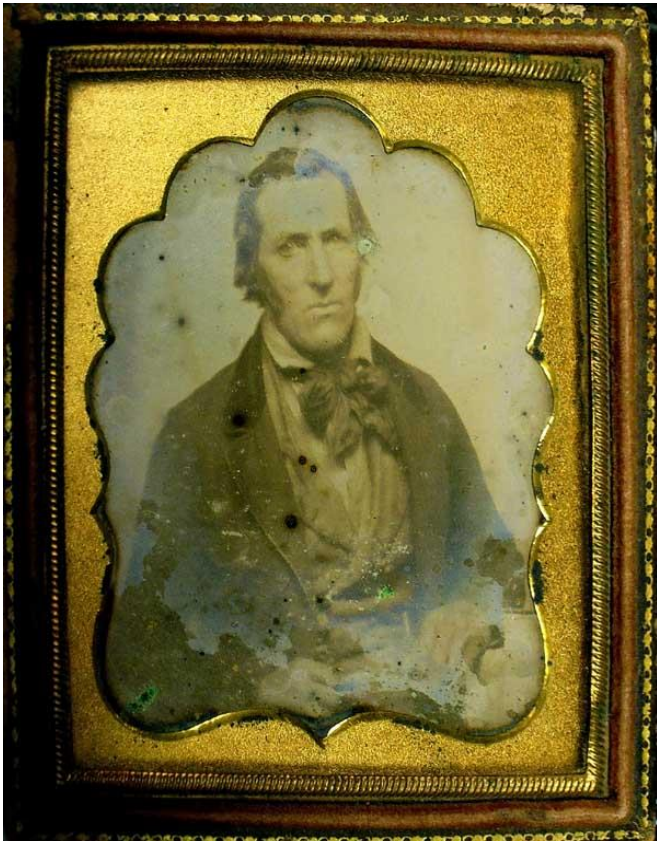


## TWO SOLDIERS

One of the challenges I have in sorting and scanning photos held by the Grant County Historical Society is identifying the individuals in those photos. Large stacks of studio portraits lie un-named and unknown. At one time those photos of loved ones were well known to all who looked at them, but time confuses everything and the minds that held their names in memory are now gone, as they say, to a better place where we cannot make inquiries.

I was looking at a Daguerreotype last week at the museum, the only one I recall seeing there. In the ancient image a man stares out at me, his countenance appearing to me to be one of disappointment or grief. He looks sad. I wanted to figure out who he was, so I came up with the idea of looking through our accession records to see what daguerreotypes we had, perhaps that would allow me by process of elimination to identify him.

I found only one daguerreotype existed in the records; that of one William Kretzer. Aha, I thought, I have

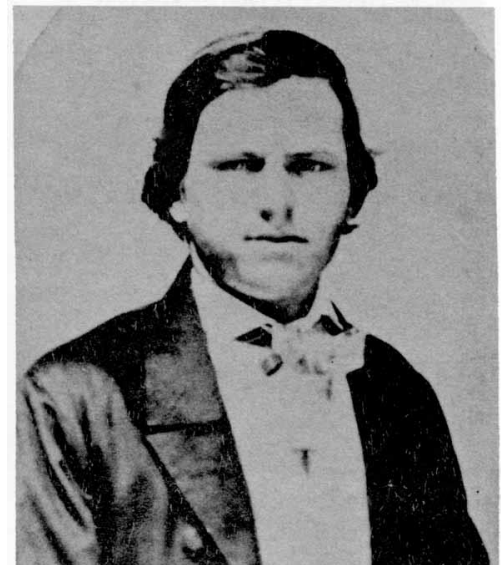


the name. I looked for Kretzer on records and there was his name on the Roster of Wisconsin Volunteers, War of the Rebellion; a private in Company C of the 25<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin Infantry Regiment. I did further internet searches and one led me accidentally to William White, of Mount Hope, Wisconsin, a soldier in Company I of the 20<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin Infantry Regiment. I read the story of each man's service.

Jon Angeli soon disabused me of my belief that I had identified the daguerreotype. He advised me that no matter what the inventory might say, we have other daguerreotypes, and this one looked too old, by the man's clothing and apparent age to be a Civil War soldier. Of course he was right, so for now, this man remains unknown. I later found that William Kretzer, photo and all, is to be found in the book "Our Boys: A Civil War Photograph Album", by Alan and Maureen Gaff, which is based in part on records held by the Grant County Historical Society .

Reading the story of each of man's experience of the war makes it clear that no two stories were alike. Each man experienced suffering, and neither was among the fortunate ones who came home with no injury to the body. Could anyone who saw that war come home unaffected in mind and spirit?

Kretzer was the support of his family. Before enlisting, he did most of the work on the farm, because his father, Phillip, was so severely afflicted with rheumatism (arthritis) that he could not do heavy work. In addition to helping till the poor land of the farm, William worked for neighbors to earn enough to make ends meet. When he enlisted, the money he earned, after a few dollars for absolute necessities, was sent home. His father and the oldest of the five girls at home labored on the land. In July of 1863, William,



Private William Kretzer  
Age - 21 6'1/2" Blue Eyes  
Auburn Hair Light Complexion

like many of his regiment contracted dysentery, which the soldiers called “quickstep.” At that time dysentery meant severe diarrhea with visible blood. It was probably caused by poor hygiene, a wet tropical climate, and poor nutrition. It may have been amoebic dysentery, cholera, parasites or a number of other infectious agents. All were endemic in the southern Mississippi valley, and all were harbingers of death.

William was sent North to recover. In March of 1863 Cordelia Harvey, the widow of Wisconsin’s governor, had prevailed upon General Grant to allow soldiers suffering from chronic dysentery to be sent north to recuperate, as it had been shown that many who would have died in the South recuperated in the North. Mrs. Harvey was a tireless advocate and comfort to the soldiers, who referred to her as the “Wisconsin Angel.” She worked for better food, cleaner facilities, and fresher air: “Pneumonia, typhoid, and camp fevers, and that fearful scourge of the Southern swamps and rivers, chronic diarrhea, occupied every bed” she wrote. Clara Barton described a Hotel converted into a hospital: “I saw, crowded into one old sunken hotel, lying helpless upon its bare, wet, bloody floors, five hundred fainting men hold up their cold, bloodless, dingy hands, as I passed, and beg me in Heaven’s name for a cracker to keep them from starving (and I had none); or to give them a cup that they might have something to drink water from, if they could get it (and I had no cup and could get none).” On his way north, Kretzer’s condition worsened. He was taken to hospital number 2, at Paducah, Kentucky with severe dysentery, stomach pain and vomiting. He was beyond recovery. On his deathbed he asked for all of his money and effects to be sent to his parents, a dutiful son to the end.

I have no photograph of William White. His brush with death came in a far different way. He was older than Kretzer. Born in Scotland in 1831, he came to the United States with his parents in 1852. William decided on the West as his hope for fortune. With a friend he set out for Wisconsin. By the time he arrived in Platteville he was penniless. He walked to Lancaster, and then traded his last earthly possession, a shotgun, to the stage driver for a dollar and a trip to Patch Grove. The dollar was counterfeit. Despite his poverty he worked hard and earned enough to buy a quarter section of land. He built a house, and married Mary Moore, an emigrant from Ohio.

When war broke out, William, like his brothers, enlisted. He served in Company I of the 20<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin Infantry Regiment and campaigned through Missouri, Arkansas, Mississippi, Texas, and Louisiana. At the end of the all the battles, when the war was over, he found himself stationed in Mobile, Alabama. The city was under martial law. The occupation force established an ordinance depot on the north side of the city. Soon it housed 200 tons of shells and powder. On May 25, 1865, smoke was seen escaping from the building. Within moments the ammunition magazine exploded. A series of blasts occurred in quick succession as artillery shells, torpedoes, and gunpowder were detonated. Ships in the harbor were shattered, caught fire, burned and sank. White was near the site of the explosion in charge of a detail of men. A piece of timber fell on the place where

he stood, sheltering rather than crushing him from the shredded projectiles and the rain of debris. He was unconscious when he was rescued. His horse was dead.

It is nearly impossible to conceive of the experience of surviving such an event; an event which would dwarf the recent tragic blasts at Boston. William White was mustered out on July 14, 1865 and returned home to his farm and family, but he said he never recovered from the shock. After the blast he found that one of his legs was shorter than the other, and so it remained for the rest of his life.

