

HISTORIC LETTER OF 1865 SOLDIERS HOME FAIR DONATED

On June 2, 2007, Sue Laco and family officially presented to the Soldiers Home Foundation, Inc., a recently rediscovered family letter from 1864, which describes in beautiful and historic detail the 1865 Soldiers Home Fair as well as the Fourth of July events in Milwaukee that year as soldiers came home from the Civil War.

The Soldiers Aid Society of Milwaukee hosted the fair to raise money for the care of soldiers in Milwaukee, specifically a home for soldiers who could not go home again. In several weeks they raised \$100,000, the seed money for what eventually became the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers (the predecessor of the VA Medical Center in Milwaukee), now known as the National Soldiers Home Historic District.

The family's long-lost relative "Em" wrote the letter apparently to family in Columbus who were running the daily newspaper there. The letter was discovered among family mementos in 2006 and, at the encouragement of family friend and historian, the Laco family traveled to Milwaukee during Reclaiming Our Heritage 2007 to present the letter to the Soldiers Home Foundation and to see the sight so lovingly and patriotically described by their relative so long ago.

The letter has since been lent to the VA Medical Center Library in Milwaukee for display and preservation. The following is the text of the letter, *with misspellings, etc., left as they are*. Note that the writer refers to Waupun by its then nickname "Prison City."

"Prison city"
July 1st 1865.
Eleven o'clock a.m.

"All aboard"- Goodbye to Waupun- the iron horse is off and away we go, uncle & aunt Hooker and cousins, a merry party. The cars are crowded-everybody is going to the fair. I always enjoy a railroad trip: there is ever something amusing and interesting transpiring to occupy one's attention. Two o'clock p.m. - we are in the "white city", and the first person we meet, as we step from the train, is Mr. Burger(?), once "mine" host of the Exchange, looking as sleek and portly as ever. Here, by the sidewalk, with his team and buggy is Mr. Pryor: we are soon seated, and winding around the lake-shore, we reach his residence, three miles from the city, yet in full view of it. Just a road separates the yard from Lake Michigan. Sunset-how beautiful! It seems as if I would never tire of the scene. a little later, the blue waves are dancing in the moonlight, while out from the city goes a steamer, brightly illuminated, bound to Grand Haven. She glides over the smooth waters like a thing of life and I almost wish I were aboard of her.

Sabbath a.m. July 2nd.

Sunrise- a steamer bearing a reg't (regiment) of soldiers is passing toward the city, and on board is band discoursing most beautiful music. Now we are down on the beach, taking a walk before breakfast, and gathering all sorts of curious stones and pebbles.

Ten o'clock-we are on our way to attend church in town. As we enter the city, a band is playing, and a crowd in the streets are welcoming the 1st Wis., heavy artillery home from the war. Brave soldier boys! their faces fairly glisten with joy, and they caper around like colts loosed from the harness, scarcely knowing what to do with themselves. Guess we'll go to the

cathedral, having never attended a real Catholic service. The interior of the edifice is splendid, with its arched ceilings, stained windows, paintings, statuary, and so forth. You,

Of course, have seen more splendid buildings, but I never dreamed of anything so beautiful in this life. And the rich, heavy notes of the grand organ, almost lift me from my seat. Now, we are going home again: the streets are full of people - soldiers and civilian, all traveling this way and that, and I cannot realize that this is the Sabbath.

Monday, a.m. July 3rd.
Ten o'clock.

We are on our way to the "soldiers Home Fair."

Reaching Main St, we observe, stretching across the street, a piece of canvas, on which are the words, "Soldiers of the Union, welcome home", and, directly, we are at the building appropriated to the fair.

Presenting our tickets at the door, we enter the main hall, and are nearly bewildered by the beauty of the scene before us. The main hall rises in the form of an arch, to a height of fifty feet. Around it extends a gallery, which is reached by two flights of stairs, at the farther end of the hall.

Festoons of ever greens are suspended from the arch, and the walls and the base of the gallery are ornamented with evergreens. All around the gallery are the old battle flags of Wis, and interspersed among the evergreens are the names of the battle fields upon which our soldiers have fought. Near the rear of the hall, forming an arch, are the words, "The only national debt which we can never repay, is the debt we owe to our brave union soldiers", and on the wall, behind this are the portraits of Washington and Lincoln - under the former, are the words "Our Father", and under the latter, "Our Savior". On the floor of the hall, just in the center, is the Floral Temple, a beautiful pyramid of flowers and evergreens and on the side fronting the main entrance is the name of Lincoln, draped in mourning. Let us take a stroll around the hall. First, at our right is an ice-cream stand, and neighbor to it is a soda fountain and confectionery stand. Next is the druggists department, where are to be found all sort of perfumery, toilet-soaps, flavoring-extracts, medicines and so forth. Then we reach the German department, containing all kinds of fancy articles, pictures and the like. At the rear of the hall, under the stairway, is another fancy table.

Between the two stairways, "Jacob's Well", of lemonade, attended by two lovely "Rebecca's" dressed in white, minus crinoline. Their white arms and necks are bare, and over their heads are white veils, trimmed with red and blue. One must need to take a glass of lemonade, if for no other reason than to have a chat with these charming creatures. In front of the "Well", is an enclosure, containing sewing-machines, and in front of this, is the musical department, where are ladies and gentlemen performing upon the instruments. Passing along to the left-hand stairway, we come to another fancy table while further on is the jeweler's department, containing everything fine in this line. Here, also, is an aquarium, the first I ever saw containing a gold fish, two tiny mud-turtles, a small frog and two or three other creatures, all swimming around very contentedly, except the turtles: they have clambered up a little pile of rocks that rises just above the surface of the water, as if sunning themselves.

Next, we reach the St. Louis department, where is a two-thousand dollar piano, a splendid instrument, every key of which is pearl. Now, we are back to the entrance, again, so we will go to the rear of the hall, and ascend to the gallery, by the right-hand stairway. First we come to the

articles sent from our state prison, consisting of a miniature set of furniture, photographs of the prison, an assortment of rings and toothpicks, and a small house furnished with all the conveniences of modern times. Now we come to the "Welsh department, containing many fine things. Here is a glass blowing establishment, where is an operator at work, manufacturing articles which are purchased by the crowd. A miniature glass "Monitor" worked by steam, is in operation, and attracts much attention. Next, we arrive at the "fish pond" attended by Maggie Burke, formerly of Waupun. This establishment is on the principle of a grab-bag- ten cents a fish. Now we pass a fresh-fruit stand, where all the fruits of the season are displayed. In the front of the gallery, is an orchestra, which is occupied by the band, discoursing sweet music. Nearby are Fairbanks Scales, upon which, for ten cents, you may ascertain your weight. Behind the scales, suspended from the wall is a large square of Brussels carpeting, very handsome, valued at a hundred dollars. We are now at the corner of the gallery, on the left hand side.

This side is occupied by the different ward school of the city, whose stands are filled with all sorts of fancy articles. Halfway down this side is another soda fountain, and at the rear of the gallery is an ice cream and refreshment table. Passing down the left hand stairway, we meet Eunice Homiston(?) formerly of Waupun, and on our way to the front entrance, we meet Sallie Burke. After resting awhile, we start to explore the wing of the building at our right. A passage way extends through it, and a door opens at the right, into a spacious dining room, where sumptuous meals are served to all who wish them. A luncheon table is spread in the passage way, where one who is not very hungry may take a bite, instead of paying for a full dinner, thereby saving his money. At the end of the passage, is a shooting gallery, ascended by stairs, where, for a certain sum, ladies and gentlemen may practice shooting at a target- that is seeing how often they can miss the mark. Returning to the main hall, we pass the "Holland Kitchen, coffee room, and smoking room. Now we cross over to the opposite side of the hall, and enter the left hand wing. First, we come to a book store, where are many books, pictures and so on. Here is a large case hung against the wall, filled with a most beautiful collection of stuffed birds.

The case itself, is covered with heavy leather-work. Next, are the pictures of Mr. & Mrs. Lincoln encircled by a wreath of worsted flowers. A door at our right, leads into a sort of hardware and agricultural department, containing a variety of articles. The first that claims our attention, is a patent weaving-loom, upon which a person is operating. Neighboring this is a patent spinning wheel, which is also being operated upon for the amusement of the spectators. And here is something to remind us of home—a covered buggy of Allis' manufacture, valued at three hundred dollars.

Reaching the passage again, we purchase tickets for "Gangle's Features", which are exhibited inside a tent, just outside the building, at the end of the passage. The first thing we want to see is "Old Abe", of course. Here he sits upon his perch seemingly conscious of his importance as the hero of the eighth reg't. He is a noble- looking fellow, and I wonder not that the rebels were anxious to capture him. Now we must look at these two "Badgers", emblems of our state. They look exactly like pictures I have seen of these animals, There are also, goats, foxes, owls, and several other small bipeds and quadrupeds, including a monkey. But the queerest animal of all, is Mr. Gangle himself. Habited in a most ludicrous costume, he perambulates among the people creating a perfect roar of laughter by his droll comments upon the curiosities of Gangle's Features.

Leaving the tent, we again, enter the passage way of the wing and make our way into a furniture room, at our right, where are many fine specimens in this line, also some neatly executed specimens of marble sculpture. Next, we enter the geological department. Here are many varieties of stones, also, two large cases of preserved - not in sugar- butterflies, and several

cases of insects of various kinds. Now, we leave the wing, and on our way to the main entrance, we pass the "Delphic Oracle" where, if disposed to consult the fates, you may have fortune told. Before reaching the door, we meet Mrs. Even(?) once a member of both prison city and welcome lodges, and hold quite a chat with her. It is nearly tea time, and having been invited to tea in the city, we leave the fair for the present.

July 4th.

Opening our eyes, in the early twilight of morning, we see cousin Viola nearly dressed, waiting for us to accompany her on a stroll along the lake-shore. It has been raining hard, the sky is overcast with cold, misty clouds, and with a "oh pshaw"! we sink back into bed, thinking the "Fourth" has forgotten itself and isn't coming. But, rousing again, we dress quickly, put on rubbers, and elevating balmorals and crinoline to a proper distance from the ground, we are down on the beach, before any one else is stirring. The lake and the city are enveloped in fog, and we can scarcely see two rods from the shore. The white caps come dashing upon the beach, and sometimes we are obliged to pick up our feet "very sudden", to avoid being overtaken by them. So we return to the house, lengthened visages predominate among the friends, and they prophesy a rather dubious "Fourth of July". But at nine o'clock the clouds disperse, the sun illumines land and water, and soon, with happy hearts, we are off to the city, where we arrive, just as the procession is forming. Mounting a flight of stairs, outside a building on the corner of Wis. & E. Water Sts., we have a fine view of the procession, which is a very long one. Among its features, are seven bands of music. The firemen, with their engines wreathed with flowers and evergreens look beautifully. We are pleased to see a band of Good Templars bearing a flag upon which is inscribed the motto of our Order of "Faith, Hope, & Charity". But the crowning feature is the Car of Liberty drawn by four horses. Upon a circular platform, are seated forty or fifty young girls, forming a pyramid, the Goddess of Liberty at the top. These girls are dressed in white with "red, white, and blue sashes, and wreathes upon their heads, forming a charming tableau. The streets are thronged people on foot and in carriages. Every horse, vehicle, and street car is ornamented by the Stars and Stripes, rendering the scene animated beyond description.

So the exercises are to be held at Camp Scott in the suburbs of the city, we will not go up, for it is not at all probable that we could get sufficiently near the stand to hear the oration. So we go to a friend's to dinner, and visit till about three o'clock. Then, taking a street car, we come down town again. In the streets, we meet Dr. Randall and family.

A reg't came in this morning, and their arms are stacked near the Newhall. Guess we'll go into the fair again. But what a rush! The building is literally filled, and it is almost impossible to move, after getting in. But we go, somehow, around and around every time seeing something new. In the crowd, we encounter Maggie Hobkirk, and at a distance we see Charlie Henning. There are ever so many Waupunsters here, we understand, but one might as well look for a needle in a haystack as endeavor to find any of them in this crowd.

As we stand in the gallery, looking below, the Reg't which we saw in the street, come marching in, and proceed to the dining room where a dinner is given them, after which they march around the hall then break up, and each goes where he likes. All soldiers are admitted to the fair free, as often as they choose to come. And here come the young girls whom we saw in the Car of Liberty, two by two, led by the Goddess. They, likewise have a dinner given them in return for their services, during the day. At six o'clock, the gas is lighted, and if the scene was beautiful by daylight, it is doubly so now. The band playing, battle flags waving, flowers and evergreens mingling their colors with the soft hues of the fancy articles suspended from the wall, the pictures illumined by the gas light, and the crowds of gaily dressed happy looking people,

almost gives one to think himself in fairy land, and for a moment we imagine it all a dream. Eight o'clock comes, and with a last regretful look around upon this scene of loveliness, we bid it adieu, and, taking a street car, are on our way to the grounds where the fireworks are to be exhibited. Arriving there, we find ourselves surrounded by a perfect sea of heads, extending as far as the eye can reach. The fireworks are very fine. Among the exhibitions, are several large pieces, one of which is Jeff Davis in petticoats. Such a shout ascends from the crowd, at the display of this piece. Washington on horseback, the bombardment of Ft. Sumpter, a shield surmounted by the Eagle, and the word Union below and last the words "Wisconsin soldiers welcome home. Grant, Sherman, Sheridan, & Farragut appear and the exhibition closes.

July 5th.

After breakfast, we take a parting stroll upon the beach to bid old Michigan good bye, and soon, we are on our way to the city again.

Before starting home, we must visit our Bro. Ed Damonde, at the hospital. Arriving there, we go to the office and inquire for Edwin Damonde, and a guide conducts us to the ward where he stops. Entering the door, we see him at the farther side of the room, busily engaged making a ring, and so absorbed that he does not see us till we halt just before him and speak his name. With a look of perfect astonishment, he springs up and grasps our hands, and we know by the hearty shake that he is glad to see us. Seating ourselves, we chat for awhile, and then take a tour of the hospital. There are many poor sick and wounded fellows lying upon their cots looking so sad and lonely. How I long to take each one by the hand and express my sympathy for them, but I am unworthy of so great an honor. I feel humbled, in the presence of these heroes, for, while I have done nothing for my country, what have they not done?

Having passed through the different wards, Ed accompanies us in a walk around the city, and, at last, leaves us at the place where we are to meet uncle and aunt. One o'clock, p.m. uncle is not ready to go home yet, but Viola and I are, so we step aboard the train, and are soon homeward bound. Six o'clock finds us in prison city and the loves ones at home all well.

July 10th

Friend Dwight.

Above is my glowing description of the fair. Me thinks you will never wish a similar infliction from me, and I myself am inclined to that belief. By the way, John Decker is to have a paper soon, and I promised him an account of the fair, but I can never copy all this trash, and wish you to send this to him, with an accompanying piece for which John is going to solicit you.

Joshua and Rebecca came out strong on us, last lodge night. They accused me of writing the article reflecting upon Joshua's character for truth and veracity, when it happened that I was not the author, at all. The coat seemed to fit perfectly- Josh said he knew why the article was written and that he had said nothing but what he could prove.

I shall expect to receive a letter from you, soon, describing your "Fourth" at Madison. Your friends, the Allises, lost a child this morning, the only one they had, I believe. It died of dysentery after a short illness.

Yours truly,
Em Ronnseville(?)

P.S. Sue hands me something, saying “there's a letter from your fellow”! I told her I thought there were two sides to that question. However, I'm very glad to hear from you, but sorry that the celebration in Madison was a failure, as well as in Waupun, as I had made up my mind to receive a description almost equal to mine of the fair. Em.