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Article Summary: Lohnes is the only soldier from a Nebraska regiment who won the Medal of Honor as a result of military action that occurred within the state. In 1865 he fought a skirmish with Sioux and Cheyenne Indians on the Overland Trail west of Fort Kearny. (An appendix lists all Nebraska Medal of Honor winners.)

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# A Medal of Honor for a Nebraska Soldier: The Case of Private Frances W. Lohnes

*By James E. Potter*

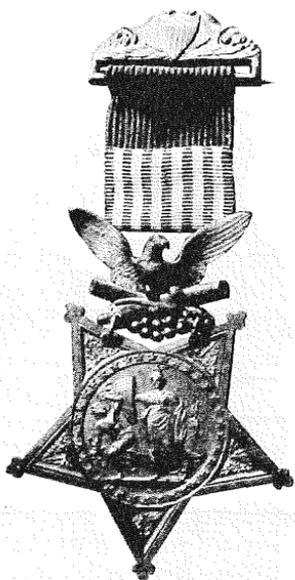
Enshrined in the Hall of Fame at the Nebraska State Capitol are the names of 57 Nebraskans who have received the nation's highest military award: the Congressional Medal of Honor. The list includes native Nebraskans who have won the Medal of Honor; others whose medals were awarded as a result of military service in Nebraska; and medal winners who were Nebraska residents for at least two years.<sup>1</sup>

The Medal of Honor was authorized by Congress on July 12, 1862,<sup>2</sup> and many of those whose achievements are commemorated in the Hall of Fame were Civil War veterans from other states who settled in Nebraska after the war. A few of the early medal winners belonged to various military units sent west to guard the Nebraska frontier against Indians during the 1860s and 1870s.<sup>3</sup> But only one soldier from a Nebraska Regiment has won the Congressional Medal of Honor as a result of military action which occurred within the borders of the state. That distinction belongs to Francis W. Lohnes, Co. H, 1st Nebraska Veteran Cavalry, who won the medal in a fight with Indians near Dan Smith's Rancho on the Overland Trail, May 12, 1865.

Lohnes' Medal of Honor is properly recorded in the government's official roster of medal recipients, but the citation fails to provide any details about the events resulting in its award or about the interesting and tragic life of Lohnes himself.<sup>4</sup> Despite the fact that Lohnes was the only member of the 1st Nebraska Regiment to win a Medal of Honor, his exploits seem to have escaped the notice of Nebraska historians. The single reference to his achievement that is easily found is a line in the

roster of Nebraska Civil War soldiers published in Andreas' 1882 history of the state.<sup>5</sup> Even this scant recognition is flawed by the misspelling of his name, an indignity that seemed to haunt Lohnes throughout his life. Contemporary references to his medal-winning effort refer to "Francis Lohnas," "Francis D. Louas," or "Frederick W. Lolmas." His marriage license gives his name as "Lonis." Although Lohnes was a long-time resident of Richardson County, even some of the local obituary writers could not get his name right when they reported the tragic accident which caused the death of "Frank Loomis" in 1889.<sup>6</sup>

Francis W. Lohnes was born in Oneida County, New York, in 1840. By 1860 he had moved to Richardson County, Nebraska Territory, where he was living in the household of his brother John, who was a farmer in Arago Precinct. Francis Lohnes gave his occupation as "farmer laborer."<sup>7</sup> When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Lohnes joined other young men from throughout Nebraska Territory who heeded President Lincoln's call for volunteers. On July 3, 1861, he was mustered-in as a private in Co. H, 1st Nebraska Volunteer In-



*Francis Lohnes was awarded the Medal of Honor in 1865.*

fantry.<sup>8</sup> The regiment, under the command of Colonel John M. Thayer, soon embarked aboard the steamer *West Wind* to join Union forces in Missouri.

While nothing specific is known about Lohnes' activities during the next three years, he probably participated in the 1st Nebraska Regiment's campaigns against guerillas in Missouri and Arkansas and fought with it in the major battles at Fort Donelson and Shiloh in Tennessee. In order to better perform scouting and patrol duties, the regiment was mounted as a cavalry unit in the fall of 1863. In the summer of 1864, men of the 1st Nebraska who had reenlisted were given furloughs back to Nebraska Territory and Lohnes was among those who stayed on to form the nucleus of the 1st Nebraska Veteran Volunteers.<sup>9</sup>

When the Sioux and Cheyenne launched a series of raids along the Overland Trail from the Little Blue to Julesburg in August, 1864, the 1st Nebraska Veteran Volunteers were dispatched to the plains to guard road ranches, mail coaches, and emigrant trains. Soldiers from the regiment were dispersed at various small posts along the trail where they engaged in scouting and skirmishing with roving Indian bands.<sup>10</sup> It was in one such skirmish near Dan Smith's Ranche 70 miles west of Fort Kearny that Francis Lohnes' bravery was to earn him the Medal of Honor.

Following the outbreak of hostilities, Co. H of the 1st Nebraska marched to Fort Kearny and then to Plum Creek Station, 35 miles farther west. On November 19 soldiers from the company fought a skirmish with Indians 2 miles from Plum Creek. About 100 Indians attacked a wagon train and were engaged by 30 cavalymen, including a detachment from Co. H. After an hour's fight the Indians were driven off and the soldiers followed their trail until night fell. The brave conduct of Private Lohnes and Sergeant Frederick M. Elwood in this engagement was deemed worthy of mention in the company history.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the winter of 1864-1865, Co. H remained on duty at Plum Creek doing routine scouting. On February 15, 1865 the company was ordered to Penniston and Miller's Ranche located on the south side of the Platte about 37 miles east of Fort Cottonwood. There they constructed a military post known as Midway Station.<sup>12</sup>

On May 12, 1865, Private Lohnes was dispatched from Midway in charge of a wood-gathering detail. Near Dan Smith's Ranche, 10 miles to the west, his party became involved in a skirmish between 30 Indians and elements of Co. A, 1st Battalion, Nebraska Cavalry, which was headquartered at Gilman's Ranche. The engagement began when Sergeant Hiram Creighton of the 1st Battalion with two men and a wagon belonging to Co. A were attacked by Indians 5 miles west of Smith's Ranche. After a running battle in which all three men were wounded, the soldiers reached Smith's where Sergeant Creighton died from his injuries that same evening. Sergeant Judson Langstaff and four men, also of Co. A, 1st Battalion, encountered the same group of Indians just south of Smith's Ranche and were forced to fall back towards the ranche to avoid being cut off. About one-half mile from Smith's, Langstaff and his troopers made a stand.<sup>13</sup>

At some point during this series of skirmishes, Private Lohnes and his detachment joined the conflict. Records say only that Lohnes was wounded in the thigh and shoulder and that an arrow split the stock of his Enfield rifle. His horse also was wounded, and at one time Lohnes found himself surrounded by 10 Indians. According to official reports he held his ground until assistance reached him and the soldiers finally succeeded in reaching Smith's Ranche without the loss of life or the government property they were guarding. Although the leader of the Indian band reportedly was killed, the rest of the war party managed to run off about 20 head of Dan Smith's cattle before making good their escape north of the Platte.<sup>14</sup>

Captain Charles Porter, with 26 troopers of his own Co. A, 1st Battalion, and a few members of the 3rd US Volunteers, "Galvanized Yankees," made an effort to overtake the Indians. After experiencing great difficulty in fording the Platte, Porter's contingent traveled some 65 miles to the south fork of the Loup, upon which they located the remains of a large and recently abandoned Indian camp. As the soldiers were now far from their supplies and probably outnumbered, they decided that continued pursuit would be too risky.<sup>15</sup>

On May 29, Brigadier General Patrick Connor, commanding the District of the Plains from Julesburg, issued a general order taking note of Lohnes' bravery in the fight of May 12 and recommending him to the Secretary of War for a Medal of

Honor. Connor followed up with a letter to the Secretary on June 8 which noted that "it is my opinion...that Private Francis W. Louhas (*sic*) Co. H, 1st Nebr. Vet. Cavalry deserves, and should receive, a medal of honor."<sup>16</sup>

While Lohnes recovered from his wounds, Connor's recommendation proceeded through the chain of command to the War Department in Washington. The department moved swiftly to confirm the award and on August 15, 1865, an impressive ceremony was held at Fort Kearny to present the Medal of Honor to Lohnes, who had recently been promoted to the rank of corporal. In attendance were Nebraska Governor Alvin Saunders, Brigadier General Herman Heath, commander of the Eastern Sub-District of the Plains; Major General Grenville M. Dodge, commanding the Department of the Missouri; and other officers and dignitaries. In the presence of the entire garrison, General Heath presented the medal, the governor made some appropriate remarks, and General Dodge shook Lohnes by the hand, "congratulating him upon the token of honor he had received, equal to many a proudly-worn shoulder strap."<sup>17</sup> Lohnes expressed his thanks to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton in a letter dated August 17 but added that while he was "proud and happy to be the recipient of so flattering a tribute to soldierly qualities...there are numbers of my comrades-in-arms more worthy of this great honor than I."<sup>18</sup>

No doubt there were many members of the 1st Nebraska Veteran Volunteers who deserved recognition for bravery, but by August, 1865, most of them would have been happy just to have received their discharge from the service. The Civil War in the East had been over for several months, yet there seemed to be no immediate prospect that the units guarding the Overland Trail could soon return to civilian life. Like Lohnes, many of the soldiers had been away from their homes and families for more than four years, years which had been marked by danger and hardship. It is not surprising that the desertion rate among the volunteer units remaining along the Overland Trail was beginning to rise dramatically.

While few volunteer soldiers had demonstrated more bravery or devotion to duty than Francis Lohnes, the rigors of continued campaigning soon became too much even for him. The last straw seems to have been the order on September 22,

which sent Co. H from Midway Station all the way west to Fort Sedgwick near Julesburg. As far as the troops were concerned, this was a move in the wrong direction. Company H had been stationed at Midway for seven months and the men had managed to erect some fairly substantial barracks. They were ordered to leave "just as they had comfortable quarters built and had to lie here [at Julesburg] in huts [and] escort coaches over very long routes without any comforts."<sup>19</sup> On September 23 Lohnes deserted, to be followed by several other members of the company during the next few days.<sup>20</sup> By October the desertion rate rose even higher as another plains winter approached.

Captain William H. Ivory, commander of Co. H, attributed the growing number of desertions to several factors but primarily to the very long time that most of the men had been in the service.<sup>21</sup> The Nebraska Volunteers had originally enlisted to fight the rebel South and believed that they had more than fulfilled their duty. Other troops with far less time in service than the men of the 1st Nebraska had already been mustered out. The descriptive book of Co. H reflects the fact that desertions had become prevalent only after the 1st Nebraska Regiment had been assigned to duty on the plains. Thirty-four men, representing about 19 percent of all those who had ever been carried on the rolls of Co. H, deserted during 1865-1866. By comparison, only 15 desertions had occurred during the period 1861-1864.<sup>22</sup> Desertion would continue to be a problem until the 1st Nebraska Veteran Volunteers were finally mustered out on July 1, 1866.

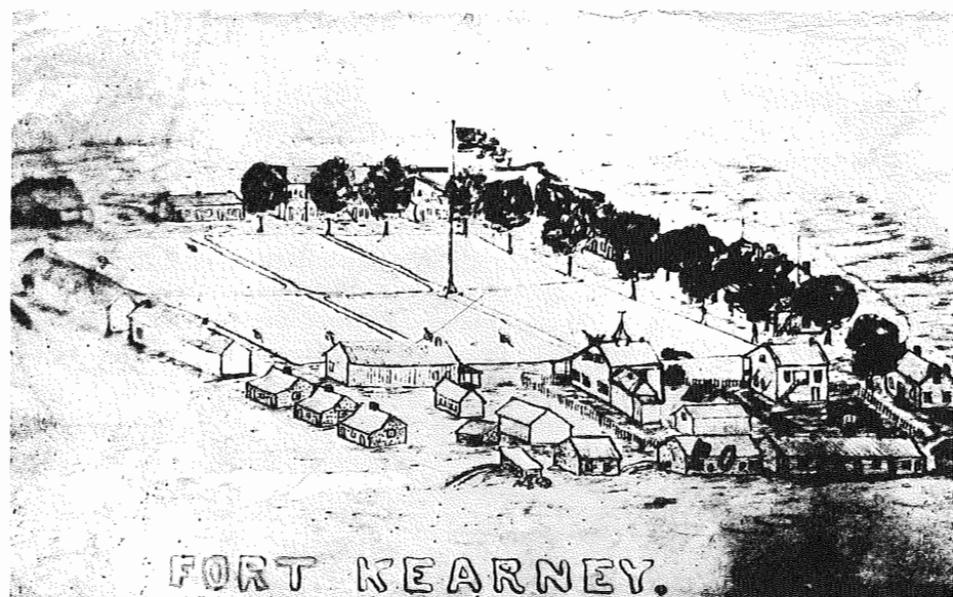
There are few records of Lohnes' activities during the next several years. Evidently he simply went home to Richardson County, for he was married there to Mary A. Simpson on November 13, 1867.<sup>23</sup> As a deserter, Lohnes certainly would have been liable for punishment under military law, but, as a practical matter, soldiers who deserted after the Civil War had officially ended probably were not pursued very vigorously by military authorities. Manpower for such a task was lacking and there was no good purpose to be served in view of the reduced need for troops and the pending discharge of the volunteer units still serving on the plains. There is no evidence to suggest that any effort was made to bring Lohnes to justice on a desertion charge.

The 1870 census confirms that Lohnes had resumed his former occupation as a farmer in Richardson County, Nebraska. He and his wife Mary had become the parents of a son born in September, 1869. Though Lohnes was now 29 years of age, the family was still dependent to some extent upon the assistance of Mary Lohnes' parents, Hiram and Elizabeth Simpson, in whose household they were living.<sup>24</sup> By 1885, Lohnes was renting and operating 60 acres of farm land located about 10 miles north of Falls City. The value of buildings, livestock, and farm implements was \$2,500, but he raised farm products worth only \$500 during the year ending June 1, 1885. His livestock consisted of two horses, one milk cow, and ten pigs.<sup>25</sup>

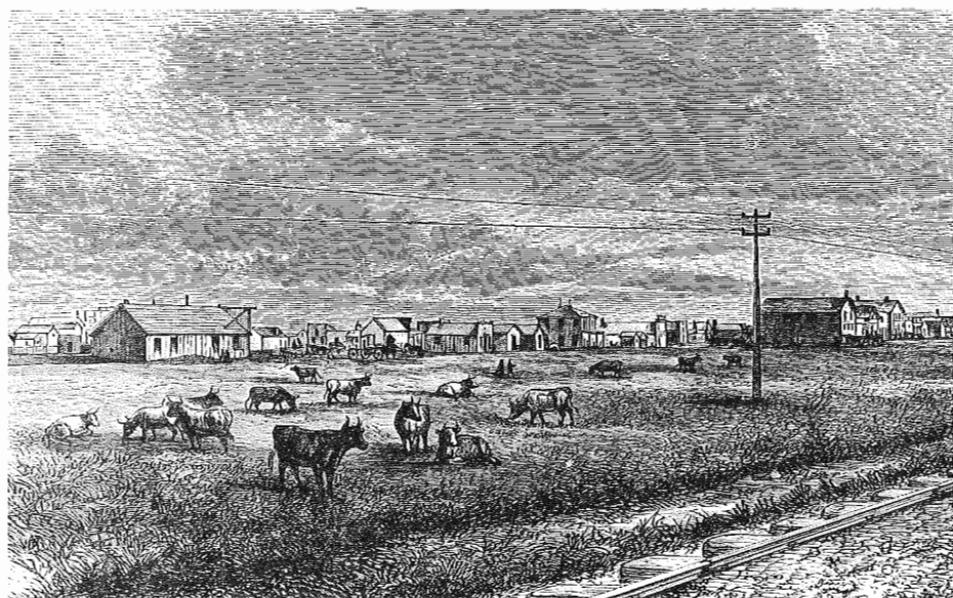
In the fall of 1889, possibly to supplement what appears to have been a meager farm income, Lohnes was working with his brother-in-law Clint Simpson in the operation of a threshing outfit. Typically, the steam traction engine and the separator were taken from farm to farm to thresh the crops during the course of the threshing season.

On September 18, 1889, the threshing crew was proceeding with the outfit down a road just northwest of Schubert, Nebraska, when they came to a bridge. After an inspection the men decided that the bridge was strong enough to bear the weight of the steam engine, and Lohnes began to drive it across. However, once the full weight of the engine came to rest upon the bridge, the timbers gave way and the engine and its tender plunged into the creek below. Lohnes was pinned between the boiler and the water tank and was scalded to death by escaping steam. His brother-in-law and others at the scene were powerless to rescue the unfortunate man, so dense was the steam and smoke from the ruptured boiler.<sup>26</sup>

Lohnes' death left his wife Mary and two surviving children with no means of support. Fortunately for Mary Lohnes, an Act of Congress authorizing pensions for widows and minor children of Civil War veterans was approved on June 27, 1890. On July 11 Mrs. Lohnes filed her claim for a pension which would entitle her to receive a payment of \$12.00 per month.<sup>27</sup> But before the pension application could be processed, there remained the problem posed by Lohnes' desertion from the 1st Nebraska Regiment back in September, 1865. Deserters were not eligible for pensions and other veterans' benefits.



*Fort Kearny, about 1863. The spelling "Fort Kearney" at the bottom of the sketch by an unknown artist is incorrect. . . . (Below) Plum Creek, Dawson County, before 1875.*



Congress had recognized the need to provide some relief for Civil War soldiers charged with desertions that had not actually occurred in the face of the enemy or because of cowardice. Accordingly, a series of congressional acts between 1882 and 1889 provided procedures for the removal of the charge of desertion against soldiers who had served faithfully until the expiration of their terms of enlistment, or until after the 1st day of May, 1865.<sup>28</sup> In 1884 the House Committee on Military Affairs explained the reasoning behind legislation to absolve certain groups of deserters:

It is claimed, and your committee believe justly, that after the war was over and hostilities had actually ceased, a number of soldiers, long departed from their families and from their relatives and friends, feeling that the country no longer needed their services, and impatient at the delay of being mustered out, left their commands and went home without being mustered out of the service, and without receiving the certificate of honorable discharge to which their patriotic and faithful service entitled them.<sup>29</sup>

In 1891 under the terms of an Act approved March 2, 1889, the War Department removed the charge of desertion from Lohnes' record and granted him an honorable discharge retroactive to September 24, 1865.<sup>30</sup> This restored Lohnes' pension privileges and cleared the way for Mary A. Lohnes to receive a widow's pension, a benefit she would retain until her death in Tacoma, Washington, on April 25, 1925.<sup>31</sup>

Contemporary accounts of Francis Lohnes' death say nothing about his Medal of Honor, mentioning only that he was "an old soldier" who had served throughout the rebellion. Perhaps few of his neighbors were aware of the full story of his military service. One can only speculate whether silence was how Lohnes chose to deal with what must have been his life's greatest paradox: He was a war hero turned deserter.

It is unfortunate that Lohnes did not live to see his record cleared. Under the circumstances which prevailed at the time, his desertion hardly seems a reprehensible crime and his legitimate credentials as a brave and faithful soldier amply justify his place of honor among the "bravest of the brave" in the Nebraska Hall of Fame.

## APPENDIX I NEBRASKA MEDAL OF HONOR WINNERS

Following is a complete list of Nebraska Medal of Honor winners taken from the program printed for their induction into the Hall of Fame in the Capitol on May 5, 1974, pursuant to LB 1212, 80th Session of the Nebraska Legislature. Criteria for selection have been extended to include servicemen who were awarded the medal for service within Nebraska and native Nebraskans who had taken up residence for at least two years in the state prior to or following military service:

### CIVIL WAR

Bates, Delavan  
Bourke, John G.  
Flanagan, Augustin  
Hanks, Joseph  
Henry, Guy V.  
Johnston, David  
Josselyn, Simeon T.  
Miller, Jacob C.  
Miller, James P.  
Prentice, Joseph R.  
Shapland, John  
Traynor, Andrew  
Vifquain, Victor  
Widick, Andrew J.  
Williams, William H.

### INDIAN CAMPAIGNS

Babcock, John B.  
Canfield, Heth  
Co-Rux-Te-Chod-Ish (Pawnee Scout)  
(Mad Bear)  
Day, Matthias W.  
Foley, John H.  
Grant, George  
Herron, Leander  
Heyl, Charles H.  
Himmelsback, Michael  
Hubbard, Thomas  
Leonard, Patrick  
Lohnes, Francis W.  
Lytton, Jephtha L.  
Stance, Emanuel  
Strayer, William H.  
Thompson, George W.  
Vokes, Leroy H.

### WAR WITH SPAIN

Ehle, John W.  
Meredith, James

### 1901-1911

Schmidt, Otto Diller

### PHILIPPINES, 1911

Volz, Jacob Jr.

### WORLD WAR I

Graves, Ora\*  
Holderman, Nelson M.  
Rickenbacker, Edward V.

### WORLD WAR II

Bauer, Harold W.  
Booker, Robert D.  
Cowan, Richard E.  
Hansen, Dale M.  
Lindstrom, Floyd K.  
Parle, John J.  
Powers, Leo J.  
Tominac, John J.  
Treadwell, Jack L.

### KOREAN CONFLICT

Gomez, Edward  
Kouma, Ernest

### VIETNAM CONFLICT

Coker, Ronald L.  
Fous, James W.  
Hagemeister, Charles C.  
Hibbs, Robert J.  
Keith, Miguel  
Kerrey, Joseph R.  
Young, Gerald O.

\**Omaha World-Herald* writer John Taylor in the January 10, 1981, *Magazine of the Midlands* concluded after research that Sailor Ora Graves (1892-1965) of Fullerton was not awarded the Medal of Honor. Navy records had confused him with Coloradan Ora Graves (1896-1961), who did win the medal.

## NOTES

1. The Nebraska Legislature, during its 80th Session, 1969, passed LB1212 which provided for the induction of Congressional Medal of Honor winners into the Nebraska Hall of Fame.

2. *U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Veterans Affairs*, "Medal of Honor, 1863-1968," 90th Congress, 2nd Session, 1968, p. 3.

3. Medal of Honor Collection, MS3524, State Archives, Nebraska State Historical Society.

4. "Medal of Honor, 1863-1968," p. 305.

5. Alfred T. Andreas, comp., *History of Nebraska*, V.1, (Chicago: Western Publishing Company, 1882) p. 278.

6. See, for example, Andreas, *History of Nebraska*, V. 1, p. 277-278; Marriage license of Francis W. Lohnes and Mary A. Simpson, November 13, 1867, RG245, Richardson County, Nebraska, Marriage Records, State Archives, NSHS; *Falls City Journal*, September 20, 1889, p. 5.

7. 1860 Census, Arago Pct., Richardson County, Nebraska Territory, p. 33, family No. 262.

8. Descriptive Book, Co. H, First Nebraska Regiment, RG18, Nebraska Military Department, State Archives, NSHS, Entry No. 66.

9. A summary of the history of the First Nebraska Regiment, 1861-1866, is in *Nebraska in the Civil War*, Nebraska State Historical Society Educational leaflet No. 8, (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, n.d.) not paginated. Lohnes' enlistment record is in the Descriptive Book, Co. H 1st Nebraska Regiment, Entry No. 66.

10. *Nebraska in the Civil War*.

11. Manuscript History of Co. H, 1st Nebraska Regiment, January 31, 1866, RG18, Nebraska Military Department, State Archives, NSHS.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*; Post return, Gilman's Station, Nebraska Territory, May 31, 1865, Microcopy 617, Roll 1511, Returns from U.S. Military Posts, NARS RG94, copy in RG500, State Archives, NSHS; *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*, S.1, V.48, Pt. 2, (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1896), p. 1251.

14. Post Return, Gilman's Station, May 31, 1865; "Award of Medal of Honor File, Francis W. Lohnes," NARS RG94, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Copy at State Archives, NSHS.

15. Post Return, Gilman's Station, May 31, 1865; *ORWR*, S.1, V. 48, Pt. 1, p. 269-270; Dee Alexander Brown, *The Galvanized Yankees*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963), p. 21-22.

16. Francis W. Lohnes Medal of Honor File.

17. *Omaha Weekly Republican*, September 1, 1865, p. 3.

18. Francis W. Lohnes Medal of Honor File.

19. Manuscript History, Co. H, 1st Nebraska Regiment.

20. Descriptive Book, Co. H, 1st Nebraska Regiment.

21. Manuscript History, Co. H, 1st Nebraska Regiment.

22. Descriptive Book, Co. H, 1st Nebraska Regiment.

23. RG245, Richardson County, Nebraska. Marriage Records, State Archives, NSHS.

24. 1870 Census, Twp. 1, R. 17, Richardson County, Nebraska, p. 18, family No. 119.

25. 1885 Census of Agriculture, Arago Pct., Richardson County, Nebraska. p. 13, line 8.

26. *Falls City Journal*, September 20, 1889, p. 5; *Verdon Vidette*, September 20, 1889, p. 5.

27. Mary A. Lohnes Pension file, NARS RG15, Records of the Veterans Administration, Civil War and Later Pension Applications, copy at the State Archives, NSHS.

28. *Ibid.*; *U.S. Statutes at Large*, V. 22, p. 347-348; V. 23, p. 119-120; V. 25, p. 869; *U.S. Congress. House. Report to Accompany H. R. 4383, 48th Congress, 1st Session, House Report 180*, p. 1-3.

29. *U.S. Congress. House. House Report 180*, p. 1-3.

30. Mary A. Lohnes Pension File.

31. *Ibid.*