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Soldiers of Company C, First Nebraska, at Block House Number Eight. (NSHS-G784)

THE PHILIPPINE WAR: THE DIARY OF ROBERT BRUCE PAYNE, 1899

Edited by John Hall

INTRODUCTION

Robert Bruce Payne was born in Frederick County, Virginia, in 1872. He emigrated with his parents to Nebraska in 1883 and was an undergraduate at the University of Nebraska when war broke out between the United States and Spain in April 1898.¹ Payne's entire college class was graduated early by the university to enable them to join the state's volunteer regiments that were being raised. He enlisted with many of his friends on May 10, 1898, as a private in Company D of the First Nebraska Volunteer Infantry Regiment.

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In June 1898 after a period of initial training, the First Nebraska was sent to the Philippine Islands as part of an expeditionary force led by General Wesley Merritt. While most eyes had been turned toward Cuba, an American squadron under Commodore George Dewey destroyed the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay on May 1, 1898, and American troops established a series of fortified camps on the Spanish-held mainland outside Manila.²

Filipino forces, led by General Emilio Aguinaldo, had been in rebellion against the Spanish since 1896. By mid-July 1898, Aguinaldo's soldiers had taken control of most of the countryside and had forced the

Spanish to retreat into the heavily-fortified city of Manila. The arrival of Dewey and the American troops was welcomed by the revolutionary government, which recognized a powerful ally against the Spanish.

Though supporting and even arming the Filipinos, the Americans were not fighting for Philippine independence. Rather, President McKinley hoped to assume control of the strategically placed Philippines to facilitate American trade with the Far East. The arrival of 8,000 reinforcements in late June and July 1898 strengthened the American position. General Merritt decided, in a conference with Admiral Dewey, to attack Manila as quickly as possible and so avoid an outright vic-



Robert Bruce Payne. Courtesy of John Hall and Frances Payne Evangelist.

tory by Aguinaldo's forces. A secret agreement was made with the Spanish garrison that the American troops would protect the Spaniards from the potentially vengeful Filipinos if Manila was quickly surrendered to the Americans.³

American troops occupied Manila on August 13, 1898. The close support of the American warships anchored in Manila harbor proved decisive, and the Spaniards offered only token resistance. It was the Nebraskans who hauled down the Spanish flag and raised the American flag in its place. American soldiers, including the Nebraskans, rapidly secured all the bridges entering the city and forced out any Filipino soldiers who had entered. The American troops occupied Spanish defenses and blockhouses and constructed a line of trenches protecting the approaches to Manila. The Filipino army quickly constructed its own fortifications facing the American positions.

Following the euphoria of victory over the Spanish, doubts began to be expressed in the United States about a policy of continued occupation of the Philippines. Edwin Lawrence Godkin, the eloquent editor of *The Nation* and one of the more outspoken of the anti-imperialists, argued that American occupation was both immoral and hypocritical. He hotly denied that America had taken full possession of the Philippines: "All we hold is one city under the guns of our ships, 10,000 miles from home."⁴ However, such views were not prevalent. More popular were those of men like Senator Albert J. Beveridge, who applauded territorial expansion as an extension of America's "manifest destiny." "The Philippines are ours forever," he claimed, "a base at the door of all the East." The Filipinos were "a barbarous race," not capable of "self-government in the Anglo-American sense." Additionally, he suggested, Americans had "great responsibilities" which necessitated occupation: to provide a government for the natives; to convert

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them to Christianity; and to prevent the Spaniards from returning.⁵

An uneasy peace settled over Manila for almost six months, with the opposing forces often separated by only a few yards. Poorly equipped and ill-trained, the Filipino army was nevertheless determined to occupy the capital and finally secure national independence. The Americans, now commanded by Major-General Elwell Stephen Otis, needed to remove the threat of Aguinaldo's forces and subdue the hostile population if a permanent occupation was to be contemplated. Such irreconcilably different goals made conflict inevitable.

The fighting erupted on the night of February 4, 1899, when a Nebraska sentry, Private William W. Grayson, shot a Filipino who failed to halt when challenged. The firing quickly spread, and the Filipinos launched a series of desperate attacks, which were bloodily repulsed. The next morning American forces advanced and captured the fortified Filipino positions, and Aguinaldo's troops were forced to retreat from the devastating fire of American gunboats and artillery. According to one observer, "The slaughter was sickening." The estimated Filipino losses in this opening engagement (killed, wounded, and prisoners) were about 4,000. American casualties were forty-nine killed and 197 wounded. After a series of similarly overwhelming defeats in pitched battles, Aguinaldo's soldiers adopted guerrilla tactics.

The "Filipino troubles" were to continue sporadically until mid-1902 and cost the United States more lives than the war with Spain. A total of 4,200 Americans died in battle or from disease and accidents, and 2,800 were wounded.⁶ Some 20,000 Filipinos were killed, and over 200,000 died from disease and famine. It was a brutal war, with both sides frequently resorting to torture and murder of prisoners. The islands were finally subdued after Aguinaldo was captured and Filipino civilians were interned in guarded

camp. Many areas supporting the Filipino army were turned — as one American commander had demanded — into "a howling wilderness." For American troops, including the Nebraska volunteers, the war in the Philippines became a nightmare.⁷

The diary of Robert Payne, written in a discarded Spanish account book, has been in the possession of one of his daughters, Wilella Payne Overing, since 1923. This small book offers us an important firsthand account of the fighting between the Filipinos and the Americans. The spelling is Payne's. Occasional punctuation has been added for clarity.

The diary, published here for the first time, covers only the first week of fighting, from the night of February 4 through February 11, including the American advance on the morning of February 5, the capture of the water works at Singalon, and the activities of Dewey's ships. Payne's account is particularly significant, because he offers a new and detailed description of the initial incident which sparked the hostilities — when a Nebraska soldier in

*William W. Grayson, Company D,
First Nebraska. (NSHS-G784)*



his company shot and killed a Filipino officer. Accompanying Payne's diary is his March 22, 1899, letter to his brother in Nebraska.

Having volunteered to fight the Spanish, Payne, who participated in a total of seventeen engagements against the Spanish and the rebels, became increasingly disillusioned with the bloody campaign being waged against the Filipinos.

He wrote to his brother in Nebraska and asked him to arrange a discharge. Finally discharged in Manila on May 9, 1899, he returned to the United States via Japan and China, bringing with him some Spanish books, a Mauser rifle, an embroidered priest's robe, and his short diary — the only one he was ever to keep. He became a school teacher, first in Nebraska and then Colorado, and later followed a career in the U.S. Postal Service. He married in 1904, had six children, and finally died in Lincoln, Nebraska, November 8, 1937.⁸

THE DIARY

Feb. 4 1899

On the evening of this day was placed on guard or rather Cossack outpost at Block house no. 8 in the Santa Mesa district.⁹ Our orders were to hold this place and report anything suspicious. A number of recruits had been rec'd on this day by the Filipinos in the shape of wild men from the mountains who were armed with bows and arrows. They wore red breech cloths.¹⁰ [Pvt. James I.] Bowe[s] from our company had been placed on guard. The other private, the corporal and myself had lain down. At about 8 o'clock I heard a rifle shot, a Springfield. We did not pay much attention to this, but directly we heard two more shots. We began to hastily put on our stuff, but before we could get on our belts and haversacks on, firing began on our camp from all sides, and balls began to ping and chug around us. In a minute or two we heard footsteps approaching from camp. It was eight men and a sergeant from C to reinforce the post. Our orders were now



Company D, First Nebraska, at Pleasant Valley. (NSHS-G784)

to hold the blockhouse and fire only when the enemy advanced in the immediate open and were visible, so during the fire of the night which was incessant we lay sleepless and keeping a sharp watch.

Febr 5 '99

Sunday morning dawned bright and clear. The sun had no sooner rose bright and clear than the Americans began an advance on their entire lines. The advance was an inspiring sight. Our soldiers fired volleys by the platoons and then advanced under cover of the smoke and lay down behind the convenient rice ridges. Unfortunately our fort was soon behind the firing line and we could not fire. However I got in three shots at a sharp shooter in a tree. At this time a private in Co. C who had come out of the block house with me to get a crack at the sharp-shooter was shot through the

shoulder. Then the Col came along and ordered us out of the block house and into the trenches.¹¹ The men were coming back at this time from their advance and lay there the rest of the day. The Utah Artillery [Utah Volunteer Light Artillery] did fine work in their fire on block house no. 7 which was held by over 200 Filipinos, at San Juan Church,¹² at the Filipinos quarters just south of camp, and at two cannons they had mounted. The Filipino heavy cannon were soon silenced and general retreat of the natives took place all along the lines. The gunboat which had specially been prepared for this occasion came up the river Pasig [Pasig] and began firing on churches and buildings occupied by the native troops.¹³ Many churches and other buildings were built of a sort of soft stone that is bullet proof of rifles, but the guns on the gun boat sent great holes in these buildings and soon there was not a native to be

seen in five miles. In the afternoon I visited the battle field where my Co. "D" had been located. I saw there fifteen dead Filipinos, and heard that [Pvt. John L.] Bronson one of our men had been severely wounded in the arm. Many of the boys had killed from one to two Filipinos but they were not there to be found so of course it is hard to tell who killed the luckless fellows laid so low, one with the whole top of his head torn off and others with ghastly holes in them. This shows how deadly a weapon the Springfield is. During the day Dewey took some part in the fight in firing on towns and cutting off trains with reinforcements from Malolos. A whole train load was wrecked it is rumored. In the afternoon our boys crossed the river San Juan and took all of the Filipino works and occupied their headquarters which was the reservoir and filtering station of the waterworks. These places were occupied and held without attack for the night.

Febr 6 '99

I had joined my company during the night and now we anxiously waited orders to go to the front but instead were ordered to hold the captured places while two battalions of Nebr and two co's of Colo [First Colorado Volunteer Infantry] moved against the waterworks or pumping station.¹⁴ When they had gone about two miles they [found] a quartermaster of the Utahs shot full of holes and with his throat cut from ear to ear and his heart cut out.¹⁵ He had lost his way trying to join his command which were advancing with Nebr with two guns. This nerved the boys who soon came upon the entrenched Filipinos. The advance guard fell back and the Filipinos mistaking this for a retreat made a charge out of breast works. They were fairly mowed down. 78 were found and buried here.¹⁶ After that there was no more opposition till the pumping station was reached which is eight miles east of Manila and now Nebr holding this and all surrounding territory. The pumping station is in a deep vale [illegible] splendidly for-

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tified. There is a fine fort on a high point which commands the entire valley. The country around here is a country of ledges and places not naturally adapted to battle it is terraced with rice fields. The ground is dry and hard now and in splendid condition for a campaign. Those boys of the two battalions went into camp here in separate co's. Co L our friends at station and others here and there in nice spots. The night of the sixth was uneventful save that where we were quartered a K man got scared and began shooting and of course there was a call to arms, but there was not a shot fired by a Filipino in hearing. This camp at the water-works was named after our Col. Camp Stotzenburg [sic]. Our col. was very brave and led the charge against the block houses 6 and 7 which K and D men took on Sunday morning. He found a Remington Rifle and used it in the thickest of the fight. There are strict orders issued against pillaging which up to this time has been carried on to excess.

Febr. 7: '99

Today has been an uneventful day. The dead were buried and a little skirmishing done but few natives could be found. The boys are taking a much needed rest. Our 2nd sergeant and a pvt have returned from the front. By the way these are the two men who started the war. The sergeant, a Dutch man [Sgt. Joseph De Vriendt], told the guard [Pvt. William Grayson], a man of little character, not to stand any monkey work. There was a lieut. on the Filipino side who had about as much sense as the afore mentioned who had been getting drunk and causing trouble before. He came down and ordered a post of ours moved back which had been moved up to hold one in check which had been pushed up by the Filipinos. This had been done during the day and when night came the lieut. came up and was halted by our sentinels. He called back "Alto," the Spanish for "halt" at which our sentinel fired upon him and it is stated

killed him but he was taken back by the native soldiers with him.¹⁷ Then the post was reinforced and on the natives making a second advance were fired upon again, which was answered as stated before by the Filipinos on all sides of us save the Manila side.

Febr. 8 '99

This day was spent waiting for orders which came and were revoked several times. The Tenns. [First Tennessee Volunteer Infantry] left for Iloilo and in a few days the fight will be on there.¹⁸ Dewey bombarded a few towns where there might be Filipino soldiers stationed, and several of these towns burned. Kansas [First Kansas Volunteer Infantry] had another brush with the natives who tried to effect an entrance through our lines at that point north of the city. So far as can be heard our boys have done bravely through the whole army corps. The Washingtons [First Washington Volunteer Infantry] shot a little too much ammunition perhaps and the Minns [First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry] who were police in the city killed too many harmless people if accts are true.

Feb. 9.

This morning our company rec'd orders to go to the water works. We left the "Asilo de Huer-fanos" Orphans Home, an old brick building which had been used by the Filipinos for barracks, about 8 o'clock and reached the Pumping Station about one. Co. L our friends had a dinner ready for us when we reached there. They gave us three cheers when we came to which we responded heartily though we were very tired. We enjoyed our dinner very much. In the afternoon James, my tent mate and myself were down to the river a small mountain stream called San Mateo. Here we enjoyed a fine bath. The water was very chilly however. In the pumping station are four mammoth engines capable of 120,000 gallons per hr each. The natives had not destroyed a thing here though it could easily have been done and one would think they

would from the way our forces burnt their homes.

Febr. 10

This day passed with little done save waiting for orders which came at supper time. In the morning we enjoyed another bath in the clear and swift San Mateo. When we reached camp again we found letters from home. Mine announced the death of my father [Richard Thornton Payne, b. 1828]. He died of paralysis on the 18th of Dec. 1898. This was sad news to me. I had written him in Jan. some time after his death. I had hoped to be home and see him again before he died. Indeed I often thought I would like to see father again. My nephew tells me he died reading the bible. He was alone on his farm near Otto [Webster County] Nebr.

Late in the evening we rec'd orders to return part way back to the filtering station and reservoir. There were said to be some 20 or 25,000 Filipinos going to attack no. 7 block house and force an entrance to Manila combined. They did not try it that night.

Febr 11 '99

When we got up this morning we had a two miles march in heavy marching order to make before breakfast. This gave us a good appetite, but breakfast was not ready when we arrived which annoyed us somewhat as we expected to advance against the Filipinos. We had orders to be in readiness after breakfast as we were to be in the reserve but the advance after meandering around the country all day returned empty handed. So today has been a day of rest with us. I have had a bath again in the San Mateo. Its bottom is sandy and the gravel is plainly visible and the smallest fish can be seen.

Ten days rations were just issued to us here and our dinner was an excellent one we had been having poor fare since we have been in field hitherto. It is nearly supper time and I am writing seated in a species of rubber tree. This tree is large and spreading and close to camp. Under it is an immense stone a

boulder with steps up it, so one can walk up the steps and step off in the tree. There was a bombardment of Caloocan, a small town, by Dewey this morning.¹⁹ During the middle of the days the heat is hardly bearable but in the evenings and mornings it is quite cool and the nights are cold. Very dry here now, even too dry to plow. We hear many banterings and quarrels now about what troops did this and that. But I can hardly realize the honour that is to be gained any way fighting a people struggling for liberty. Many of the boys have a poor opinion of the Filipinos simply because they have talked ill of them so long that now they hate them. I think they are doing unwisely in fighting so powerful [a] nation as the U.S. It reveals at once the [ir] patriotism as well as their ignorance. Nor is it by any means all ignorance.²⁰

LETTER

Letter from Robert Bruce Payne to his brother, Francis E. Payne, dated Manila, March 22, 1899.

Dear Bro

The "Grant" sails Saturday for Frisco. A number of the Nebr. men have rec'd discharges and go on that vessel. Two from our co. both of them well and who were on duty at the time of their discharge.

Ask again for my discharge on the grounds of uncompleted education. State conditions at the time of my enlistment. Ask if the gov't means to hold volunteers for the Spanish War to subjugate all the races of her new colonies? Write Sutherland. He will be glad to attend to the matter.²¹

Of course when you get this, if there is reasonable show of the reg't coming home soon you need not pay any attention to it. There is talk here now of the regt having to stay the full two years. God forbid that it be so. I do not want to waste another year here. Another year here would be worse than waste. It is a shame that volunteers for the Spanish War should be held to subjugate the people Spain was trying to subjugate. We volunteers imagined we were heroes going forth to battle for others liberties. Yes fight for freedom of other people, but alas, we feel a little sneaking when we have to return to our fair land with the blood of Filipinos upon our hands. Men, whom we would liberate we now force under the yoke! What if the north had whipped the south to free the negroes and then took the negroes and compelled them to work for them?

Do what you can for me and I shall ever be obliged

As ever
R.B. Payne

NOTES

I would like to extend my sincerest thanks to Wilella Payne Overing, not only for permission to use her father's diary, but also for her kindness, friendship, and support. I would also like to thank Frances Payne Evangelist, who supplied me with copies of her father's letters and photograph.

¹G. J. A. O'Toole, *The Spanish War: An American Epic - 1898* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984).

²Henry B. Russell, *An Illustrated History of Our War With Spain and Our War With the Filipinos* (Hartford, Connecticut: Hartford Publishing Company, 1899), 561-74.

³O'Toole, *Spanish War*, 364-71.

⁴Edwin Lawrence Godkin, "Apropos of the Philippines," *The Nation* (September 1898).

⁵Albert J. Beveridge, *Congressional Record*, 56th Congress, 1st Session, 1899-1900, Pt. 1, 704-5.

⁶Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army*, vol. 2 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1903), 293.

⁷O'Toole, *Spanish War*, 394-96.

⁸*The Commercial Advertiser* (Red Cloud, Nebraska), November 15, 1937.

⁹A suburb of Manila, northeast of the city.

¹⁰Negrito Indians.

¹¹Colonel John M. Stotsenburg, later killed leading an advance against the trenches outside Calumpit, April 26, 1899.

¹²San Juan del Monte.

¹³The heavily armed *Callao*, commanded by Lieutenant Benjamin Tappan, recently captured from the Spanish.

¹⁴The waterworks at Singalon, outside Manila.

¹⁵Dr. Harry A. Young, formerly quartermaster-sergeant in the Third Utah Volunteer Light Artillery Regiment.

¹⁶The First Nebraska's casualties in this engagement were one killed and three wounded.

¹⁷The account of the incident later given by Private William Grayson, the Nebraska sentry involved, is quoted in O'Toole, *Spanish War*, 388: "About eight o'clock something rose slowly up not twenty feet in front of us. It was a Filipino. I yelled 'Halt!' . . . He immediately shouted 'Halto' at me. Well, I thought the best thing to do was to shoot him. He dropped . . . Then two Filipinos sprang out of a gateway about fifteen feet from us. I called 'Halt,' and [Pvt. Orville H.] Miller fired and dropped one. I saw that another was left. Well, I think I got my second Filipino that time. We retreated to where our six other fellows were, and I said, 'Line up, fellows, the niggers are in here all through these yards!'"

¹⁸Iliolo, an important commercial port, was taken by a seaborne expedition, including the First Tennessee on board the *St. Paul*, on February 11.

¹⁹On Friday, February 10, the monitor *Monadnock* and the gunboat *Concord* opened fire on the town of Caloocan. This bombardment was followed at 4 p.m. by an attack by General Harrison G. Otis's brigade on the Filipino trenches outside the town. The so-called Battle of Caloocan was an overwhelming victory for the Americans. The Nebraska Regiment was not involved in the fight at Caloocan, and Payne is mistaken about the date of the bombardment.

²⁰Lt. Andrew Wadsworth's letters, published in *Nebraska History* 68:183-99, also reflect the mixed emotions with which some Nebraska soldiers viewed their participation in the Philippine War.

²¹Roderick D. Sutherland of Nelson, Nebraska, was Fifth District Congressman, 1897-1901.