



HISTORY NOOK

Orcas Island gets a Colonel

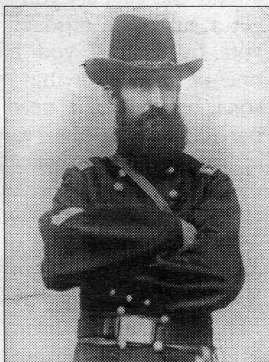
By: CLARK MCABEE

John Black Vliet had a long career in surveying and engineering. Born April 26th, in 1822 in Wilmington, Ohio he accomplished a great deal in his life. He surveyed numerous townships in Iowa (with his father a famous surveyor) and in Wisconsin. He was elected county surveyor and city engineer of Milwaukee County and city. In the 1850s he began working with railroads.

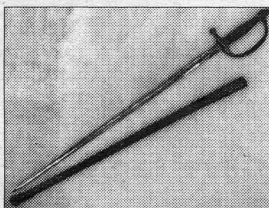
At the start of the American Civil War, Vliet enlisted as a volunteer and was commissioned Captain for Company I of the 31st Wisconsin Infantry Volunteers. He served throughout the war, including briefly visiting Fort Leavenworth, and was taken prisoner of war in 1864. He later escaped, was wounded, and was in early 1865 commissioned as lieutenant colonel of the 51st Wisconsin Infantry Volunteers.

After mustering out in August of 1865, Vliet started for Lawrence, Kansas. Once there he presented himself to General James Lane and was quickly engaged as chief engineer of the Leavenworth, Lawrence, and Fort Gibson Railroad, later renamed the Leavenworth, Lawrence, and Galveston. By 1870 Vliet was engaged in surveying for the Paola and Fall River Railroad and thereafter he returned to Wisconsin.

He came west to the San Juans from Wisconsin and stayed with another Civil War veteran from



Portrait of Lt. Colonel John Black Vliet, 51st Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry Regiment courtesy of Jan Koltun Titus.



Civil War era sword from the Orcas Island Historical Collection. Photo by author

Wisconsin, Elvin H. Smith, the famed "Hermit of Matia." Smith bought Matia in the early 1890s. Vliet lived with him for a time then moved to Orcas Island after their relationship became strained. It seems they could not agree on who was the best general officer on the Union side during the Civil War. The old war horse was cared for in his old age by the Harry Donohue family, whose father Michael was also a Civil War veteran of Chancellorsville and Gettysburg. It is believed the wicker wheel chair in our collection belonged to Lt. Colonel Vliet who was also an accomplished civil engineer and also de-

signed a successful water pump. Near the end of his life he returned to Wisconsin where he passed away in 1910.

Clark McAbee

Director Orcas Island Historical Museums

Special thanks to Jan Koltun Titus for donating a portrait of Lt. Col Vliet, Virginia Jensen, Joanne Johnston and the Kansas Historical Society.

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