

## Denis Byrne (1828 – 1905)

Compiled by Kathy Huston, Lake Minnetonka DAR



**BIRTH:** May 1828 Wexford, County Wexford, Ireland  
**ENTERED SERVICE:** 16 Mar 1858 at New York, New York  
**BRANCH:** ARMY  
**CONFLICT:** Indian Wars  
**DEATH:** 31 December 1905

### Early Years

Denis Byrne was born in Wexford, Ireland in May, 1828 and emigrated to America before 1860.<sup>1</sup> He initially settled in New York City, and enlisted for five years in the U.S. Army on 16 Mar 1858, stating his occupation at the time as shoemaker. He was sent to the frontier to serve with the 5th U.S. Infantry.<sup>2</sup> A career soldier, he would spend the majority of his life in the military.

### The War Years

The 5th U.S. Infantry spent the Civil War in the territory of New Mexico. Byrne re-enlisted 16 January 1863 at Albuquerque, New Mexico.<sup>3,4</sup> When the Civil War ended and the bulk of the Regular Army returned from war service in the east to frontier duty in the west, the 5th Infantry moved slightly in the other direction, transferring from New Mexico to Kansas.<sup>5</sup> Byrne is listed on records at Ft. Bliss, Texas from 1866.<sup>6</sup> By October, 1868 the 5th Infantry was strung out across seven different posts in western Kansas, with headquarters at Fort Riley. Congress expanded the Army to 41 infantry regiments in July, 1866, then reduced it to 25 in March, 1869. The 5th absorbed half of the 37th Infantry, including its commander, Colonel and Brevet Major General Nelson A. Miles. Under his command, the 5th, with some companies operating at times as mounted infantry, took part in many of the major Indian wars of the next twelve years.<sup>7</sup>

From 1865 to 1889, Fort Hays was a key frontier post for the United States Army during the Indian Wars, serving as a base of operations for combat forces and a supply point for Fort Dodge

and Camp Supply to the south. Major General Philip Sheridan, supported by Lt. Col. George Custer and the 7th Cavalry Regiment, used it as his headquarters during his 1868-1869 campaign against the Cheyenne and the Kiowa. Both Buffalo Bill Cody and Wild Bill Hickok served as Army scouts at Fort Hays during this period. Custer and the 7th Cavalry continued to operate from the fort when Col. Miles assumed command in April, 1869. Miles and the 5th Infantry Regiment were assigned to protect the railroad from Indian attacks as its construction extended west into Colorado Territory. In 1871, Custer and the 7th Cavalry were reassigned to the South, and Miles and the 5th Infantry headquarters relocated to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.<sup>8,9</sup>

Byrne's commanding officer, Lt. William Reed of the 5th Infantry, is mentioned by Buffalo Bill Cody as someone he hunted buffalo with near Ft. Hays.<sup>10</sup> According to Byrne's military record, he re-enlisted in 1868 at Fort Hayes<sup>11</sup>, was discharged Jan 16, 1871, a sergeant under Lt. Reed with exceptional service at Ft. Hays. He also re-enlisted on that date.<sup>12</sup> And Byrne is shown on records at Ft. Leavenworth in 1873.<sup>13</sup>

From July 1874 to February 1875, Miles led a mixed force of the 5th Infantry and 6th Cavalry in campaigns against the Southern Cheyenne, Comanche and Kiowa Indians along the Red and Washita Rivers in Indian Territory and Texas. The 5th Infantry also played a major role in the Red River War.<sup>14</sup>

Byrne re-enlisted again in 1876.<sup>15</sup> The Battle of Cedar Creek was part of the Great Sioux War of 1876; that summer the Battle of Little Bighorn and Custer's Last Stand had been a major victory for the Sioux and Cheyenne Indians.

In the aftermath of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, the U.S. Army sent reinforcements to Montana to scour the northern plains after Custer's defeat, forcing the Sioux in Montana Territory onto reservations. One of these units was the 5th Infantry Regiment led by Miles from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas to the Yellowstone River in Montana Territory, where he came under command of General Alfred Terry.

Byrne is found moving with the 5th under Miles into Montana Territory. He is shown on military documents from Fort Ellis, Montana.<sup>16</sup> He is also listed as on the rolls of the Army Quartermaster's Department, Fort Custer, Montana as a Wagon and Forage Master, 1877-1880,<sup>17</sup> and he is on the 1880 federal census for Fort Custer.<sup>18</sup>

Terry's men moved to Glendive on the Yellowstone River where he established winter quarters. Under Terry, Miles' troops set up a temporary base at the mouth of the Tongue River. Supply trains attempting to reach Terry's men were ambushed by Sioux warriors several times in October, 1876. After a few engagements Indian messengers contacted the commander of one wagon train suggesting a meeting between Miles and Sitting Bull at Cedar Creek. The two men met on October 20th. Miles demanded the surrender of all the Sioux while Sitting Bull wanted to trade for ammunition so he could hunt buffalo. The two agreed to meet again the following day.

On the 21st Miles again demanded an Indian surrender while Sitting Bull demanded a halt to white encroachment on Sioux territory. The talks broke down and a gunfight erupted in which two soldiers and five Indians were killed. The Sioux withdrew and were chased for about eight miles by the army. Crucially the Indians abandoned food, horses and their shelters. With no means of surviving the winter, some 2,000 surrendered on October 27th. Sitting Bull and his

more ardent warriors were not among them. They were headed for Canada and the army engaged in a winter campaign in pursuit of the renegades.<sup>19</sup>

By the start of Miles' winter campaign of 1877, during which he drove his troops on a forced march across Montana and eventually intercepted the Nez Percé band led by Chief Joseph<sup>20</sup>, Byrne had become a veteran Indian fighter and had reached the rank of Sergeant in Company G, 5th U.S. Infantry. Between October 1876 and January 1877, he participated in many battles against the Sioux, most notably, against Chief Sitting Bull at Cedar Creek, Montana. On the latter date Byrne and the 5th Infantry defeated a band of Sioux and Cheyenne at Wolf Mountain, Montana. Byrne was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his fighting in these battles. In total, there were 31 men who received Medals of Honor for their efforts in this period, the Irish-born soldiers well represented with eleven awards.<sup>21</sup>

Byrne's citation, issued 27 April 1877, reads "Gallantry in engagements."<sup>22</sup>

### **Post-War Years**

After finally leaving the military, Byrne homesteaded 160 acres in Minnesota on 31 Mar 1888.<sup>23</sup> In 1890, he filed for a Civil War pension in Minnesota.<sup>24</sup>

On the Minnesota State and Territorial Census for 1895 Denis Byrne is living in Melville, Renville County, Minnesota, a boarder with Joseph Haggitt (also of the 5th Infantry) and wife Cora. He is age 60, a farmer, and claims he has been in the district and state for six years.<sup>25</sup> On the 1900 Federal Census he is single, still a boarder with Haggitt and his wife; has been in the country for 40 years, and was naturalized in 1860.

This time he listed his occupation as "old soldier".<sup>26</sup>

### **Gravestone**

Byrne died in on the last day of 1905 at the age of 72 at Bird Island, Renville County, Minnesota, and is buried in Calvary Cemetery, St. Paul, Ramsey County, Minnesota.<sup>27</sup>



## **Documentation**

- <sup>1</sup> 1900 USC for Melville, Renville, MN, p. 178A, line 3, HH #1; online at [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)
- <sup>2</sup> U.S. Army, Register of Enlistments, 1798-1914 Denis Byrne, 16 March 1858, New York, New York; found online at [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)
- <sup>3</sup> Civil War Pension Application of Dennis Byrne, Minnesota #904217; certificate #661551, filed 3 August 1890; Service Company G 5<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry; online in U.S. Civil War Pension Index: General Index to Pension Files, 1861-1934 at [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)
- <sup>4</sup> U.S. Army Register of Enlistments, 1798-1914, Denis Byrne 16 January 1863, Albuquerque, New Mexico; online at [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)
- <sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/5th\\_Infantry\\_Regiment\\_\(United\\_States\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/5th_Infantry_Regiment_(United_States))
- <sup>6</sup> U.S. Returns from Regular Army Infantry Regiments, 1821-1916; online at [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)
- <sup>7</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/5th\\_Infantry\\_Regiment\\_\(United\\_States\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/5th_Infantry_Regiment_(United_States))
- <sup>8</sup> Kansas State Historical Society, Fort Hays, online at <https://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/fort-hays/11793>
- <sup>9</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort\\_Hays](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort_Hays)
- <sup>10</sup> Don Russell, *The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill*; University of Oklahoma Press, 1979; p. 84-87
- <sup>11</sup> U.S. Army Register of Enlistments, 1798-1914, Denis Byrne 16 January 1868, Ft. Hays, Kansas; online at [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)
- <sup>12</sup> U.S. Returns from Regular Army Infantry Regiments, 1821-1916; online at [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)
- <sup>13</sup> U.S. Returns from Regular Army Infantry Regiments, 1821-1916; online at [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)
- <sup>14</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/5th\\_Infantry\\_Regiment\\_\(United\\_States\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/5th_Infantry_Regiment_(United_States))
- <sup>15</sup> U.S. Returns from Regular Army Infantry Regiments, 1821-1916; online at [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)
- <sup>16</sup> U.S. Returns from Regular Army Infantry Regiments, 1821-1916; online at [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)
- <sup>17</sup> Montana Memory Project, Billings Public Library Historic Collection, found online at <http://cdm15018.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p103401pblhc/id/442/rec/4>
- <sup>18</sup> 1880 USC for Fort Custer, Custer County, Montana Territory; found at <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mtyellow/census1880/fortcuster.pdf>
- <sup>19</sup> South Tipperary Military History Society Forum; <http://stmhs.proboards.com/thread/26/irish-recipient-medal-honor?page=3#ixzz44n6mvDZj>
- <sup>20</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/ir/miles.htm>
- <sup>21</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Denis\\_Byrne\\_\(Medal\\_of\\_Honor\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Denis_Byrne_(Medal_of_Honor))
- <sup>22</sup> <http://www.history.army.mil/moh/indianwars.html#BYRNE>

<sup>23</sup> Homestead Land Office Records, [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)

<sup>24</sup> Civil War Pension Application of Dennis Byrne, Minnesota #904217; certificate #661551, filed 3 August 1890; Service Company G 5<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry; online in U.S. Civil War Pension Index: General Index to Pension Files, 1861-1934 at [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)

<sup>25</sup> 1895 Minnesota State and Territorial Census for Melville, Renville, MN

<sup>26</sup> 1900 USC for Melville, Renville, MN, p. 178A, line 3, HH #1; found online at [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=19695018>

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<http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=19695018>