

THE STEELE LETTERS

Camp Ruger, North Dakota
Monday, Sept. 9, 1889

My Darling Mother:-

We have been up here in camp nearly a week now & have had a most pleasant time. Our camp is in a deep bend of the Cannon Ball River. Indeed we are on a little peninsula almost encircled ~~by~~ by the little river. It is a fine place for a camp - the grass is fine & wood abundant & close & the water of the river is clear & good. We have had a good deal of military work to do, all of which has been very pleasant. Besides this I have had a good time hunting. Dr. Shannon & Phelps & I do the hunting for the camp & we not only keep our own mess supplied with prairie chickens & ducks, but all the other officers' messes in camp. We go out hunting for a few hours every day. I have my young setter, Leo, along & he has developed into a very fine hunter. I wish Tracy were out here with us. It would be such a pleasant vacation for him & would do him more good than anything in the world. Stella is still in Fargo but she has already begun to beg me to let her come & spend a day or two in camp. As this place is not much out of the Mandan-Yates road I have almost concluded to go up & bring her down this way, toward the end of our camp - let her spend one day here and then go on to the post ahead of me. She spent one night in camp with me on my way from Bismarck back to Yates in July & says she enjoyed it. I had so much to do & was in such a hurry the last day or two I spent at the post that I came away without sending you my remittance. I will be back about the 20th of the month & will send it as soon as I get there.

The first day we were in camp here we had a fearful storm & the sand from the river covered everything for two inches in (illegible) but since then the weather has been delightful. I must say a hasty goodby as the wagon is about to leave that this letter must go on, with much love,

Ever your devoted son,

Matt

THE STEELE LETTERS

Fort Yates, N. Dakota,
Friday, Oct. 4, 1889.

My Own Darling Mother:-

How the days have flown by since I got in from camp! And all because I have been so busy I have scarcely had time to breathe. Even now I have just fifteen minutes to sit here before the call sounds for afternoon stables. I am sure I never will let so long a time slip by again without sending you a letter. Since I came in from camp Stella & I have moved - "changed our quarters," - & nearly worked ourselves to death. We have a much nicer house now tho' & are all "fixed up" so prettily in it that I do ~~not~~ wish you could drop in and pay us a visit. Don't you think you ever will visit with us Mother? It does seem like a long way to come & the name Dakota sounds fearfully chilly to the southern ear. But distance doesn't count for much nowadays & the blizzards of Dakota not half so bad as they are painted. Besides all the work of moving I have had to make a map of our road & camp & do a hundred other things during the last 10 days, all of which together have kept me busy the livelong time.

Stella & Jessie came by our camp & spent a night & part of a day with us. I went up to Mandan to meet them, & escorted them down but I sent them on into the post to await my arrival there. Stella at first begged to be allowed to march in with us, but after one night's sleep on the ground she was very willing to come on to the post & spring beds.

I was very much worried for some days by the accounts in the papers of the trouble with the negroes at Shell Mound, but as the whites seem to have soon settled the filthy black savages I haven't allowed myself any more anxiety on the subject. I have been unable to get a good account of the whole affair. If you have any paper with a full account in it, I would be greatly obliged to you to send it to me.

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In all my peregrinations recently I believe I have neglected to answer Tracy's letter, but tell if he will forgive me. I will write very soon & with my accustomed promptness in future. My 15 minutes is up & the call has sounded, so I will have to suspend until later.

I am back from stables and have dressed for parade & now have a few minutes more of leisure. An hour or so after parade comes tattoo & then comes, this evening, a duty worse than either to me - a german. The winter's festivities begin with a german this evening. I have grown so old & so contented to sit back with my "nose in some old book" as Stella says, that I positively detest germans & dances of all sorts. I didn't think a few years ago that I could ever outgrow my fondness for dancing, but I have done so completely. I guess I will have to keep at it though for many years to come, for I have always looked upon the social duties of our garrisons as being as binding almost as the military duties.

A garrison with no social life in it is a very dull, disagreeable place. It is the part of every one of us to do all he can for the general pleasure, as well as comfort of the garrison. I am writing on the dining table & I hear Dora moving dishes around in a way that sounds as tho' she wants the table to prepare for dinner. Dinner comes immediately after parade. Parade is at 5:30 - last about a half hour. The days have grown so short - the sun sets very close to 5 o'clock already. But the weather has been lovely since October set in - It could not be finer. The days are bright & beautiful & just cool enough to be delightful. We have had no fires as yet. It turns a little cool in the evening, but the heat from the lamps is sufficient. I must now say goodby. I enclose a P.C.M.O. (drawn to C. E. Steele) for £ \$40. It is for Sept. & Oct.

With a heartfull of love

Ever your devoted son

Matt

THE STEELE LETTERS

Fort Yates, North Dakota
Tuesday, October 15, 1889

My Darling Mother:-

I have been very busy again and will have to plead lack of time again for any neglect to write to you earlier. The truth is I hardly have breathing space now-a-days & I long to see the snow come & bring our long winter's rest. Every morning I spend the whole of the forenoon ~~xi~~ out with my "signal class," practicing signaling with the flags and heliographs. Then in the afternoon I have drill. An hour or so each night I have to spend preparing my dispatches for the signal class to send the following morning. Of course dress parades and all the other routine duties come daily. In addition to these I have to make a map of a road & our summer camp, which I took a great deal of pains with & consumed a good many long hours on. The Colonel was so well pleased with my effort that he paid me the compliment of requiring me to make a tracing of it for him to forward with his report to Departm't Hdqrs. "as the original was so fine he wanted to have it dramed and kept in his own office." This cost me another day or two of hard work. And now the cap the climax of my labors, I am detailed as Judge Advocate of a General Court Martial.

I have just tried one case which occupied all of yesterday for the trial & all of last night, until half past twelve, to write up the proceedings. To make it worse & add to my afflictions Stell is going to give a card party Thursday evening. So don't you think I am a much abused and hard worked fellow?

Yesterday was a right raw cold day, and I began to think winter was coming to stay; but the sun came out bright & warm again today.

The falls here are beautiful & if we only had some trees with gorgeous foliage your Alabama falls would be no better.

Poor old Weeks, who succeeded Major Carahan as captain of my troop has within the last two weeks been placed on the "retired list"

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on account of bad health. That promotes Phelps, who has been my 1st lieutenant for so long, to be captain of the troop. It also gives me another file, but I have got to make three more files before I will be a first lieutenant. Mother, I wish if you ever write to Katie you would try to induce her to write to me and I wish, if you ever write to me again you would give me Sister's address & Susie Tracy's, if you know them.

I am afraid I will have to give up trying to keep up relations with my kin, for I am so far away that they all seem to think I am out of the land of recollection and the living.

The mail has just brought me another long case to try by court martial & it will give me three or four more days of work.

I must now say a hasty good night with much love -

Ever your loving son

Matt

THE STEELE LETTERS

Fort Yates, North Dakota
Sunday, Nov. 3, 1889

My Darling Mother:-

I wrote to Tracy last Sunday night and since he is with you and I have so little to write it would be impossible for me to write two letters the same night without covering exactly the same ground in each. I had to let one Sunday go by without writing to you. This has been our coldest day this fall & I guess the winter is surely here to stay now. The season seems earlier this year than it was last, and all those who pretend to be weather prophets about here predict a long cold winter. A light snow was blowing about when I went out to reveille this morning but the wind was from the due north & it was rapidly turning colder; and it soon became too cold for the snow to continue.

All our drills & parades have ceased and we will now hibernate until about the first of April next.

I expect to do a great deal of hard reading and study during winter. I did a great deal of it last winter but it seems to me that all I have ever read and studied is just enough to show me how little I know & how much there is to learn. I sometimes wish the habit of writing would stop & the art of printing be lost, and science, history and progress in the world would stop long enough to give me a chance to catch up. The happiest man in the world, after all, must be the one that can't read and doesn't know any thing; for he has no conception of his own ignorance; doesn't suspect that there is ever has been anything for him to learn of, and so he is perfectly satisfied with himself. The next happiest sort of a man must be one like Uncle Willis, who, tho he did - fifty years ago - have the rudiments of an education and tho' having the necessary means for traveling and learning what is going on in the world, is nevertheless contented to sit still &

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forget what he once studied to acquire; wrap himself around with what his father has told him of Thomas Jefferson and his greatness; be satisfied with such glimpses of the world's advancing as he can see in the pages of the "Huntsville Democrat," and embalm himself in prejudice and ignorance like a mummy. Goodness, how I would like to have money. enough to travel - travel - travel! All my ambition now is to be able, by economizing in every way, to save enough to travel on. I want to go to Europe. In fact I am going to Europe if I live long enough for it will be my objective point as long as I live. It may be ten years - it may be fifteen, before I go - but go I will! I have seen most all there is to see in the United States east of the Rocky mountains & of course, I expect to see the Pacific coast sometime; but next comes Europe; then Mexico; then South American; then Asia & Africa, if I live long enough. Then I will be read to "hand in my checks," but not until then. I want to see all there is to see in this world, before I start on an exploring expedition in the next.

Well, Mother, how long has it been since you wrote to me. I really believe it has been six months - hasn't it? Well, whether it has or not, it is high time you should be trying your hand on another letter to me. You all seem to think that because I am a good many miles away from you it isn't worthwhile for you to write to me. But, the distance only makes your letters more appreciated when they reach me - & they invariably reach me if you mail them. I must now tell you good night. Please write soon. Stella joins me in love.

Ever your devoted son

Matt

THE STEELE LETTERS

Fort Yates, N. Dakota
Monday, Dec. 7, 1889

My Darling Mother:-

This pen, tho brand new, doesn't seem at all disposed to write. It is willing enough to go, but it requires a great deal of persuasion to part with its ink. You may therefore conclude when this letter reaches you that if it were proportional to the amount of manual labor I shall have expended on it, it would be just twice the size you find it to be; for it takes an average of just two strokes to make each line. I didn't write you last Sunday. 'Cause why? I was wrapped up in buffalo coats & robes taking a cold ride in an ambulance to Fort Lincoln on that Holy Sabbath day. I had to take a detachment of men up to bring down some horses, received from Montana. We got the horses from the cars at ten o'clock Monday night set out on our return Tuesday morning, camped at the Cannon Ball that night & got into the post Wednesday afternoon. We had the coldest days of the season while I was away but we were so bundled up in buffalo coats & fur caps & gloves that we didn't suffer much. The thermometer fell to 12 below zero. Yesterday was a beautiful mild day & nearly everybody was out riding or driving, but last night it began to snow & kept it up slowly till now the ground is pretty well covered. It isn't cold at all tho, but the days are so short. The sun hardly begins to show himself before he is ready to go down again. Most of our time is spent by lamp light for the lamps have to be kept going till nearly 9 in the morning & lighted again before 4 in the afternoon.

Our winter studies pleasures are in full sway. I played a very interesting game of Kriegsspiel with Gordon Friday and Saturday. It was especially pleasant to me from the fact that I won the fight. I have got more than a week of very hard work before me, as I am detailed to prepare an essay to read to the other officers of the post next Wednesday (the 11) even'g.

2--Dec. 7, 1839

My subject is "Cavalry in Advance of an Army," & it will require a great deal of research on my part to acquit myself creditably. This I hope to do, for I make it a rule to do what ever I have to do the best that I possibly can.

Stell & I have joined a whist club of 12 & we meet every Saturday evening to play. We have met only twice - first at Col. Townsend's & then at Van Schrader's. We meet here next time. We enjoy the whist evenings very much - The fact that I enjoy sitting down a whole evening to a game of whist, so much more than I do a dancing party forces upon me the unwelcome conviction that I really am growing old. Just think of it! Napoleon had whipped Austria and conquered Italy before he was my age, and Custer, McKenzie - Merritt were major generals before they were 28. I wonder if there is anything in the future for me. Poor Custer & McKenzie tho', like Napoleon, came to miserable ends. The first was slaughtered by old Gall & his savages & General McKenzie became insane a few months after he became a full brigadier in the Regular army & died a year or two afterward. Merritt, who was brilliant but dissolute and disgraceful in his younger years, is now respected and esteemed and reformed, but still fortunate.

I must stop now & get to my books for I have got to scan thro' "Hawley's Operations of War," Trench's Cavalry in Modern Wars; Shaw's Minor Tactics" "Von Smidths Instructions for Cavalry;" "Greene's Russian Campaigns in Turkey;" "Dwyer's Franco-Prussian War;" "Brackenburgh's Principles of War;" "Wheeler's Art and Science of War;" & everything else I can find touching my subject within the next week. Good night.

Ever your loving son,

Matt.

THE STEELE LETTERS

Fort Yates, N. Dakota
Sunday, Dec. 15, 1889.

My Darling Mother:-

Last Sunday I sacrificed pleasure to duty & spent the whole day working on my essay & let the pleasures of writing my letters to you & friends go by the board. This day has almost slipped by me too, for it is now after 10 o'clock at night. I counted upon having the whole evening to myself & expected to have a good quiet time to write you a long letter. ~~I~~ But it has been another case of L'homme propose &c. At ~~last~~ half past six I was surprised to hear the trumpet sounding church-call. It meant that old Passon What-you-may-call-'im, that preached to us two weeks ago was here again. He is an utterly illiterate old Methodist circuit rider, who thinks the Lord has directed him to take in this benighted post on his rounds. He seems to be a good old soul tho' & Stell & I will probably go to ~~h/ya/ya~~ hear him every time he comes, for he looks as though he needs every 25 cents or half dollar that can be gathered in when the hat is passed around. After church, the two Misses Townsend with their beaus, came down with Moody & Sankey books under their arms to make Stell play, while all, except my voiceless self sang hymns. Thus went the minutes till 10 o'clock. I enjoyed them but I confess I would have preferred to be in here with you - so to speak. I received a great many compliments from Col. Townsend down on my essay last Wednesday evening.

Well, Mother, I had thought you would write to me before this. I am sorry Katie has acted so mean with me. She might have spent a few minutes to write me a letter. In God's name, how does she spend the 24 hours of each day! I wanted to send some little Xmas present to Katie but since she has not cared enough about us to write a line, I shall not do it. I also wanted to send some little thing to Robert Newman, but can not, simply because I have ~~not~~ been unable to get the address. For nearly a year

2--Dec. 15, 1889

I have been begging you & Tracy to send me Sister's address, but haven't got it yet. Same with regard to Susie Tracy. She sent Stella such a handsome present when we were married that I would like to show her that I haven't forgotten it, so for over two years have tried to get her address but in vain.

Winter is still behind hand with us. It actually rained here today. Would you imagine it could rain in Dakota in mid winter?

Stell is here yawning over the "Century" trying to patiently wait for me. I promised her I would go to bed at 11 but it is already after that time so I guess I will have to tell you good night & go. Stella joins me in love.

Ever your devoted son,

Matt.