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Robert A. Stitt

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Many soldiers in the Civil War endured the problems of stress from family members pressuring them to come home and leave the fighting to others. This problem could cause friction between husband and wife. Such was the case of Captain Robert A. Stitt of Company F, 4th Iowa Infantry, and his wife Hannah. His lengthening term of service and a severe arm injury at the Battle of Chickasaw Bayou on December 29, 1862, increased Hannah's worries and loneliness and led her into increasingly strident attempts to get him to resign his commission and come home.

Stitt had been born in Pennsylvania and at the time of the Civil War his mother was still living in Huntingdon, a town in the central region of that state. In 1855, he had received a commission as a 1st lieutenant, Scott Infantry, 4th Pennsylvania Brigade. The following year he was promoted to captain. Apparently, the Stitt family had some acquaintance with John Scott, a prominent lawyer in Huntingdon, who was elected to the U.S. Senate from Pennsylvania after the war.

At some point within the next few years, Stitt moved to Winterset, Iowa, and married Hannah Maria Crain on September 18, 1859. She was also born in Pennsylvania, but married Stitt after both of their families moved west. The first of their three children, Hilda Eliza Stitt, was born on April 9, 1861. Hannah's family settled in Moneka (Linn County), Kansas, directly south of Kansas City along the Missouri border area. It is not known what job or career Stitt was involved in before the war (he did attend West Point immediately prior to his marriage) although it is known that after the war he became a real estate agent and served as recorder and treasurer of Madison County.

With the outbreak of war, Stitt quickly volunteered his services as the 4th Iowa Infantry was being organized by Colonel (later Major General) Grenville M. Dodge of Council Bluffs. Stitt was appointed as 1st lieutenant of Company F on June 20, 1861, and was mustered into service on August 15. In May, 1862, he was promoted to adjutant, and in September was promoted to captain of Company F. Stitt led a group of skirmishers that were instrumental in effecting the capture of Springfield, Missouri in February, 1862. In December, 1862, the regiment fought at the Battle of Pea Ridge and was then transferred to the Vicksburg area and found itself in the thick of the fighting at Chickasaw Bayou. It was there on December 29, 1862, that Stitt was severely wounded in the arm. It was mid-April, 1863, before Stitt rejoined the regiment. Even then the extent of his recovery from his arm injury was perhaps not complete.

Hannah left Winterset with Hilda sometime after Robert began his service with the 4th Iowa Infantry and went to Moneka, Kansas, to live with or near her family. Like many other married couples, Robert and Hannah corresponded regularly during the war. Presumably their correspondence started immediately, although the earliest letters that have survived date from early April, 1863. At that time, Stitt was still recovering from his injury and Hannah was begging him to resign and come home. Hannah's early letters merely reflected a strong desire to get Robert to come home, but as time went on intensified into a mixture of love with frustration and even anger with Robert. On his part, Robert was tortured by the tension created between his sense of devotion both to his family and to his country. In a letter to Hannah dated April 23, he notes that he would have been appointed major of the regiment if

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he hadn't been absent and that he was actually offered command of a black regiment. He then added:

God knows, if a man ever loved his wife and child, I do, but a loyal and true man owes devotion to his country which a loyal man cannot help to obey.

Hannah often talked about how wonderful life would be if Robert would just come home and they could buy a farm back in Iowa and life would be almost idyllic. By early July her frustration was worsening and she wrote:

I feel very bad when I think that you could come home as well as not and will not do it now you know you can come home and you must why dont you write a bout coming home Oh you are hard hearted toward me I wont stay away from home any longer I want to go home and I must

Robert tried to explain that he couldn't resign because another captain in his company had tried to resign but it was not accepted. Also many men who became unfit for duty because of injuries were placed in the invalid corps. But there was yet another reason why Robert could not bring himself, at least at this point, to try to resign:

...these are times that we must all undergo trials and privations while our country is being convulsed from its very center by this most wicked rebellion...Neither you nor I would like, after this war is over, and peace reigns over our once happy land to hear it said that Mrs. Stitt knows nothing about the trial of war for her husband a big stout hearty man was a coward and never helped his country when she was struggling for life with her enemies.

Sometimes Hannah's emotions could run the gamut all in the course of one letter. In a letter late in July, Hannah was practically in despair with her loneliness and accused Robert of wanting to stay in the army to avoid his duties to her and because of the good pay officers received. She again begged him to come home:

...you seem so cool and unconsidering about me...Oh Stitt if you only knew my feelings I am heare as it seems almost in a land of heathenism I am here in a loansome and dreary

little hut and no way to go anyplace...there is nothing to pass the time for me only to cry or think about every thing that I ought not and when I go to you with my trouble you don't give me a word of comfort or consolation.

It was a very long letter, and by the time she finished she had sufficiently spun out her anger. She was able to close by reassuring Robert of her love and understanding but she was also experiencing extreme anguish intermixed with feelings of being deserted by him, especially he was ever to be killed in action.

Oh my Dear Husband if I say any thing that is wrong for me today you must not get angry at me for I love you and I cannot live without yuou and Oh how could I live if you get killed Oh if you dye and leave me the wound could never heal.

Although Hannah may have told Robert that he was "cool and unconsidering," Robert gave little evidence of this. Indeed, in addition to his reasoned pleas with Hannah about his duty to the Union cause, he was also capable of great warmth of feeling. In a letter to Hannah in late June, he wrote passionately:

Oh! What would we do if we were not able to write to those we love, it deprives absence of more than half its intensity. And when we receive letters from home, our imagination takes us on its wings to those we fondly love.

By late August, Stitt was back in Winterset. The letters reveal nothing about why he was allowed to go home, the degree of his recovery, or to what extent Hannah's letters may have expedited the situation. It does seem peculiar that he spent months pleading with Hannah to understand his devotion to duty and then suddenly come home without being placed in the invalid corps. While many explanations are plausible, the existing records are silent. His resignation was officially accepted on December 26 although it appears there was little doubt through the fall that it would come. He was elected that fall as treasurer and recorder of Madison County. It is not likely this would have occurred if there was reason to suppose he would be returning to the 4th Iowa Infantry.

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After serving a single term as Madison County treasurer and recorder, Stitt left office for reasons unknown but continued residing in Winterset. He and Hannah had a second daughter, Mary Ella, in 1864, but she lived only to about the age of five. A third daughter, Clara Estelle, was born in 1866. Both she and the older daughter, Hilda, lived into old age, Hilda until 1929 and Clara until 1938. Unfortunately, Stitt did not live into old age. Hannah continued correspondence with Robert's mother, Eliza, who still lived in Huntingdon, Pennsylvania. A letter from Eliza in the fall of 1869 only stated her concern on hearing that Robert had not been well. He died on December 4, 1869, at the age of only 36. The causes are unknown, but as with many other Civil War veterans, his injury at Chickasaw Bayou could have caused lingering health problems. Hannah was remarried on April 11, 1872, to Andrew Jackson (A.J.) Kendig of Winterset. Kendig and Stitt were both members of Evening Star Lodge in Winterset and almost certainly knew each other. Kendig had lost his wife, Jane, a few months after Stitt died, so A.J. and Hannah experienced loss and grief at almost

the same moment. They married two years later. A.J. and Hannah had one daughter, Jennie Maude Kendig (1873-1944.) A.J. lived until 1908 and Hannah until 1922.

What Robert and Hannah experienced during the Civil War was not a unique problem for married couples in America during that conflict, but each couple had to search and find answers unique to their own situation. For most soldiers, there was no solution until the end of the war when they could finally go home. For many the answer was brought tragically to the wife by news of the death of her husband from disease, accident, or on the field of battle. For others, the answer was a husband crippled for life and unable, or only partially able, to support the family. For yet others, the answer was to come home and avoid these problems. For Robert and Hannah, the answer was probably the last one, but not without sacrifice for the Union cause and great mental and emotional anguish caused by conflict over duty to both family and country.

FOOTNOTES:

- i The main source of this article is from a collection of letters between Stitt and Hannah and also a smattering of other letters between other family members. They can be found in the Iowa State Archives in the Iowa Historical Building, Des Moines. The archival file with his letters actually include letters dated as early as 1858 and into the 1870's. In addition considerable genealogical work was done by Margaret Boys, who drew up genealogical charts of the family and donated these along with a number of photos of Hannah and other family members to the State Historical Society of Iowa in 2000. Margaret is a great-granddaughter of Hannah through her second marriage to Andrew Jackson Kendig.
- ii Oral interview with Margaret Boys (hereinafter referred to as MB), November 30, 2007.
- iii MB
- iv A.A. Stuart, *Iowa Colonels and Their Regiments*. Chicago. Mills and Co., 1865.
See 4th Iowa Infantry. See also Lurton Denham Ingersoll, *Iowa and the Rebellion*. Philadelphia. J.B. Lippincott, 1866. See 4th Iowa Infantry.
- v *Ibid*. The 4th Iowa Infantry suffered many casualties in this battle. Out of 350 men in the regiment who fought at Chickasaw Bayou, there were 112 casualties, including Colonel Williamson, the commanding officer of the regiment.
- vi Hermann A. Mueller (ed.) *History of Madison County Iowa and Its People*, Volume I. Chicago. S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1915, p. 70.
- vii MB
- viii Mueller, pp. 379, 391. Kendig worked in Winterset throughout his adult life variously as a school official, a minister, and as an agent of the United States Express Company.