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## Article Title: Now Here I Am in the Army: An 1898 Letter of a Nebraska Volunteer in the Spanish-American War

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Article Summary: Walter J Hunting served with the 1<sup>st</sup> Nebraska Volunteer Regiment in the Philippines. His letter to a friend at home in Bertrand describes a week that the volunteers spent in an improvised camp in San Francisco before they sailed.

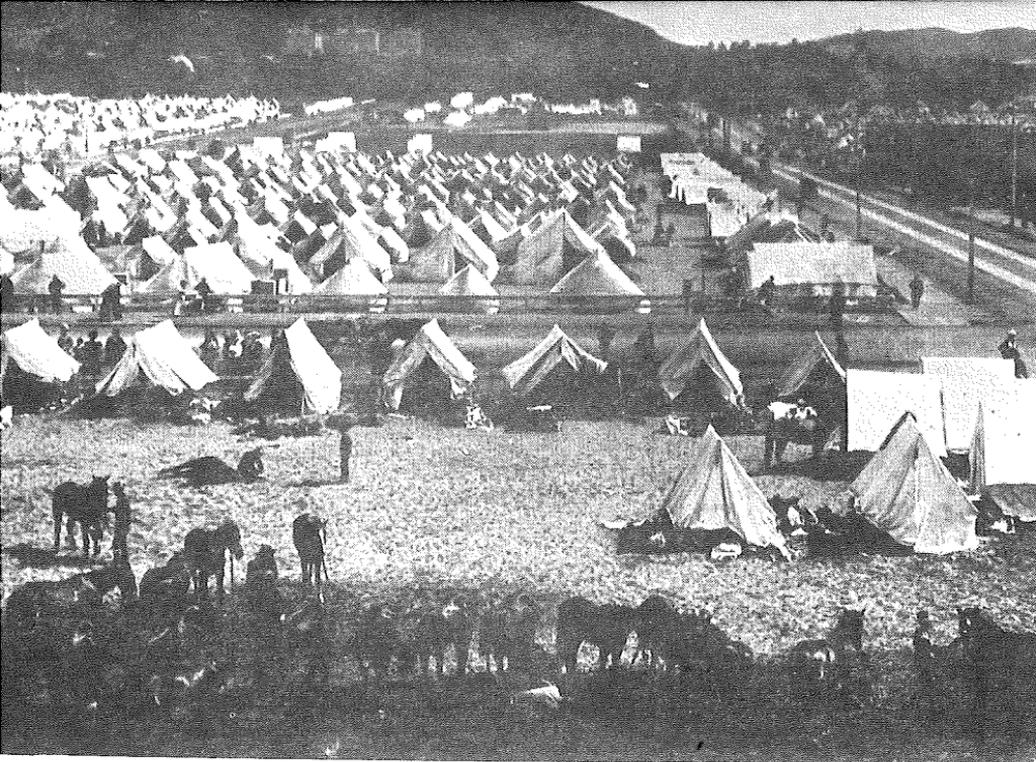
### Cataloging Information:

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Photographs / Images: 1<sup>st</sup> Nebraska Regiment bivouac (Camp Merritt), located at 1<sup>st</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Avenues, San Francisco; Company F marching to the waterfront to embark on the steamship *Senator* on June 14, 1898; Col John P Bratt of Bennett, first commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Nebraska; Walter J Hunting



*The 1st Nebraska Regiment bivouac (above), known as Camp Merritt, was located at 1st and 6th Avenues in San Francisco. Company F (below) marched to the waterfront to embark on the steamship Senator on June 14, 1898.*

**NOW HERE I AM IN THE ARMY:  
An 1898 Letter of a Nebraska Volunteer  
in the Spanish-American War**

Edited by WILLIAM F. STROBRIDGE

The 1st Nebraska Volunteer Regiment, in which Corp. Walter J. Hunting served, arrived near California's Golden Gate on May 19, 1898, to find its quarters at an abandoned San Francisco race track opposite the Odd Fellows Lodge cemetery.<sup>1</sup> The soldiers had marched from the Oakland Ferry landing, eager and patriotic, to an army encampment established only hours before their arrival. The site was just south of the Presidio, a permanent military post, and two miles from the ocean. Nebraska's volunteers were not impressed:

The men complained bitterly of the cold, penetrating wind. Many of them had never smelt the salt water breeze in their life and they did not like it. They did not like the sandy soil of the camp and officers complained of the absence of a drill ground.<sup>2</sup>

San Franciscans flocked to the race track camp to see the volunteers. The city dwellers were not too awed with their fellow Americans from the plains but condescendingly offered their mild approval: "However, the Nebraska men are powerful, well put up fellows and are good raw material to make soldiers of and the drill with the regulars that will come by will put them into more military shape."<sup>3</sup> The interest of an idealistic American public was on Cuba in the spring of 1898, when there

was suddenly news from the Spanish-held Philippine Islands: "Manila Captured."<sup>4</sup> Adm. George Dewey had presented the United States government with a spectacular victory. He had destroyed the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay, but contrary to reports, he had not captured the city of Manila. Sometime in early May, President McKinley decided the country should send troops to Manila.<sup>5</sup>

Maj. Gen. Wesley Merritt, a Civil War cavalryman of some note, was designated to command the expedition to the Philippines. Officials urged Nebraska and other western states to hurry volunteer units to San Francisco preparatory to sending them to the Islands.<sup>6</sup> But the Regular Army's fifteen-hundred-acre Presidio of San Francisco lacked adequate camp grounds and sufficient water supply for the flood of volunteer regiments. Many military supplies had already been sent away from San Francisco to St. Louis and New Orleans for the organizations going to Cuba. An offer to use the old Bay District Race Track was accepted in the confusion and hectic activity of preparing the unplanned overseas expedition to the Philippines. The 1st Nebraska Volunteers, mustered in at 1,034 men strong, found the place to be one of drifting sand, bad drainage, and exposure to the fog and wind of the Pacific Ocean. Somebody decided to call the spot "Camp Merritt."<sup>7</sup>

The week after their arrival an inspector reported that the Nebraskans were in fair condition but still short of equipment. He told the War Department that they could be in condition to sail for the Philippines the following week. However, there were no transport vessels for the soldiers.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, the Nebraska regiment devoted five or six hours a day to military drill, using San Francisco's First Avenue for this purpose in the absence of a parade ground within Camp Merritt. A *Daily Report* newsman described the camp as "a city of tents . . . risen from the sands" where "everything wears a military air." Local generosity got to be excessive as other volunteer regiments set up at the race track site, and Camp Merritt's officers asked San Franciscans to stop the overwhelming donations of pies and cakes to the soldiers: "Many of them are gluttons and as a consequence are troubled with indigestion."<sup>9</sup>

A more serious problem in such a confined space as Camp Merritt was disease. Company M from Lincoln had three men

come down with measles. The trio was isolated, with a guard to keep away visitors, and tents were fumigated. On May 26 the regiment was the first of the volunteer units to receive pay. Each man got at least eight dollars, but the soldiers were confined to Camp Merritt instead of being allowed to visit the city. Their commander Col. John P. Bratt said that the Nebraskans were not of the drinking kind and downtown San Francisco would not do them any good.<sup>10</sup>

This was the setting for the 1st Nebraska Volunteers when Corporal Hunting wrote a letter home to a friend A. K. Wilson in Bertrand:



*Col. John P. Bratt  
of Bennett was the first  
commander of the 1st Nebraska.  
He resigned because of ill health  
after reaching the Phillipines.*

Camp Merritt  
San Francisco Cal  
June 9th '98

My dear old friend,

Your short but very welcome letter came a few days ago.<sup>11</sup> I have often wondered the past year whether you were too busy to write, I knew you must be busy. I certainly had a busy year of it up to the 1st of May and now here I am in the army and to judge by appearance I'm busy now. Well, well here comes the call to battalion drill so must clear out.

Drill over and mess call responded to. We had cabbage soup and potatoes for dinner with bread and coffee. I left out the coffee. I believe there was a little meat somewhere in the soup. But I am as full as a soldier boy need be (and still am all in good time.)

My time has been broken into so in writing that you will get a short chop, hashy letter.

I have been contented as can be in the army, not from bodily comforts however: but I feel that I am in my place and you know that makes me feel. . . . [*sic*]. I have been a little impatient to move on to Manila although I recognize the necessity of being fully prepared and well drilled.

The report had gone about for several days that we were not going to the Philippines but would remain here for a few weeks and then move on to Hawaii.<sup>12</sup> But this morning the news comes that we go to Manila on the next squadron, about next Wed. I have not been wishing for the war to furnish me a chance to get shot at,<sup>13</sup> and yet if there is to be any fighting I want to do my share of it, so it is good news to hear that we are going soon. We have now come to army realities. Well company drill now.—

*Fri. morning*

After co. drill I went downtown to see — well here again I was called away from letter writing to attend to some duties.

I am on for "officer in charge of quarters" today and have the company street to look after. The 1st Sargent [*sic*] called me out to set a detail to work to get our water and slop trench bailed out. And now I am back, the work done, and things looked after. I had three men to take over to the hospital to get some medicine. The damp weather for the past few days has been bad.<sup>14</sup>



*Walter J. Hunting, as Nevada school superintendent in the 1920's, used this picture in his election campaigns. (Courtesy Nevada Historical Society)*

As I was writing when called away, I went down town yesterday P.M. I could not get a pass until seven o'clock and that would be too late to do the business I had to attend to; so I got excused from battalion drill by the 1st Sgt and skipped over the guard lines. I wanted to see about getting some Testaments and Bibles for the boys. The State Y.M.C.A. Com. of Nebr. gave me the power of getting whatever I wanted for the boys in our regiment in the way of Bibles. The manager was sick and so I will have to go again. Then we went down to the Y.M.C.A. Gym. rooms and had a fine bath! Something like civilization again.<sup>15</sup>

In the evening three of us got some hot wheat cakes and milk: ate peanuts, pie etc. and had a very pleasant time. I hunted about for a tailor who would put on my corporals stripes for me, but prices were either double or else the men were too busy, so I did not get them put on. We had a big scramble to get back before our passes ran out. We got in O.K.

The other day we went out to Golden Gate and saw the defenses. Old Fort Scott on Fort Point is of course out of date, though its thick brick and mason walls look massive still. We

saw several vessels sail through the Gate. This entrance seems about  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile in width but it is  $1\frac{1}{2}$  mi. From old Fort Scott, after eating some strawberries picked on the very top of the fort, we went back up the cliff to see the big guns; the disappearing and dynamite guns. They were a wonderful and interesting sight and I involuntarily wondered how a vessel could stand against them.<sup>16</sup>

I must go out now and see how quarters are, whether anything or any body needs tending to.

As we sail so soon you probably will not have time to answer it before I go. But send your mail to San Francisco and it will follow me.

[WALTER J. HUNTING, Corporal]

Nebraska guards were posted on the ocean-going *Senator* of the Pacific Coast Steamship Company the day the corporal in Company F wrote his letter. The vessel had been intended by its owners for Alaska trips, but it was seized by the government to take the 1st Nebraska to the Philippines. On Tuesday, June 14, two volunteer regiments and a detachment of Regular Army soldiers marched out of Camp Merritt for the San Francisco waterfront. There were cheers but none around the glum Nebraskans, who thought they were being left behind. However, shortly after noon the *Senator* was ready to take on troops, and the 1st Nebraska broke camp and headed for the dock.<sup>17</sup>

Next day the Nebraskans, Pennsylvanians, Coloradans, and Regulars put to sea. General Merritt had asked permission to hire cooks for the voyage, but his request was turned down flatly by the War Department in Washington, which replied bluntly: "For a hundred years the soldiers of the Army have cooked for themselves, and it is not understood why at this late date change should be made. This, however, is immaterial, as there is no fund available."<sup>18</sup>

The four ships carrying troops to the Philippines were reported in Honolulu on June 23, where "good order and general good feeling prevailed" while the men were in town. Admiral Dewey reported their arrival in the Philippines on July 17.<sup>19</sup> There, the 1st Nebraska Volunteers took part in a short war and a long insurrection.

## NOTES

1. This letter is in the archives of the Sutro Library, a branch of the California State Library. It was written by Corp. Walter J. Hunting, 1st Nebraska Volunteer Regiment. Corporal Hunting was born in Jasper County, Iowa, in 1875, but by 1898 had an Arapahoe, Neb., address, where his father, A. L. Hunting also lived. At the time of Corporal Hunting's muster with Company F in Lincoln, he was listed as a student at Nebraska University. He was taken into the military by Lieut. John M. Stotsenburg, who later was to command the regiment in the Philippines and who was killed in action there. After the Spanish-American War Corporal Hunting was graduated from the University in 1901. He married Harriet Alden Dinsmore in Eugene, Oregon, on July 7, 1903. They lived in Ohioa and North Platte, Nebraska, before moving to Carson City, Nevada. Three children (Alden, Walter A., and Gordon) were born to the Huntings. By 1918 he had accumulated nineteen years as a school teacher-administrator, four years of which were as president of the Nevada State Educational Association. He then ran successfully as a non-partisan candidate for Nevada state superintendent of public instruction and was returned to that office each election until 1926. He applied to the federal government for a Spanish-American War pension in 1926, listing a "gunshot wound and heat-exhaustion resulting in general loss of strength and in attacks of rheumatism" as his reasons for application. Between 1926 and his death on December 4, 1947, in the U.S. Naval Hospital in Oakland, Calif. his activities and residences are uncertain. His last home is thought to have been in the Bay area near San Francisco. *Muster-In Rolls, 1st Nebraska Regiment, Nebraska Regiment, Nebraska Volunteers, Spanish-American War, 1898*, in Nebraska State Historical Society Archives, Lincoln; Nevada Historical Society to Nebraska State Historical Society, June 30, 1972; Pension and Military Records, National Personnel Records Center, St. Louis, Missouri.

2. *San Francisco Daily Report*, May 20, 1898, 3.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, May 2, 1898, 1.

5. H. Wayne Morgan, *William McKinley and His America* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1963), 386-387.

6. U.S. War Department, *Correspondence Relating to the War With Spain* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1902), 637; *San Francisco Daily Report*, May 12, 1898, 6.

7. U.S. War Department, *Annual Reports of the War Department for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1898*, Vol. 1, Part II, Report of Major General H. C. Merriam (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1898), 176-177.

8. War Department, *Correspondence*, 659-660, 671.

9. *San Francisco Daily Report*, May 21, 1898, 3; May 23, 1898, 1; May 25, 1898, 3; May 27, 1898, 3.

10. *Ibid.*, May 26, 1898, 2.

11. Camp Merritt's troop population had swollen to 11,159 men and a branch post office was opened at the camp. *San Francisco Daily Report*, June 2, 1898, 3; June 4, 1898, 2.

12. There was concurrently a move by the United States to annex Hawaii. Despite strong opposition by the Beet Sugar Association of Nebraska, annexation was

accomplished on August 12, 1898, and a New York volunteer regiment was sent to garrison America's new territory. War Department *Correspondence*, 725, 748; Merze Tate, *Hawaii: Reciprocity or Annexation* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1968), 250-254.

13. The writer of the letter was reported as having been severely wounded on March 6, 1899, during action in the Philippines. War Department *Correspondence*, 325.

14. San Francisco had experienced unusually cool weather for June and also received unseasonal rain showers on June 1, 8, and 9. The high and low temperatures recorded in San Francisco for the period were:

June 1	60	—	50	June 6	59	—	50
June 2	63	—	51	June 7	56	—	50
June 3	77	—	56	June 8	55	—	51
June 4	89	—	58	June 9	56	—	52
June 5	80	—	56				

San Francisco Weather Bureau,  
Past Weather Records.

15. The local YMCA was located in downtown San Francisco at Mason and Ellis Streets and was active among the volunteer soldiers in the city during 1898. Clifford M. Drury, *San Francisco YMCA 100 Years by the Golden Gate 1853-1953* (Glendale, California: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1963), 180.

16. Massive Fort Point was started in 1853 and modeled after Fort Sumter. It was redesignated Fort Winfield Scott in 1882. The thirty-six foot thick walls still remain just beneath the south end of the Golden Gate Bridge. Above the original fort, reinforced concrete positions were constructed in 1893 featuring seacoast guns with "disappearing carriages" which carried the gun to the rear and downward upon firing. On April 14, 1971, Fort Point was turned over to the National Park Service by the Department of the Army for development as a national historic park. Herbert M. Hart, *Old Forts of the Far West* (Seattle: Superior Publishing Company, 1965), 92-97; Emanuel Raymond Lewis, *Seacoast Fortifications of the United States*. (Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press, 1970), 76-81.

17. *San Francisco Daily Report*, June 9, 1898, 3; June 14, 1898, 1.

18. War Department *Correspondence*, 695, 701; *San Francisco Daily Report*, June 15, 1898, 1.

19. War Department *Correspondence*, 730, 738.