

# A Punishment on the Nation: An Iowa Soldier Endures the Civil War

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## Review

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**Miller, Brian Craig** *A Punishment on the Nation: An Iowa Soldier Endures the Civil War*. Kent State University Press, \$45.00 ISBN 978-1-60635-144-4

### A Look at How One Man Survived the Horrors of War

Silas W. Haven was part of Company G of the 27th Iowa Volunteers from August 21, 1862 to August 8, 1865. Over 150 of Private Haven's unpublished letters, most of which were sent to his wife, Jane, have been edited by Brian Craig Miller, an assistant professor at Emporia State University and a review editor at *Civil War History*, as part of the collection under review. Rounding out this fine offering are a dozen letters written by Haven to his children or composed to him by his mother, Elizabeth.

In 1862, Haven was a 36-year old father of three who worked a family farm in the newly settled village of Rockford, Iowa. His reasons for volunteering are not clear, though Haven firmly opposed slavery. In the one letter made available from before his service, Haven wrote that "the North will have to suffer as well as the South" for the sin of slavery; there would be no "remission without the shedding of blood and the sooner this war is conducted on the principle of freedom to all, the sooner it will cease" (10).

Though originally from Vermont, Haven was thoroughly western in his outlook by 1862. In the letter to his parents quoted above (10), Haven also asserted that "the war so far has been carried on by the East and has been a money-making concern, and if there is not something done soon, I believe the West will take it out of their hands and close the thing up at once." That kind of bravado is apparent on more than one occasion in these letters, for Haven brimmed with confidence and frequently predicted a quick end to the war. While the West, as has been shown over the past generation, was critical to the Union's victory, the war unfortunately did not end on his schedule. Haven himself, admittedly, was so frequently out of the loop that he wrote little of large matters;

Jane undoubtedly had seen more in the papers already.

Haven's religiosity is evident in requests for news from back home about church matters. A founding member of Rockford's First Baptist Church, Haven's aversion to swearing, card playing, and drinking is occasionally evident in his commentary on camp life. "The boys" around him wore on his nerves at times, particularly while Haven was writing home. Haven wrote home often. When he was healthy at the start of the war, he wrote every other day. Readers unfamiliar with how wartime letters reached home and what materials were contained therein—whether part of Haven's paycheck for his family's support; keepsakes collected for the children; excess clothing he wished to avoid carrying while traveling from one post to another; or medications (Ayers pills), foodstuffs, and miniatures from home—will be surprised at the enthusiasm, determination, and ability with which connections were maintained during the conflict.

Camp life is what Haven wrote about most. Dietary variety and shebang construction figure prominently in his correspondence, as do his frequent ailments. Haven entered the army favoring his arm and side. He later experienced eye, back, and other problems, suffered a hernia, and contracted smallpox. Due to his health, Haven seems to have drawn guard duty often, during which he usually found time to write. He did march when possible, sometimes placing his knapsack in an ambulance or with the baggage train. Haven was particularly proud, and rightfully so, of his participation in a month-long march to Vicksburg in 1864, dutifully detailing the miles covered every day. On a few occasions, nonetheless, he fretted about being transferred to the invalid corps and becoming a nurse.

Haven's regiment was stationed primarily in Tennessee and Arkansas during the war, guarding rail lines and battling the occasional guerrilla. Haven's company was detailed initially to the Minnesota frontier in the midst of the Dakota uprising in order to deliver a treaty payment to the Ojibwa. Haven did not think well of Minnesota, and the Indians he encountered were "half starved and half-naked creatures" (26). He generally thought ill of the South as well, expressing disdain for Southern ladies, who "most all use snuff and tobacco" (78). He thought highly of African Americans by contrast, not only for the useful intelligence they provided about guerrillas, but also because "they make good soldiers and learn the drill pretty quick" (74). Haven's regiment saw action during the Red River and Mobile campaigns though he himself, as late as April 14, 1864, had never fired at anyone.

Perhaps the most intriguing letter in the entire collection is an accounting of Haven's expenses over the course of two months while stationed in Moscow, Tennessee. For readers interested in such details and those who wish to learn more about the lives of soldiers during the war, the trove Miller ably presents will be a welcome addition to Civil War bookshelves.

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