

## **Joseph Burger**

(1848-1921)

Compiled by Cynthia Jorgenrud – Anoka Chapter NSDAR

### **Born**

April, 16, 1848  
Bludenz, Vorarlberg, Tyrol, Austria

### **Entered Service**

#### **Civil War**

July 15, 1861

Crystal Lake, Hennepin County,  
Minnesota

US Army, Company H

Second Minnesota Infantry

### **Died**

January 3, 1921  
St Paul, MN



### **Early Years**

Joseph Burger was born on April 16, 1848 in Austria. His family immigrated to the United States when he was a toddler and settled in Chicago. His parents both died from cholera in 1854, making him an orphan at age 6. He was then sent on an orphan train to a foster home in New Ulm, Minnesota.

At age 9, he began work as a farm hand in New Ulm, but he grew restless. When Fort Sumter was fired upon on April 12, 1861, Joseph began thinking about becoming a soldier. But he was only 13 years old!

### **War Years**

Then when the Second Minnesota Regiment was being organized in July, 1861, Joseph wrote in his diary that he thought he could join "maybe as a drummer" even though he was only 13 years and 3 months. He ran away from home at that point to join the army. As he was tall for his age, he convinced the recruiter that he was eighteen, and it was official; Joseph was a volunteer in Minnesota Second Regiment as a drummer. He excitedly wrote in his diary that he received "drumsticks, a new uniform, boots, et al"

Until the Second Minnesota left the state on October 14, 1861, Joseph worked on his drumming and his marching. He also did a lot of water carrying, road building, trench digging, wood gathering, and tending horses – normal soldier activities. However, he learned that the drummers were special targets for the enemy – “we were vital to the signaling of troop movements”.

Before the Second Minnesota reached its intended destination of Washington, they were diverted to Louisville, Kentucky for guard and picket duty in and around Lebanon Junction. In January 1862, the Second took part in the Mill Springs Campaign, driving a Confederate regiment back in disorder and capturing their supplies.

The regiment then moved on to Shiloh, arriving on April 9, 1862, missing that famous battle by two days (July 6-&7). They camped in Corinth, Mississippi until late June when they moved on to Perryville. Here they were held in reserve at the Battle of Perryville in October. The remainder of 1862 was spent on short expeditions and various guard duties, finally making camp near Gallatin, Tennessee.

In early February, the regiment was located near the Battle Farm along Nolan Pike. On February 15, 1863, Burger was assigned, with 16 others, the task of guarding foraging wagons. Leading the squad was Sgt. Lovilo Holmes from Mankato, Minnesota. It was later that day that the squad ran into a company of Confederate cavalrymen, numbering about 125. Joseph and his squad were defiant and held the Southern men off until the remaining Second Minnesota, back at camp, heard the sound of the distant fighting and came to the rescue. Sgt. Holmes and two other privates were wounded. This brave and defiant action by this squad of 16 earned them all the Medal of Honor. Joseph was then just 14 years old.

The Second Minnesota fought again later at Chickamauga, Missionary Ridge, and Kennesaw Mountain. As his enlistment term was up in late 1863, Joseph Burger reenlisted into the Second Minnesota again on December 12, 1863.

On July 9, 1864, Burger was guarding Confederate prisoners being moved by train to Chattanooga, Tennessee. Near Dalton, Georgia, the train jerked violently and Joseph lost his balance. He fell out of the train car door and his rifle discharged. The Minie ball went through his hand, through the left forearm, and right leg, lodging in the calf. In his diary he wrote, “ I fear for my very life for I am nearly destroyed.”

His left arm was amputated and he was sent to a hospital in Chicago. In December of 1864, Burger was promoted to Captaincy and assigned to Hancock’s Invalid Reserve Corps at Fort Douglas Camp in Illinois. In June of 1865, at the young age of 17, Joseph Burger was discharged and returned to Minnesota.

## **The Post War Years**

Even with his disabilities, Joseph Burger did not give up. After being discharged, he moved to Missouri to study law at Warrenton College. He met and later married 19-year-old Caroline Nolton on April 7, 1869 in Warrenton. Burger practiced law in Missouri for a time and even served in the state legislature in 1872, representing Franklin, 2<sup>nd</sup> district.

In 1877, he and Caroline moved back to Mankato, Minnesota. He served in the Minnesota House of Representatives in 1881 through 1882, representing District 14. He later moved to St. Paul and served as a military storekeeper on Governor Hubbard’s staff.

He was awarded his Medal of Honor on September 11, 1897. The citation reads: "Was one of a detachment of 16 men who heroically defended a wagon train against the attack of 125 cavalry, repulsed the attack and saved the train."

His disability was nearly total, needing constant help in dressing, washing, and nearly everything else. The bullet still remained in his leg.

However, he and Caroline raised seven children. In 1870, Charles Joseph (father of U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger) was born while they were still in Missouri. Also born in Missouri were Elizabeth (1872), Pauline (1874), Amelia (1876), and Minnie (1878). Both Julia (1880) and George Alexander (1887) were born in Minnesota.

Caroline died of bronchitis on November 6, 1920 in St. Paul, Minnesota. Joseph followed a few months later on January 3, 1921 at the age of 72. Both were buried together in Oakland Cemetery in St. Paul, Minnesota.



*At right: photo of Caroline & Joseph Burger.*



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## Note

Great-great granddaughter, Sara Burger-Edwards, has a copy of Joseph's diary and provided the entries in the Mankato Free Press article. Burger-Edwards is a lawyer, like her great-great-grandfather, and is an adjunct professor at Bethany Luther College in Mankato, Minnesota.