

Falmouth Historical Society Annual Meeting

FHS Presents! — The Story Begins with a Sword

The Iverson Brothers in Cuba

In-person and Online via Zoom—January 23, 2024

The accompanying slides are posted on the Society website at:

<https://thefhs.org/resources/Documents/FHS%20Presents-The%20Story%20Begins%20with%20a%20Sword.pdf>.

David Farnham shared what he learned when researching the history of an artifact at Falmouth Memorial Library.

Every artifact has a story. An artifact presented without a story is begging for the history detectives to go to work. That’s what happened here.

There have been libraries in Falmouth going back 250 years. Efforts to establish the Falmouth Memorial Library began in 1943. Funds were raised from wartime scrap drives. The home at the corner of Depot and Lunt Roads had been the home of Iver Iverson from 1908 until his death in 1948. His widow died two years later and left the house to her brother. He died a short time afterwards and the heirs sold the home to the library association in June 1951. Falmouth Memorial Library opened in the former Iverson home in May 1952 and has been there ever since.

There had been renovations and expansions of the library over the years, but none as extensive as the work completed in 2022. A ceremony was held to rededicate the library. During the ceremony, a sword that Iver Iverson had carried during his military service in Cuba was exhibited.

The “sword” was a Model 1860 light cavalry saber that had been issued to cavalry troopers since the Civil War. And that was the mystery: How did a young man from Falmouth come to be a cavalryman serving in the US Army in Cuba?

According to family legend, Iver had been a “rough rider,” and some took this to mean he had charged up Kettle Hill with Teddy Roosevelt.

A quick search of Ancestry turned up a pension application from 1927 in which Iver Iverson (ending with “on”) claimed service in L Troop of the 8th US Cavalry.

It was only later we thought to search for Iver Iversen (ending with “en”) which is how the family spelled their name before WWI.

We needed to know more about Iver’s family.

Iver’s father was Marin Hansen Iversen. He was born in a rural part of southern Denmark called the Duchy of Schleswig. Along with adjacent Holstein, the people living in this area were a diverse lot. Some spoke Danish and their allegiance was to Copenhagen. Others spoke German and had closer ties to German-speaking nations to the south and east. We believe that Martin’s family were Danes living in a Danish-speaking parish on the west coast of Schleswig.

Denmark had repulsed a previous attempt by Germans to annex Schleswig and Holstein. There were large swaths of German speakers who would have welcomed annexation. In 1864, Prussia invaded Schleswig. This time, the Germans prevailed, and the Danish King ceded Schleswig to the Germans. By 1770, annexation was a done deal.

This led to an exodus of Danes who wanted to stay Danish across the border into Denmark. There wasn’t land for them. There weren’t jobs. Many looked west to America.

A surprisingly large number came to Maine. Many had been farmers. They must have liked the climate and the culture because they of them settled in Falmouth and thrived.

Martin Iversen married the daughter of another family of Danish refugees. They had four children.

Spanish-American War. Before we explore Iver’s military service, we need some context. Exactly when was the Spanish-American War?

It’s a toss-up as to which war went more swiftly—the Spanish-American War of 1898 or the Persian Gulf War of 1990. It’s brevity and relatively light loss of life (when compared to the Civil War) led to it being dubbed the “Splendid Little War.” Fighting was pretty much done by August 12th.

The Army wasted no time pulling out of Cuba because everyone was sick, mostly due to Malaria. They left three regiments as an army of occupation.

These were the 24th Infantry along with the 9th and 10th Cavalry.

They were “Buffalo Soldiers.” They were, in the parlance of the time, “colored troops.” In what today seems like an extraordinary bit of reverse racism, it was believed that people of African descent had stronger resistance to tropical disease.

Time proved this assumption false, and it wasn’t long before there were calls for reinforcements. Cavalry units were needed for their mobility. The Army sent three regiments. The 8th Cav arrived in Nov 1898 and occupied the center of Cuba. The 8th had its headquarters and a garrison at Puerto Principe (which is now called Camaguey). They had another garrison at Nuevitas.

Iver Iversen, a 20-year-old man of Falmouth enlisted in the regular Army in November 1900. This was two years after the Spanish-American War was effectively over. Soldiers were needed for the army of occupation supporting the US military government running Cuba until a Cuban-led government was strong enough to stand on its own feet.

Iver was sent (probably by way of Fort Riley, Kansas—the 8th Cav’s home station) to Cuba and assigned to L Troop. Here he underwent Army training. He spent the next 15 months performing the duties expected of the cavalry in Cuba: patrolling and providing military escorts in the hinterlands of Puerto Principe Province.

Iver must have performed well because he was promoted to corporal and probably became a squad leader. As Cuba prepared for independence, the 8th Cav was ordered back to Fort Riley. Iver’s troop left in February 1902.

He spent the rest of his hitch in garrison and was honorably discharged when his enlistment was up in November 1903.

No, Iver didn’t serve during the Spanish-American War. All cavalry troopers serving in Cuba came to be called “Rough Riders,” but he didn’t charge up Kettle Hill with a future president.

The Army didn't have three regiments of cavalry riding around the countryside armed to the teeth without cause. Iver's duty in Cuba was definitely not spent sitting on a sunny beach sipping a piña colada.

Time for some more historical context. The fellow who was "El presidente" in Cuba when the US left in 1902 didn't last very long. He tried to rig an election three years later. This led to a revolt in 1906 and the government collapsed. The US government, under the authority of a 1903 pact with Cuba, sent the Army back to Cuba to reestablish the government.

Now it was Iver's brother Lawrence's turn to serve his country. He too was sent to the cavalry—this time it was I Troop of the 15th US Cav at Fort Ethan Allen in Vermont.

When things fall apart in Cuba, the 15th Cav was one of the regiments sent to be part of the "Army of Pacification." (For those of us old enough to remember the war in Vietnam, now we know where the term originated.)

Iver was promoted to corporal and served as the leader of a machine gun section. He was on detached duty providing security at fixed locations around the coastal town of Cienfuegos.

You don't need crew-served automatic weapons in sandbagged emplacements to discourage pickpockets.

When Lawrence's three-year hitch was up, they shipped him to Fort Monroe in Hampton Roads, Virginia, where he was honorably discharged in April 1907.

Iver and Lawrence returned to Maine. They found brides (from other Danish families) and got married. Lawrence had three children between his two wives. One of his granddaughters visited the Museum this past summer.

Both Iver and Lawrence became carpenters and lived on Depot Road. Iver died in 1948. Lawrence followed a decade later. Both are buried at Pine Grove. Iver received a medal for his service in the Army of Occupation. Lawrence got a medal for his service in the Army of Pacification.

As a historical society, we are accustomed to reconstructing narratives of military service from spotty records. Our biggest problem is the large number of WWII

records lost in a blaze at the records center in 1973. Usually, we can learn a lot from unit rosters (sometimes called muster rolls).

In this case, there was nothing. No personnel records were maintained for enlisted soldiers in the regular army—only a “Register of Enlistment.” Beyond that, we found no unit histories, no rosters or musters, not anything.

Military histories usually fill in the gaps. Not so much here. The histories tended to be broad in scope and seldom identified individual units.

We found a wealth of information in an unlikely source: Newspaper accounts. Who needs spies when the press provides regular reports on unit deployments, readiness, and morale? We were amazed to see newspapers (archived in GenealogyBank.com) identifying units down to the company or troop level.

Puritan roots run deep in New England and that applies to Falmouth. Historians are quick to tell us that the phrase “Puritan New England” is three lies for the price of one. Our community in Falmouth was built by waves of immigration over the past four centuries.

Many fled oppression or religious persecution in their homeland. They came seeking opportunity and found it.

Many of these immigrants showed their appreciation to their new country through military service. An Iverson from a later generation was the first son of Falmouth to give his life during military service in WWII.

If Martin Iversen had not come to Maine, he certainly would have been conscripted into the Prussian army. The phrase “cannon fodder” comes to mind. Instead, he came here and packed two of his sons off to serve in the army of the nation to which he had chosen to belong.

The Iverson Family is just one more chapter in a story where we could fill several large volumes with the tales of Danes who sought refuge in Maine. Their heritage is still evident today with the names of so many townspeople ending in “sen” or “son.” One Iverson descendant—Carol Iverson Kauffman—is a former president of our Society and currently sits on our board of directors.