

LETTER TO THE DESCENDANTS, RELATIVES AND FRIENDS  
OF THE BURCH FAMILY RELATING TO THE CIVIL WAR  
DIARY OF NEWELL BURCH

A word of explanation is due the descendants, relatives and friends of the Burch family as to the events leading up to the re-discovery of the Civil War diary written by Newell Burch; its analysis by John Quinn Imholte; and its reproductions in the accompanying mimeographed form.

Very early in my acquaintances with the Burch and Hill families, I had heard rumors concerning the Civil War diary of Newell Burch. The consensus was that the original, or at least, copies of it, had been deposited in the Grand Army Room of the Menomonie, Wisconsin Public Library, in which city Mr. Burch had lived from 1870 until his death in 1908. Here he had raised a family of five children, two of whom were Dr. Frank E. Burch (deceased July 1, 1957) and my first wife, Effie (deceased November 3, 1951). Sometime during the summer of 1956 I had occasion to drive Dr. Burch from my home in St. Paul to Menomonie. At that time I suggested to him that we call at the Menomonie library and see whether we might arrange to have copies of the diary made available for ourselves and our children. The librarian at Menomonie and the head of the Menomonie Library Commission made a diligent but unsuccessful search for the document or extant copies of it. My curiosity aroused, I began a more or less systematic canvas among the Burch relatives, hoping thereby to unearth its whereabouts. My efforts were in vain until early in 1958 when I had occasion to open an old trunk in my attic while searching for other papers. To my extreme

delight, and I might add, great embarrassment, I found not only two elaborated copies of the diary but also the original. The latter consisted of two 3 1/2 by 5 1/2 leather covered notebooks in which were recorded in Newell's own handwriting his day to day experiences from the date of his enlistment in the 154th Volunteer Infantry of New York on August 25, 1862, through his capture by the Confederates at the Battle of Gettysburg on July 1, 1863, to March, 1864 when he was transferred from Belle Isle Prison at Richmond, Virginia to the Andersonville Prison in Georgia. The diary itself was terminated at this point; however, the two copies I found with it continue the narrative up to April 21, 1865, the date of his discharge.

Not long after making my "find", I took the diary and A Burch Book over to Minneapolis to show them to the family of my son, David. His daughter, Janet, who was taking an American History course at the University of Minnesota, became intensely interested and begged to be allowed to show the entire file to someone familiar with Civil War history at that institution. The net result was that I did not see the file again until November, 1958. Mr. Imholte had asked and received permission from me to study the diary and to correlate and verify the events as recorded therein with corresponding historical sources. In accomplishing this, the work he first attempted was tripled, since he reproduced not only an unabridged copy of the diary but also copies of the two related sources written by Mr. Burch. A diary-type daily entry pattern has been utilized throughout the major portion of the work.

Those of us today who read this diary must realize certain facts that are intrinsic to a better understanding of its meaning. First, it was written by a twenty year old volunteer with no prior army experience.

As a result its genuineness is more apparent than in other personal accounts furnished by active participants during the Civil War.

Second, the entries were often recorded under adverse weather conditions; during periods when the author was excessively fatigued; under combat conditions; and of course surreptitiously under the noses of the Confederate prison guards. Such circumstances are obviously not conducive for an optimum literary creativeness.

Furthermore, the fact that he survived through more than twenty one months in the Confederate prison camps at Belle Isle and Andersonville indicates that he had something more than mere physical stamina. He had diplomacy, courage, tact and the ability to make friends. His finesse in dealing with his captors probably saved his own life and those of his fellows as well. His versatility, that is, his ability to adapt himself to varying situations, was perhaps his greatest asset when coping with the vicissitudes of prison life.

Lastly, as far as military advancement is concerned, his descendants may take pride in the fact that his superiors saw enough latent talent in this twenty year old farm boy to time and time again place him in positions that required high degrees of both responsibility and trust. Such qualities we may rightly assume, were as rare and as appreciated in the 1860's as they are today.

It is not superfluous to add that Newell's descendants can also take some pride in his command of the English language. One must remember that he was writing almost a century ago when educational advantages were limited. I wish I could reproduce for you a sample of his exquisite penmanship.

I have commented too briefly on Mr. Imholte's contribution to us in the historical research and in the preparation of the initial

copies of this diary including his foreward, notes, etc. I believe he would tell you that he undertook this work on his own initiative as a research problem in history and that I have no financial responsibility to him in connection with its preparation. Subsequently, he may secure publication of all or parts of the diary in a historical journal. For the moment, then, I extend to him my sincere thanks for a job well done.

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