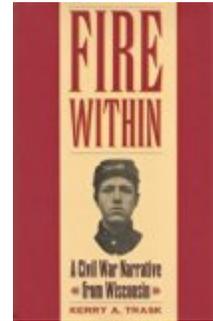


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Kerry A. Trask. *The Fire Within: A Civil War Narrative from Wisconsin*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1995. xiii + 279 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87338-519-0.

Reviewed by Mark D. Van Ells (CUNY-Queensborough)
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Civil War at the Grass Roots

To help the people of his adopted hometown cultivate a “historically conscious sense of place” (p. ix), Kerry Trask (professor of history at the University of Wisconsin Center-Manitowoc County) developed a brief talk about the first soldier from Manitowoc, Wisconsin, to die in the Civil War. However, Trask soon found himself absorbed by the story and explored the matter further. The result, *The Fire Within: A Civil War Narrative from Wisconsin*, is a fascinating glimpse into the world of one frontier village during the war to preserve the Union.

Based primarily on newspapers, letters, and diaries, Trask’s book reconstructs the worlds of Manitowoc’s soldiers in the field and their friends and families back home. His goal is to “recreate a sense of how the Civil War looked and felt” for the soldiers (p. xi) and to explore the ways in which the war affected those remaining in Manitowoc. He provides a brief history of the village, then follows selected persons through the war. One is James S. Anderson, an enthusiastic nineteen-year-old volunteer whose three years in the Army of the Potomac led to his exhaustion and disillusionment with the army. Another is innkeeper Rosa Kellner, an ardent supporter of the war whose diary revealed much about the thoughts and feelings of local residents. The resulting narrative underscores the strong connection between the soldiers in the field and those who remained behind, while at the same time showing how soldiers and civilians grew distant from each other as the war dragged on—a development familiar to those who have lived through more recent conflicts.

Trask aimed the work at both scholarly and popular audiences, and both will find it an absorbing and valuable account of Civil War America. However, professional scholars may be troubled by its narrative format. In retelling the war stories of Manitowoc residents, Trask raises numerous intriguing issues—such as Anderson’s possible combat exhaustion and the social anxieties behind the village’s 1862 Indian massacre scare—but leaves it to the reader to connect them to larger trends in American social and cultural history. The work’s only noteworthy omission is the voice of Manitowoc’s considerable German-speaking community. None of the soldiers Trask follows served in one of Wisconsin’s predominantly German regiments and the citations make reference to only a very few German-language sources, despite the fact that one in six Manitowoc residents was German-born.

The Fire Within is an outstanding work of history in several respects. Trask succeeds as few historians have done in conveying the personal impact of the Civil War on Americans. The horror and exhilaration of combat, the monotony of camp life, the passions and anxieties of noncombatants come alive as the author relates how individuals discussed the war, what it meant to them, and how they were affected by it. He then skillfully weaves the stories of both soldiers and civilians together, switching gracefully from battlefield to homefront to produce an exceptionally vivid portrait of the lives of everyday Americans during the nation’s epic struggle.

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