of the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862, including the critical pieces of Dakota culture that led so many of the letter writers to be imprisoned. It is clear that many Dakota may have admitted to participating in battles and raids against settlers and the government, but that so many of them did so without having ever actually participated in violence or belligerent activities; Dakota appeals to this fact appear over and over again in the letters. The Dakota Prisoner of War Letters present a confounding case in terms of primary source letters, though. The main problem with the Dakota letters might also be their greatest strength: only the Dakota's perspectives are represented in the letters, thus their descriptions of conditions and their pleas for clemency and support are relatively consistent—this consistency stands as repeated evidence that each letter is telling the truth.

As the Dakota letters show, many of the prisoners held at Camp McClellan admitted to participating in activities against settlers or in battles against soldiers or militias. However, acknowledging support or participation in the cause did not necessarily mean that an individual had ever been violent towards anyone or had stolen from anyone. The letters plead innocence once it is clear that they are imprisoned for previous admissions of guilt. To be a warrior was an honor for the Dakota, but this honor had led many of them to a terrible situation. Prisoners of War camp throughout history have been awful to the imprisoned population, and Camp

McClellan appears to have been no different. Readers are repeatedly reminded of suffering, abuse, and death. As primary sources, it would be reasonable to apply a level of skepticism to these accounts because Dakota would have a clear and obvious motive to describe a dreadful situation in order to possibly be freed or rescued. Perhaps accounts from guards or outsiders would not be as dire. In this case, however, it is reasonable to accept the descriptions in these letters as truth, as they are from many different writers and were composed over the course of years. Readers see Dakota language and culture come to life through English translation, from repeated phrases to spirituality. These letters should be situated as critical primary sources in the study of the U.S.-Dakota War and its aftermath.