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State Historical Society helps solve 32-year-old mystery

PIERRE, S.D. – Researchers with the South Dakota State Historical Society recently played a key role in solving a 32-year-old mystery involving the death of a Civil War veteran.

In 1979, a home in Warner owned at the time by Gerold Zumbaum, was raised from its foundation, revealing an 1893 marble headstone issued by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and inscribed “SERGT. J.F. KINNA, CO.C., 12OHIO.CAV.” The stone made its way to a basement where it stayed for the next 32 years. Eventually Brown County Centennial Village in Aberdeen became caretakers of the stone, where it was later included in their mock cemetery.

Through the years, questions about the stone remained unanswered, such as: Who was this Sgt J.F. Kinna that served in the Ohio Cavalry during the Civil War? If not buried in Aberdeen, where was this soldier’s grave?

Some Aberdeen-area veterans heard of the stone and felt it would be better to place the stone at the originally intended gravesite. After exhausting local resources, they contacted the State Historical Society-Archives at the Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre. It is at this time that Virginia Hanson and Lori Carpenter became involved in the search. After an extensive search of the State Archives’ diverse resources, Kinna’s life story began to emerge.

Hanson, the primary researcher, first looked for information about Kinna in WPA cemetery records, where she found out his full name was Jacob Franklin Kinna, and he was buried in Yankton. From there she went to the society’s microfilm newspaper collection and was able to find articles about Kinna’s death in 1893. Hanson also utilized census records, Civil War records and land records to piece together Kinna’s story. Carpenter conducted several personal interviews.

“It’s one of the more interesting research projects I’ve been involved with,” Hanson said. “There’s more to the story than just finding his burial location. Here is a man who is part of our history. This is saving South Dakota history.”

On Saturday, Sept. 10, at Yankton Cemetery in Yankton, the once forgotten stone will at last mark the site of Kinna’s remains. Military Honor Guards are expected to attend the installation of the stone for this Civil War soldier.

Born in 1840 at Virginia to Catherine and Samuel Kinna, Jacob Franklin Kinna grew to manhood in Maryland. By the age of 20, Kinna accepted employment as a wagon master at Jackson, Md. On Oct. 23, 1863, Kinna resided in Ohio where he enlisted into Company C, 12th regiment, Ohio Cavalry division as a Corporal for the Union Army. His unit remained at Camp Chase until February 1864. The company received orders sending them to Nashville on March 31, 1864. During the War of the Rebellion, Kinna and Company C saw action at Mount Sterling, Ky.; Bristol, Tenn., and Dallas, N.C. His war service ended at Nashville, Tenn., on Nov. 14, 1865.

By 1870, Jacob had married Rebecca. Children born of this union were Charles H. and Clayton, both of whom were born at Indiana. At age 40, Jacob was a widowed wagon maker at Alvin, IL. On Sept. 13, 1881, Louisa McClellan and Jacob received a marriage license at Vermillion County, IL. Between 1882 and 1890, Kinna made his way from Illinois to Ordway, S.D. From Ordway he traveled to Yankton, where he made his home two miles west of the township. Although a resident of the Yankton area, Kinna retained membership with Aberdeen’s Robert Anderson Post 19 Grand Army of the Republic for Civil War veterans.

On Dec. 2, 1893, Kinna sustained a gunshot wound to his shoulder while attempting to evict a trespassing hunter from his property. After the shooting, Kinna acquired an infection known as grippe and he died on Dec. 20, 1893. Burial occurred in an unmarked grave at Yankton Cemetery in block 716 grave site 25, under the auspices of Phil Kearney Post 7 GAR.

“The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs provides headstones and markers for the graves of U.S. veterans anywhere in the world,” Carpenter said. “If you find an unset military stone, contact the nearest Veterans Administration Office. As is shown in this instance, the stone may need to mark a soldier’s remains.”

The Kinna story is an example of the kind of research sources the State Historical Society-Archives has, said Chelle (Shell-ee) Somsen, state archivist.

“The South Dakota State Archives has a diverse collection of information available to the general public as well as researchers,” she said. “We have been collecting, preserving and making available manuscript collections, governmental records, photographs, maps and other archival materials since 1891. If you are searching for a person or subject of interest, the State Archives is here to aid you in a successful outcome.”

Questions remaining include how the stone got to Warner from Aberdeen, and why the stone was never taken to Yankton, Hanson said. Those answers, she said, might require further research at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. Hanson said the stone was probably ordered by the Aberdeen GAR.



Several other sources contributed to the Kinna stone finding a home and making the Sept. 10 service possible. These include: SFC Peter Cerny, SSG Michael Smith and SFC Shane Smith of the Aberdeen Army Recruiting Station; Col. Michael Herman of the Aberdeen Boys and Girls Club; Cathy Lindmann, Mary Malsom and Carol Sherman of the Brown County Register of Deeds; Thomas Gohn and Kathy Schlecht of the Brown County Military Veterans Office; Crystal Mensch-Nelson of the Dakota Territorial Museum in Yankton; Sherry Trudeau of the Northern State University Williams Library in Aberdeen; Coulter Heirigs of Sen. Tim Johnson’s Office; Donald Gisi of the Brown County Centennial Village; Aberdeen veteran Thayne Wika; Theresa Bosch and Glenda Lanning of the Yankton Community Library; Brittney Bessert of the Yankton Parks and Recreation Department; and Zumbaum.

The State Archives is open for public research from 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m. CDT Monday-Friday and the first Saturday of each month. Call (605) 773-3804 or email archref@state.sd.us for more information.

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Photo Credit: The 1893 gravestone of Sgt. J.F. Kinna is pictured in Aberdeen before being shipped to Yankton. (Photo courtesy Col. Michael Herman, Aberdeen)

The South Dakota State Historical Society is a division of the Department of Tourism. The Department of Tourism is comprised of Tourism, the South Dakota Arts Council,

and the State Historical Society. The Department is led by Secretary James D. Hagen. The State Historical Society is headquartered at the South Dakota Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre. The center houses the society's world-class museum, the archives, and the historic preservation, publishing and administrative/development offices. Call (605) 773-3458 or visit www.history.sd.gov for more information. The society also has an archaeology office in Rapid City; call (605) 394-1936 for more information.