

THE PALIMPSEST

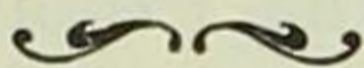
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James Sherman Minott

When James Sherman Minott came to Mount Vernon, Iowa, in the spring of 1869, the entire population, children and grownups, were very soon aware of his presence. For one thing, his broad ruddy face seemed always to be beaming with the joy of just being alive; and, for another, he was the only man in town who had lost most of his lower right leg, to the stump of which in Y form was attached a solid wooden substitute.

Friendly with young and old, and not reticent, Minott conversed about things present and future, not about past events, in which he apparently had little interest. At any rate, diligent inquiry among his old friends and relatives-in-law has failed to elicit any information as to where he came from, or what reason he had for choosing Mount Vernon as a place of permanent abode. The few known facts of his career prior to his arrival in our little city leave large areas of his first thirty-five years without any illumination.

The only extant documentary evidence concerning his early life is a yellowish sheet signed on October 17, 1864, by a surgeon of the United States Army at Judiciary Square Hospital, Washington, D. C. This is his honorable discharge from the Army of the Potomac "on account of wound received in action". The same document states that he enlisted as a corporal in Company F, First Regiment of Michigan Sharp Shooters, on May 6, 1863. A few additions to his early biography were gleaned from old friends and from his obituary notice in the Mount Vernon *Hawkeye* of early December, 1912: that he was born in Elyria, Ohio, in 1834; that he owned and operated a vessel on the Great Lakes in his earlier years, a fact that explained his usual title of "Captain"; that he became a sergeant in the Union Army prior to the battle of Spotsylvania Court House, where he received the wound that smashed his leg and finished the military part of his career.

Few in number also are the outstanding events of Captain Minott's career after he became a citizen of Mount Vernon. In September of 1869 he married Marie E. Neal of Mount Vernon, who died in 1905. In 1885 he joined the earliest roster of the local Wilbur C. Dimmit Post of the Grand Army of the Republic. In 1907 he married Gusta

Clark, who survives him. There were no children. In 1912, in his seventy-ninth year, he died in his low one-story house set into the southeast slope of the Mount Vernon hill.

More important to a host of people in an area much larger than the Mount Vernon vicinity, Captain Minott acquired control of about 160 acres of rough, heavily timbered land in the Lower Palisades region of the Cedar River, some five miles from Mount Vernon, built a spacious inn for the accommodation of visitors to this natural paradise, destined one day to become the center of one of Iowa's best-known State Parks, established a boat livery, sold lots for the building of numerous summer cottages, and for many years was the familiar and much esteemed figure about whom centered the enjoyment of river, cliffs, and forest, with all the plant and animal wild creatures that made this place their home. The Captain's nature lore, though rich, was clearly of the kind learned from a lifetime of contact, not that derived from nature books.

And how expansive he became when among his guests he found a spirit who was honestly responsive to his own! Minor matters, such as waiting for a boat customer or doing errands for summer camping parties, could wait while he guided such a guest through the woods to a blind

of cunningly arranged branches whence, if one's approach was skillful enough, one might watch the drumming of a cock ruffed grouse; or, if a river trip was called for to reach the home of a red fox or the habitat of the pink moccasin flower, the Captain himself would row the boat and poke its nose deftly into a hidden landing place at the mouth of some cliff-walled ravine. And how the boat shot forward when Minott's massive shoulders bent to the oars! Of course all this was a bit short of the best business practice if one was running a summer resort. But how the Captain didn't worry too much about business — in the sense, that is, of looking out for his own material interests. As surely as his whole nature revolved about those things that pertain to forest and stream, just so surely was Captain Minott a maladjustment, a most successful and human one, in an economy that insisted on the accumulation of dimes and dollars. The inevitable loss of his boats and his acres overtook him sometime in the early nineteen hundreds.

It was during the nineties probably that the writer came to know the Captain better and to wonder about the possibilities of his origin. However, the appropriate moment for personal inquiry seemed never to come; perhaps the Captain himself could not have supplied the desired informa-

tion. Nevertheless, an explanation there must have been for a nature attuned only to the out-of-doors, a physique that took in stride all the problems that forest and river travel had to offer, and especially there must have been a history back of that French family name. For of course the original form of the name must have been Minot, just as it is found in the various books of biography and genealogy.

In a story supposed to deal with some facts of history it may be somewhat inappropriate to indulge in a bit of surmise; however, hypothesis often precedes history and it is quite impossible to resist a guess as to the Captain's background. In spite of his Ohio birth (if he really was born there), he must surely have been of that stock that, except for the Indians, first knew this vast country we now call the Middle West. His French name, his early life on the Great Lakes, that superlative development of arms and shoulders, that skill with firearms, that complete commitment to life in the open all suggest derivation from those tough early French "runners of the woods", the *coureurs de bois*, who met both wilderness and Indians on terms of equal understanding and friendship and so opened up to permanent possession by their more conventional successors the endless reaches of the great Upper

Valley. The belated discovery in some reminiscences left by one of the Captain's old soldier friends notes the fact that such was indeed the tradition attached to Minott's personality.

But we are using Captain Minott's career as a sort of introduction for a story that has mainly to do with those people who came to the Palisades of the Cedar River, lived there for a long period of time, and disappeared from there long before Captain Minott, and the rest of us, ever heard of or knew this fair country. The Captain's association with their places of abode, however, especially with a particular one of these, was most intimate. For this there is the testimony of persons still living, to whom he described the living quarters where he spent his first winter or two after coming to the Mount Vernon region, cold-weather months spent in hunting and fishing and running his trap lines at the Palisades.

On the west side of the river, directly opposite the place where Minott's Lower Palisades tavern was built, is Spring Hollow; upstream from this is the similar dark entrance of Screeching Sands Hollow (place names at the Palisades derive largely from the information or imagination of Captain Minott); then, at another furlong interval upriver, comes Blow Out Hollow, the name having nothing to do with conviviality, but rather with a

nearby wide, shallow cavern in the main cliff wall facing the river, the appearance of which suggests formation by an explosive force. These ravines, like the river itself, are bordered more or less by vertical limestone cliffs, very beautiful with their growths of lichens, liverworts, ferns, cedars, and northern yews, and perpetually shaded by the heavy forest of the ravines themselves and the broad bluff tops that tower above.

In the south wall of Blow Out Hollow, scarcely a hundred yards from the river, is an inviting little cavern in the cliff wall, irregularly circular in form, eight by eight feet in size, with a level floor, above which the ceiling is removed far enough not to be troublesome to a man of stocky figure, like Captain Minott. There he built a lean-to of slender tree trunks and thatch, installed a small cast-iron stove, built a bunk, and so created a refuge secure from the winter storms and cold of the late sixties. Did it occur to him that many campfires had burned there before he kindled his own, and that the ashes and refuse from them had been spread to form a level floor and had then been beaten down by the pressure of moccasined feet? Being who he was, it is probable that some such thoughts did come to him. To the Captain's successors, however, the little cavern was always known simply as Minott's Cave.

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