“Mark Flotow has assembled a brilliant collection of letter material, full of surprising, fascinating, and enlightening details that bring us closer to the men who took part in the war so long ago.” — John Zimm, editor of This Wicked Rebellion: Wisconsin Civil War Soldiers Write Home

Ordinary Voices during Extraordinary Times

A vital lifeline to home during the Civil War, the letters of soldiers to their families and friends remain a treasure for those seeking to connect with and understand the most turbulent period of American history. Rather than focus on the experiences of a few witnesses, this impressively researched book documents 165 Illinois Civil War soldiers’ and sailors’ lives through the lens of their personal letters. Editor Mark Flotow chose a variety of letter writers who hailed from counties throughout the state, served in different branches of the military at different ranks, and represented the gamut of social experiences and war outcomes.

Flotow provides extensive quotations from the letters. By allowing the soldiers to speak for themselves, he captures what mattered most to them. Illinois soldiers wrote about their reasons for enlisting; the nature of training and duties; necessities like eating, sleeping, marching, and making the best of often harsh and chaotic circumstances; Southern culture; slavery; their opinions of commanding officers and the president; disease, medicine, and hospitals; their prisoner-of-war experiences; and the ways they left the army. Through letters from afar, many soldiers sought to manage their homes and farms, while some single men attempted to woo their sweethearts.

Flotow includes brief biographies for each soldier quoted in the book, weaves historical context and analysis with the letters, and organizes them by topic. Thus, intimate details cited in individual letters reveal their significance for those who lived and shaped this tumultuous era. The result is not only insightful history but also compelling reading.

Mark Flotow is the retired director of the Illinois Center for Health Statistics and is a former president of the National Association for Public Health Statistics and Information Systems. He is an adjunct research associate in anthropology at the Illinois State Museum and a volunteer interviewer with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's oral history program. Flotow has published articles about Illinois Civil War soldiers in Illinois Heritage and has given many presentations on the topic.

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Preface

1. A Lifeline of Letters
   The utility, customs, and circumstances of writing letters during the Civil War are explored, and the importance of letters to the soldiers’ morale and well-being is highlighted.

2. Illinois Citizens Become Soldiers
   Soldiers’ writings about their early enthusiasm to put down the rebellion but also about the realities of training and learning to be a soldier.

3. Camp Life and Bonding with the Boys
   Soldiers from Illinois were transformed and became soldiers through shared experiences, adaptations, and habits. Here they write about their duties, such as serving as pickets and going through drills, while learning the ins and outs of camp life.

4. Soldiering
   Learning how to survive and dealing with everyday military life, including eating, sleeping, marching, and making the best of often harsh environments and circumstances, are the subjects of soldiers’ letters here. They also write about food, respect for the flags, and managing their money.

5. Managing Affairs from Afar
   Soldiers realized they had limited influence on events at home, their former livelihoods, and politics.

6. Seeing the Elephant
   Southern-posted soldiers often wrote about their encounters with the ubiquitous Confederate partisans operating as guerrillas.

7. Southern Culture through Northern Eyes
   Writings about cultural encounters with local citizenry include Southerners’ manner of speech, cities, climate, and slaves and slavery as it was practiced in the South.

8. Officers, Generals, and “Old Abe”
   Soldiers express opinions about military leadership. Many from Illinois came to view President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation as a practical war measure. Ultimately by 1864, they generally were in favor of the president’s reelection.

9. Debility and Diseases
   Most soldiers were more in fear of infectious diseases than of the enemy’s bullets. Some new recruits died within weeks of arriving at a military camp. While soldiers rarely thought of hospitals as sites of hope or healing, medicine and hospitals improved during the course of the war and saved lives.

10. Writing the Indescribable as Prisoners of War
    Too many captured Illinois soldiers had almost surreal imprisonment experiences that seemed to defy description.

11. Soldiers No More
    There were four circumstances under which a soldier left the military: desertion; detention or incarceration; discharge; or death. While most Illinois soldiers survived the war, their elation at discharge was tempered by their accumulated war experiences and the death of the president.

Appendix A: Soldiers’ Brief Biographies
Appendix B: Chronology of the Civil War
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