



Memorial Day in 1909 just before the statue of Col. Colvill was unveiled.

to volunteer. He was elected captain of his group and remained their leader until that day at Gettysburg when he was wounded and became partially crippled for life.

William Colvill was born in Forestville, New York, on April 5, 1830. He studied law at Forestville and Buffalo and was admitted to the Bar in 1851. In 1854 he came to Cannon Falls and took a tract of land upon which part of the city now stands. He opened a law office at Red Wing in 1854 and in 1855 established **The Red Wing Sentinel**, a Democratic newspaper. The Civil War broke out and he put aside his law practice to lead the First Minnesota.

He was elected Attorney General of the state in 1865, and was appointed Register of the Lands Office at Duluth by President Cleveland. He served in the Minnesota House as a representative in 1878.¹

Colvill was described as a man of commanding appearance. He was 6 feet 5 inches tall, wore a full beard and a Prince Albert coat. At the end of the Civil War he was discharged with the rank of Brevet General, United States Volunteers. After the war he returned to Red Wing and his law practice. He was a resident of the Soldiers Home in Minneapolis at the time of his death on June 12, 1905. He was married to Elizabeth Morgan of Trenton, New Jersey. She died at Duluth, Minnesota in November, 1894. They are buried beside each other in the Cannon Falls Cemetery.

COLONEL WILLIAM COLVILL AND THE FIRST MINNESOTA VOLUNTEERS

By Albert G. Johnson

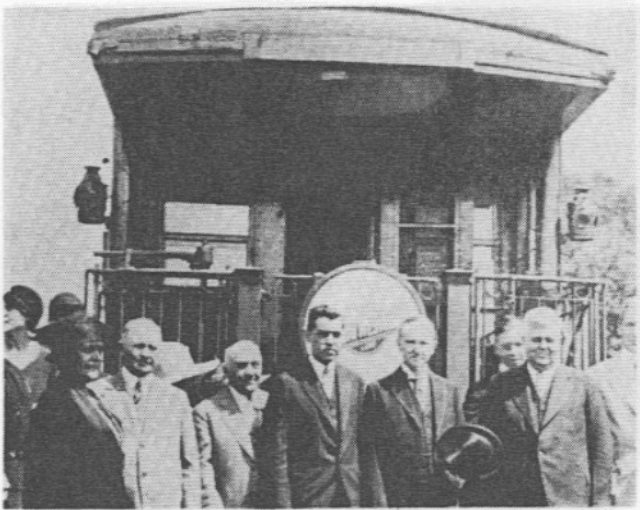
On July 29, 1928, on a little hill in the Cannon Falls Cemetery a small group of old men dressed in blue uniforms stood at reverent attention in tribute to a former comrade. They were aged and crippled and bent and broken by hardship and the ravages of time. This was the remnant of one of the greatest, most gallant groups of men ever to be assembled. They had come to the dedication of a plaque honoring their comrades of the Civil War. These were men of the First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry. They met near the statue of their leader, Col. William Colvill.

The President of the United States, Calvin Coolidge, was there. The Governor was there. There were Congressmen and Senators and many, many hundreds of dignitaries together with a crowd of nearly 20,000 persons. All had come to pay tribute to Colonel Colvill and the immortal First Minnesota Volunteers.

The history of this regiment begins with the first call by President Lincoln for volunteers. Fort Sumter was attacked on April 12, 1861, and on April 29, 1861, the First Minnesota Volunteer Regiment was mustered in at Fort Snelling. William Colvill had been the first man from Goodhue County



Col. Colvill statue, a replica of the statue in the Minnesota State Capitol. The restored cannon is behind the statue.



The three men in dark suits are l to r: Congressman August Andreson, President Calvin Coolidge, and Governor Theodore Christiansen in Cannon Falls for the dedication of the monument of the First Minnesota Regiment. July 29, 1928.

After being mustered at Fort Snelling, the regiment was sent to Virginia. With little by way of formal training they immediately were put to action. The regiment participated in the First Battle of Bull Run, the Peninsula Campaign, the Second Battle of Bull Run, Antietam, Fredricksburg, Chancellorsville and Gettysburg, where the unit under Colvill was nearly annihilated. Perhaps the best account of the battle comes from Lt. William Lochrens who lived through the fateful charge.

June 30, 1863, was a hot, humid day. The companies made out their payrolls and the regiment remained quiet and rested. Little did they realize that so many would never draw that pay. On July 1, the group including the First Minnesota, moved to within three or four miles south of Gettysburg. It was evident that a crucial battle was taking form. July 2 the First Minnesota reached the battlefield. It was not ordered to the line but rather assigned a position on top of a hill just behind the Third Corps commanded by General Sickles. About noon Sickles advanced his men approximately one-half mile through a little valley and up the side of a slight ridge. The 262 men of the First Minnesota moved forward to the point vacated by Sickles, which was also a commanding position. There were no other troops near and the unit stood in full view of the battle in the peach orchard about a quarter mile in front of them. The battle went first one way, then the other for more than an hour. It was apparent that the enemy was massing reinforcements behind their line and the Rebel Commanders Longstreet and Hill were converging their men on the area under attack by Sickles. The enemy pressure increased. Suddenly Sickles' men gave way. They tried to retreat, slowly at first, attempting from time to time to again grasp the initiative, but then at length they fell back in total disorder. They rushed back down the slope they had almost captured, through the little valley and up the slope upon which the First Minnesota waited. The Rebels poured troops after them. They reached the low ground in the peach orchard. In a few minutes they would stream up the hill and be behind the Union lines from which they could flank and roll up the entire Union line. Between them and their goal stood 262 men, the First Minnesota. The picture was a pitiful one. The better part of an Army Corps had been beaten by these on-coming Rebels. They were flushed with victory and powerful in force. The First Minnesota, however, had never deserted a position or retired without orders. They stood fast.

At that moment General Hancock rode up at full speed. He saw the desperate situation. Reserves had been sent for but they could not arrive in time to save the position. He reached the regiment and called out, "What regiment is this?" Colvill replied, "First Minnesota." "Charge those lines," Hancock

commanded. Without hesitation the 262 men started down the hill full into the withering enemy fire. Men dropped on every side. The survivors were now running at full speed. Colonel Colvill was in the center of the group together with the color bearer. They reached the enemy's first line. "Charge," shouted the Colonel. With leveled bayonets they hit the first line. The Rebels dropped before the bayonets, slashed and torn. The first line broke and turned. This caused the second line to be stopped in its tracks. Only then did the men of the First Minnesota fire. The Rebels fell in disorder. Had they regrouped and attacked again they would have overrun the remnants of Colvill's men. There were only 47 left. The quickness, the desperation, and the forcefulness of the charge stunned and disorganized them temporarily. The 47 men still able to fight took what cover they could find and held the entire Rebel force at bay until reinforcements appeared on the hill from which the charge started. The time had been gained. The order carried out to the fullest expectation. But upon the field lay 215 of the 262 men. Almost every officer was dead or wounded, Colonel Colvill among them.

In a letter written some years later Colonel Colvill described the action at the time he was wounded. He first told of the charge being ordered; then continues, "I saw a number of our men lying as they had fallen. Then came a shock like a sledge hammer on my backbone between my shoulders. It turned me partly around and made me 'see stars.' I suppose it was a piece of shell. Just then I perceived Captain Coates, who said, 'Colonel, you are badly hurt.' I said, 'I don't know. Take care of the men.' Just then I was putting my foot on the ground; there was a smart pang through it. It gave way and falling forward to the ground I saw just beside me a gully not more than two feet wide and less in depth.

"As I struck the ground I rolled over into it and listened among other things to the bullets zipping along the ground and thought how fortunate for me was the fact of the gully. I need not describe the rest of it. I saw it grow dark and then it became quiet. I saw the stars shining overhead. Presently I heard voices of our men. The boys were looking up the dead and wounded. I heard some of them talking with the wounded and in one case where their search had found a comrade they were taking his last words for his home and family."

And thus a page of military history was written. The struggle continued and men died. The battle of Gettysburg was won. It is generally thought that this battle was the turning point of the war. If that is true then 262 men may have saved the Federal cause. Only a Tennyson is lacking to make this the most famous charge in all of history. The charge of the British Light Brigade at Balaklava began with 673 men. There were 394 who survived. This is a far greater proportion than Colvill's troops at Gettysburg. What is more it accomplished its mission.²

On February 5, 1864, the First Minnesota was ordered to



Members of the George McKinley Post, G.A.R. at the memorial dedication July, 1928. L to R: Charles Burggren, C. E. Sherd, Fred Van Guilder, and Alexander McKinley.

return to this state. The regiment came by rail to La Crosse. They journeyed by sleigh up the river to Fort Snelling.

A review was held on April 28, 1864 and the men mustered out. Lt. Col. Charles P. Adams addressed the group and in part said: "Officers and men of the First Regiment: The time has arrived when the organization of this regiment must be broken up. Three years ago you rushed from the peace and tranquillity of your firesides. Then you were 1,000 strong, but stronger in your love of country and devotion to its flag. Your deeds have world renown. The blood of more than 700 of your companions has crimsoned those historic fields and more than 250 of them have passed from the smoke and clangor of battle strife to the eternal bivouac beyond the skies. May a merciful Providence direct you and crown you here with earth's highest honors. But however brilliant may be your future, your proudest boast will ever be, 'I belonged to the First Minnesota.'"

On the small hill the statue still stands. An old cannon still guards the hill. The cannonballs have long since disappeared. The Colonel surveys the peaceful homes and gentle rolling hills before him. The sumac grows thick on the east side of the hill and in the fall it turns the hillside crimson red, like another hillside on another day at Gettysburg.

¹Goodhue County History, p. 520.

²Merle Potter, 101 Best Stories of Minnesota, p. 68.