

THE STEELE LETTERS

Fort Yates, Dakota
Sunday, May 12, 1889

My Darling Mother:-

For some reason-I don't remember now what it was, but I know it was a good one-I let last Sunday slip away from me without carrying a letter to you & of course, the whole week followed in the same way. I have-and so have we all-been very busy since the month began. I am up every morning before 5 o'clock & from that time till I got to bed-which I try to do as nearly after nine as possible-I am kept busy. Indeed we don't have many idle moments again until the season of the mosquitos arrives to put a stop to much of the outdoor work. I manage nearly every afternoon to find a couple of hours to spend with Stell in a ride or drive, but that is all. We rode out yesterday afternoon in search of Indian dances but didn't find any in progress. Yesterday was "issue day." Every alternate Saturday their beef & supplies are issued to them & they come here by the hundreds.

They begin to come in about Thursday evening & by Saturday morning there are villages of tepees on all sides of us for two or three miles out. By Tuesday noon scarcely a tepee will be left standing & all the Indians will be off for their little farms. They take advantage of these issue days to have their dances, so every alternate Saturday there is a big one some where in the circle of villages. When it is warm enough they dance in the open, but otherwise they dance in some of the huts or tepees. So far neither Stell nor I have seen an outdoor dance. It was so warm yesterday we hoped to see one, but we couldn't somehow find out when nor where they would dance. We saw an indoor dance some weeks ago which was picturesque if nothing else. The bucks & squaws do not participate in the same dance. Each sex have a dance of their own. The bucks have the bodies stripped save a small breech-clout, pair of moccasins, a war bonnet, lots of brass rings & gew gaws on their arms and a great deal of yellow, red, black & green paint on their bodies. They always pass around the pipe & refreshments

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consisting of dog soup. Dog flesh is the greatest delicacy with them. At the dance Stell & I saw a big buck--the host I suppose - passed (sic) around a pan of soup with the white, grinning skull of a dog in it. I only have to suggest this dance now the drive Stell away from the dinner table. I had another night after deserters last week. Spent the night in the rain guarding, or rather watching a point of the road where I was in the hopes one might pass. But they didn't & I had the usual success of the officer sent after deserters - came back without them.

It is impossible to catch them because every citizen seems to think soldiers are driven into desertion by the persecution of the officers & not one will give you any information or assistance. On the other hand, they will all help a deserted in making his escape.

This has been one of the might delightful days I ever saw - just warm enough to be delightful in the shade.

I send you a check for \$40.00 which you must make count for two months. Is Tracy still with you? You didn't mention George in your last. Have you lost track of him again? With love to all who are with you and a heartfull for your own dear self.

Ever your loving son

Matt

THE STEELE LETTERS

Fort Yates, Dakota
Sunday, May 19, 1889

My Darling Mother:*

We have just lighted the lamps & I am going to begin the evening by beginning my letter to you, but I do not dare hope to finish it without some interruption. Somebody is almost sure to come in. This has been all sorts of a day. It started out bright and beautiful, then got gloomy, chilly & threatening with heavy rain storms in sight. It is still cloudy. Indeed the whole week has been full of weather. It rained almost steadily for the first three days & in showers ever since. The rain was a timely Godsend for the Dakota wheat people & we who have no wheat have been grateful for it too. Mud is preferable to dust.

I have suffered a great deal the past two weeks with tooth-ache. My teeth are utterly worthless. I wish I had been born with a set of false teeth for I have got to come down to them pretty soon.

I have fought against it for a long time & had my old good-for-nothing shells patched & plugged till there is nothing left of them & I think the first opportunity I have I will have a lot of them yanked out & some false ones put in.

I see in the paper that father's old professor of mathematics - Professor Barnard - is dead. What a long, honorable, useful life he has lived. Our garrison seems to grow smaller and smaller. Howard & Smith & Mrs. Abbot left us today. Howard goes to take a place on his father's (Genl. Howard) staff; Smith goes on sick leave & Mrs. Abbot on account of the illness of her father. Our garrisons usually get weak in summer but recruit rapidly as winter approaches, but I am afraid ours will not recover itself much next winter for several of the officers that have left or are to leave have no prospect of returning soon or being replaced here. Stell & I exchanged our old buggy with some boot with Howard for his beautiful little wagon which we expect to derive a great

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deal of pleasure from. If I could exchange my mare & saddle horse now for a matched team we would be all right. But that is going to be hard to do & in the meantime I will have to drive a pair of troop horses. We are still busy with drills & target practice & won't get thro' until about the time we are to go out on summer march. Well here I am at the end of all I have to say & have had but one short interruption. I must make a note of it in my diary for it really is remarkable. I must now bid you a good night with love from us both.

Ever your affectionate son,

Matt

THE STEELE LETTERS

Fort Yates, Dakota
Tuesday, May 28, '89

My Darling Mother:-

This is a raw, cold, dark, gloomy day, comfortable only while indoors with a small fire in the stove. We have just finished lunch. Stell has settled down^f to work on some dress while I will write you the letter I did not have a chance to write Sunday evening. As usual some one - Dr. Deeble this time - came in & sat till ten o'clock. We have had lots of rain within the last two weeks & the hills & prairies are all beginning to look green & beautiful & the cottonwoods & willows down in the river bottom are fast taking on their bright green leaves. We have nearly finished our first month of target practice but have another month before we will be done. So far I have shot well & if I continue to do as well with carbine & pistol will probably go as a competitor to the shooting contest this summer. So far there is one man in F troop just one point ahead of me - Sergtt Hannaghan. He has made 239 & I 238. Of course you don't understand this exactly but it is hardly worth an explanation.

While out driving yesterday - Stell & I had Mrs. Brooks & Miss Wood - we met Gall & I called him up & made them shake hands with him. Gall is a wonderful fellow & if that commission we expect here soon succeeds in bamboozling him into signing any paper that isn't to the interest of himself & his people, it will be a surprise to me. Gall is the most intelligent Indian living ' the Sioux know it & do about what he dictates. He weighs about 260 lbs & had a head & face said to resemble Daniel Webster's. You know he is the chief & not Sitting Bull, that led the Sioux when they used up Custer in '76. Sitting Bull is & always has been only a cunning, mean old Medicine man ' his influence lies only with the mean element among the tribe. Poor old fellow I fear hasn't a great deal longer for this world. He is quite old & this spring has suffered a great deal from rheumatism ' has had pneumonia too, I believe. We had a small mess of strawberries last night - imported from the south of course. They were the

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second strawberries I have tasted since the summer of 83.

Stell says if you lived close enough she would supply you with butter. She thinks she is a great butter woman. She has made all the butter we have used during the last two or three weeks & it is delicious. I wish you could taste it, for good butter is one of the pleasures of life the sunny South can not boast of. I have no recollection of ever having seen any real good butter made in the South. While in Texas Stell & I sent to Waukeshaw, Wisconsin for our butter. After paying the express all that distance it was cheaper than the slimy, sour-milky, rancid stuff they make in Texas. But you ought to see Stell make butter. Her churn is a small fruit jar, which she puts her cream in, seals up, then shakes violently for about ten minutes, when the butter "has come." I made her a small oak paddle. She says she doesn't need any other churn than this jar. I enjoy the fresh buttermilk she gives me for lunch even more than I do the butter. She told me yesterday she expected to put in her bill for \$250 at the end of each month for her butter.

You must excuse the shape & style of penmanship in this letter for Stell has been using my pen & has utterly ruined it for my use - I must now close as I have some boning to do this afternoon & also have pistol practice in an hour or so. With much love from us both.

Ever your loving son

M.F.S.

THE STEELE LETTERS

Fort Yates, Dakota
Wednesday, June 20, 1889

My Darling Mother:-

I have made several attempts & brave beginnings of a letter to you since this week began, but owing each time to some interruption or other they have all been signal failures. Not discouraged tho, I am going to try again this afternoon. This started out a damp, rainy, gloomy sort of a day & we have had a small wood fire in the stove all day. It is being allowed to die out now tho, for the sun is out bright & in spite of a strong disagreeable gale it is warm & cheerful.

I didn't write to you Sunday, a week ago, for the reason that I was on the road to Mandan, to meet & bring down Stella's cousin, Jessie Murfin, who reached that place Monday morning. She is now with & will probably remain & go back with Stella later in the summer. Jessie is Stell's favorite cousin and is an amiable, bright lovely girl. She is about a year younger than Stella, but they were always at school together & are more like sisters than cousins. Her home is in Ohio--but she isn't a nigger-equality lover. Our target season is nearly at an end & I will be glad when it gets there for I don't get sleep enough nowadays. It isn't dark till after nine o'clock, so it is almost impossible to go to bed at this hour & get up at 4:45, then keep going till 7 p.m. every day is kind o' wearing on the system. Yet, strange to say, I never kept my flesh as well any summer since I have been in the army. I usually lose from 15 to ~~20~~ 20 lbs. every summer, but so far haven't fallen off any this summer. This I owe to the cool weather tho. Nothing could be more delightful than this May and June have been. Indeed, with the exception of April, which was all dust and wind, I have enjoyed every month I have spent in Dakota. It is so much better than the twelve hot months a year in Texas. I do not feel worthless & enervated here all the time as one does in Texas. Do you remember that yesterday was my birthday? Twenty eight years old!

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And ten years and one day since I reported at West Point. I wonder if you wrote me a letter yesterday! You used to write to me on my birthdays, but - well none of you write to me any more. May be I'll stop writing too some of these days.

Stell had an awful lot of work & bother the week before Jessie came. The quartermaster had her house all freshly painted and kalsomined & during the whole week everything was dirt & confusion. We had to take our meals in the kitchen two or three days & walked about the house on boards placed to protect the paint on the floors. She feels repaid for all the work & trouble tho; for her house is lovely & new inside now. I must tell you good by now with love to all & especially a heart full for your dear self.

Ever your devoted son

Matt.

THE STEELE LETTERS

Fort Yates, Dakota
Tuesday, July 23, '89

My Darling Mother:-

It is rainy this afternoon which prevents battalion drill & gives me a chance to write you the few lines I was prevented from writing by sundry interruptions Sunday. The tone of my letters nowadays is so monotonous that I hardly think they are worth the postage fees, but I flatter myself that you want them nevertheless - to keep you assured that nothing has happened. We have had lots of rain the last few days (weeks) but none too much for North Dakota has been in dreadful need of rain.

I fear now it came too late to save Mr. Folsom's wheat. Poor man, he has put all he ever had into Dakota wheat farms & has to work himself almost to death every year to pay his taxes. Trying to raise wheat in Dakota is simply gambling with God & as God holds all the trumps, he wins every game save about one in seven. First comes a cyclone & blows all the seed out of the ground a week after they are sowed. That happened to Mr. Folsom this year & he had to plant all over. Or frost comes & catches the young wheat & kills it all. Droughts are always on hand. A cyclone usually blows what is left of it in the autumn flat on the ground or early frost kills it "in the milk." This happened to Mr. F's last year. Or rust gets into it or hail destroys it. So I say darn a fool that tries to raise wheat in Dakota. It is a more risky form of speculation than stock gambling on Wall Street. I received a letter from Tracy last night which I was very glad to get & will answer in a few days.

The Indian commission arrives here I believe tomorrow & I suppose for the next week or two there will be lively powwowing around here. But I am afraid they won't prevail on old Gall & his followers to sign their papers. Gall has too much good sense. He is one of the most dignified, intelligent looking old fellows I ever laid eyes upon.

I expect to be ordered out on a summer march soon after the commission

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gets thro here. The powers that be think it best that Yates be not depleted of its troops until these commissioners get away from the reservation. We are beginning to have fine vegetables from our gardens. Of course we have had lettuce & radishes a long while & onions, but within the last week have had new potatoes & snap beans, carrots & parsley & today the gardener brought us a couple of heads of cabbages & a head of cauliflower.

I wish you or Tracy would send me Sister's address & Susie Tracy's (Collins) if you know it. I have not known Sister's address since she returned to Chattanooga & have never written to or heard from Susie since I married.

It is time for me to get ready for dinner so I will cease fixing, with much love from Stella & me for all.

Ever your devoted son,

Matt.

THE STEELE LETTERS

Bellevue Rifle Camp, Neb.
Wednesday, Aug. 7, 1889

Mr. Darling Mother:-

I believe I wrote you that I hoped to come as a competitor to the Cavalry Competition, so you will not be surprised to hear of my being here. I left my post last Friday. Stella & her cousin came along with me as far as Fargo. I also spent a part of Saturday & Sunday with them at Fargo and if I can get a delay without having to take a leave will stop a few days on my way back. If I don't stay a few days with them myself I am afraid I will have to leave Stella for the rest of August then, for her Mother & Father will kick too hard if I don't let her stay a week or so with them. If nothing intervenes to change our programme, my duties here will be over the 17 inst. I wish Birmingham were near my route, for I would give a great deal to see you all. I don't know when I will be able to take another leave - traveling is so expensive & money so hard to save. On trips under orders like this, Uncle Sam foots the bill of course. This camp is not quite so cold and uncomfortable as it was two years ago when I was here. There are several gold and silver medals to be awarded at the end of this competition but I have little hope of winning one - the chances are too strong against me. The best shots from 4 cavalry regiments (56 officers and men) are sent here to compete and as most of them have participated in former competitions I fear my chances are shadowy. I left the Indian commission - Genl. Crook & two old politicians, Ex-Gov, Toster & Major Warner (the latter commander in chief of the G.A.R. - at Yates busy with the Indians when I came away & see from the papers that they have succeeded in obtaining the required number of his X marks at the agency to open the reservation. That is going to give us of the 8th horse a plenty to do for the next year. The dissatisfied Indians may give some trouble, but the infernal thieving boomers will be our main source of bother. We will, I

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fear, be kept out all the time driving them back - just as the 5 Cavalry was down in the Oklahoma cohntry. Among the fellows here with me are Duff Slocum & Byron of my regiment. Duff & Slocum are range officers & Byron a competition. Byram, an Alabamian in the 1 Cav; Lockridge, a Mississippian of the 2 Cav; Rivers (brother of my classmate of same name) of the 1st Cav. & Michie, 2 Cavy, Uncle Willis' cousin. Of course there are many others. Our shooting begins in the morning & will continue each day, Sundays excepted, until the 17th. Tell Trace, if I have any time at all after the shooting begins I will write to him here but if not I will write as soon as possible after the competition is ended. I have no idea that any of you will wrâte to me while I am here but if a thunderbolt of goodness should strike hard enough to induce you to write to me while here my post office is Bellevue Nebraska. Now I must say goodby & clean up my carbine & pistol. With much love to all

Ever your devoted son

Matt

THE STEELE LETTERS

Fort Yates, N. Dakota
Tuesday night, Aug. 25, 1889

My Darling Mother:-

Here I am back at my post again - lonesome & homesick, because my little girl isn't with me. On my way back I found a letter awaiting me at Fargo telling me not to delay as my Troop was ordered out for a 15 days camp & would leave the 27th. So I left Stella at home & hurried on here to find the order had been changed & we would not march before Sept. 2. The competitions at Bellevue wound up last Saturday (the 17). After staying on the Carbine team for 2 days of the contest & falling just one file below it on the 3d day (i.e., I stood 11 on the 3d day), my gun or my luck or something went wrong on the 4th & last day & I tumbled to 25 & didn't get a medal. My luck with the pistol was better. I got a medal in that contest & came out 6th. I left Omaha Saturday evening & reached Minneapolis Sunday morning & found Stella at the depot waiting for me. She left Fargo also, Saturday evening & her train got into Minneapolis a few minutes ahead of mine. About a half hour afterward we took the train for Lake Minnetonka, which is about 45 minutes run from Minneapolis. We spent nearly the whole day "doing" the lake on a steam pleasure boat. It is such a lovely trip. I don't think there can be anything more beautiful than those lakes & their surroundings. Besides all that nature has done for them, everywhere you look nearly, in every shady romantic nook there is a handsome summer cottage. They are called cottages, but many of them are in reality palaces. All sorts of craft are to be seen on the beautiful water - row-boats, steamboats, sail boats, steam yachts. And everybody is there simply for pleasures. Thousands of young people, male & female, in beautiful cool outing costumes. We spent the night at the Lafayette Hotel - the largest hotel I ever saw & crowded. Monday morning we went into Minneapolis & spent the day shopping & calling on some friends we have there. Monday evening we started for Fargo and were there to

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breakfast next morning. I spent Tuesday, Wednesday & Thursday in Fargo. Thursday night we went to a large ball. I had to hurry away from it & had to jump from swallow tail into my travel clothes in order to take the train at 3 o'clock for Mandan. Friday evening I was back here.

The country about here is almost parched, there has been so little rain. But let me tell you something you will hardly believe. For the last week or so the smoke has been so thick you cannot see more than a quarter of a mile & where do you suppose the smoke comes from? From the great forest fires in the west - 1500 miles from here! It is already after ten o'clock so I must go to bed. Stell's old cat sleeps on the foot of the bed to keep me company. The poor old cat about as lonely without her Stella as I am. Good night! With love to all & a heartfull for your dear self.

Ever your devoted son

Matt.