

# Echoes from the Past

## Civil War, Dakota Conflict letters delivered to BCHS Museum

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NEW ULM - In 1861, two local boys went to war.

The New Ulmers, brothers Louis and August Schilling, traveled to Ft. Snelling, where they joined other young men from Minnesota, formed up into a unit (the First Minnesota Battery) and began the long march south.

Stationed at Ft. Snelling and later at Camp Corinth - in the northeastern corner of Mississippi, half hour away from battle sites such as Shilo and Iuka - the Schillings diligently wrote letters home.

They wrote in their native German, in a flowing, flowery, old-script hand, mostly addressing the letters to their sister Louise; but evidently intending them for family perusal.

Sometimes separately, sometimes together, the brothers shared tidbits of camp life; conscientiously reported on their health and inquired after their mother, father and siblings.

They'd mention a skirmish or an ambush; reference a military figure; throw in a rarely documented historic fact...

Then, on Aug. 26, 1862, came a frantic letter - the Schillings had just learned, from a newspaper dispatch, of a Sioux attack on New Ulm, just eight days after the outbreak. The letter reveals their first reaction, as they breathlessly beg for information about this "sad and terrible news."

One can only imagine the writers' nervous agitation, as they relay their commanders' hectic effort to obtain a pass to head back north, defend their homes; the desperation that mingles with hope.

The letter is written with a hope that this, like other reports in the past, had been "greatly exaggerated;" before the Schillings have realized the extent of the damage and its personal implications.

The hope, sadly, proved unfounded.

The Schillings' father, another brother and mother would be wounded in what is now known as the Dakota Conflict. Later, the father and brother would die of their wounds.

In one of conflict's ironies, the Civil War soldiers would survive, with August reaching the rank of corporal in the Union army. Louis and August would go on to lead productive lives after the war.

Eight original Schilling letters - a treasure trove of historical documentation, all very well preserved - were delivered last week to the Brown County Historical Society Museum.

They were brought in by Louis' great-grandson, retired Air Force Col. Craig Duehring, a former Pentagon official and now a Fairfax Station, Va., based consultant, who once lived in New Ulm.

"The letters fill in a part of New Ulm history that we simply didn't have," mused Duehring, who handed the originals over. He was accompanied by his wife, Terri; sister, Julie; and sister-in-law, Mary (all Duehrings).

"I'd like to urge more people to contact their relatives [looking for similar treasures]..., to realize how important such pieces of history are, not only to their own families, but also to others..."

Duehring came by the Schilling letters via a now- deceased cousin.

Traveling to the man's funeral in Spokane, Wash., some years ago, Duehring helped his cousin's widow sort through family papers and photos.

At the time, he made copies of documents he considered historically interesting, but, even though he was offered, he did not take any originals.

He next came into contact with the same family at a wedding and asked for those previously viewed documents; but the papers could not be located.

However, instead, the family gave Duehring a box of other correspondence - and that box contained the letters in question.

Living near Washington, D.C. and having a variety of contacts there, Duehring was able to show the letters to an archivist from the Library of Congress. The archivist then referred him to a company specializing in historic preservation.

The letters were judged to be in excellent condition and in no need of restoration.

Duehring next contacted officials from the German Embassy in Washington D.C., hoping for help with transcription and translation of the original German.

The Germans were helpful, providing an early draft of an English version; however, the foreign translators lacked the contextual knowledge necessary to interpret the more obscure, or local, references - such as references to people or places associated with the Civil War and the Dakota Conflict.

These gaps have been filled by Romy Hall, a Bloomington-based, German-born translator who has lived in the United States for several decades and is a U.S. citizen. Hall has done translation work for the BCHS on previous occasions.

(By this time, Duehring had contacted the BCHS with information about the letters, and museum workers had put him in contact with Hall.)

Hall's work proved to be painstaking: among other things, she talked to an handwriting expert in Bavaria who helped decipher the old-fashioned writing; and had several hours of phone conversations with a city clerk in Iuka, Miss., who cleared up detail related to more obscure Civil War events.

Hall's examination of the letters - done during the two weeks leading up to Christmas - resulted a thorough, albeit it unintentional, re-interpretation of their content.

In many instances, it changed the sense of the original translation.

Just re-deciphering a date can alter understanding of the historic context - and hence meaning.

Limited by time constraints during the holiday season, at this stage, Hall has jotted down summaries of the content, with a more full translation of the parts referring to the Dakota and New Ulm.

A full transcription and written translation of the documents is pending.

Local museum officials were thrilled to receive the unexpected bonanza.

The letters will be used in the new exhibition on the third floor at the BCHS Museum opening in 2012 on the 150th anniversary of the U.S. Dakota Conflict, said the museum's Research Librarian, Darla Gebhard.

They will join a related artifact - August Schilling's Civil War diary - partially translated from the original German and also in the museum's possession.