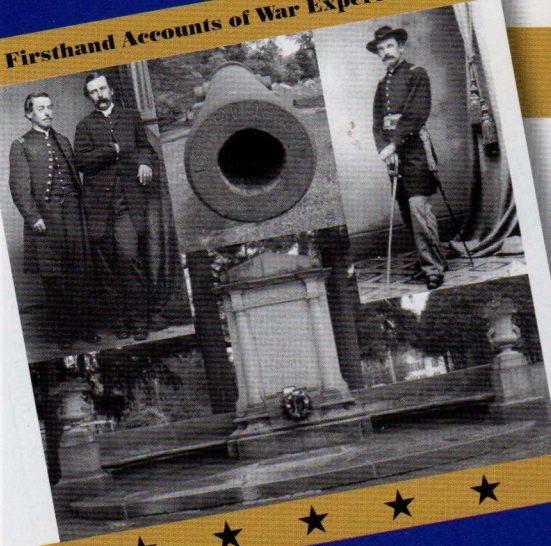


OTSEGO COUNTY IN THE CIVIL WAR

Firsthand Accounts of War Experiences



Compiled by the
Otsego County Historical Association

Dominick J. Reisen, Editor

POIGNANT WORDS

Otsego County in the Civil War: Firsthand Accounts of War Experiences

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(Square Circle Press, softcover, illustrated, 158 pages. \$16.95.
www.squarecirclepress.com)

reviewed by John Rowen

From battlefields to farm fields and villages, this book provides a valuable window into the lives of soldiers and civilians in Otsego County during the Civil War. It is a collection of letters, memoirs, newspaper articles, and diary entries originally published in 2005. It has been revised and enlarged since then, in honor of the 150th anniversary of the Civil War. In addition to the written information, the book has a good selection of historical artwork and modern day photographs of Civil War memorials in the county.

Otsego County in the Civil War has a chronological format and opens with an informative, insightful and well-written overview by Reisen of events leading up to the Civil War and the War itself. I actually wish Reisen had written more overview information throughout the book. Some more background on the battles referenced to in the letters or who the letter writers were would have added depth and greater insight to the reading.

In the Introduction, Reisen explained that the items in this book are lightly edited. In reading the entries, I noticed an odd thing: at the start, reading the entries, particularly the letters, was difficult; the letter writers used less punctuation than modern writers and many words were misspelled. But as the book progressed, the writing became easier to read. This may have been because the experience of serving in the army increased the literacy of letter writers — or it may have been because the reader gets used to the historical style.

The Civil War has inspired many books. What is noteworthy about *Otsego County in the Civil War* is that it uses local people to capture the epic political and military

currents of the time. For example, it is common knowledge that the Civil War was bloody. But a letter from a Captain Swan, which appeared in *The Cherry Valley Gazette*, and which describes an unnamed battle, captures the fury of the war simply and powerfully: "It was a terrible fight for a short one. In less than one hour over half of two brigades were killed and wounded on our side."

A letter from Andrew Chisholm of Burlington to his sister, Nettie, in October 1862 is fascinating as Chisholm's writing shifts between feelings for home and family and describing a review of the troops by President Lincoln.

In addition to finding local expressions of themes and facts described elsewhere, *Otsego County in the Civil War* has experiences that I have not seen in other Civil War books. In an April 8, 1862 letter from Cyrus Hardaway of Pittsfield to his mother, Hardaway, who appears to have been a sharpshooter, was in the Peninsula campaign of 1862 in Virginia and he wrote that a fellow soldier found a letter from a Washington, D.C., resident to the Confederates, offering detailed information on the Union troops mobilizing for the campaign. I knew both sides in the Civil War had a lively business of espionage but did not realize how significant it could be to a campaign.

In an October 18, 1864, letter, Robert B. Davidson writes about arguments between the soldiers over whether McClellan or Lincoln should be president. Davidson calls the McClellan supporters "Copperheads," a derogatory term for Northerners who opposed the War. Even though draftees in many wars do not like the reason for the war, something about this entry was particularly poignant. I wondered how these soldiers felt about risking life and limb in battles with opponents whose cause they had some sympathy for.

If you are interested in the Civil War, Otsego County history, or a combination of the subjects, you will acquire a different perspective from Reisen's fresh view of these subjects. 🐾