Severt Tesdall was born April 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 1842, in Etne, Norway to Erik and Barbero Tesdall in an area known as the “Tesdel Valley”. In 1854, Severt and his family immigrated to this country, and by the summer of 1855 his family had joined a large (mostly Norwegian) “Immigrant Train” of wagons under Pastor Osmond Sheldahl that left the Fox River country (about 50 miles west of present day Chicago) and ultimately settled in southern Story Count., Iowa.

The first recorded death in the new settlement in the winter of 1855 was that of Barbero Tesdall, Severt’s mother. Severt’s father, Erik and siblings (Anna, Aamon/Amos, Sarah, and Bertha) spent their first year living in a dugout cave located on what is now the farm of Sanford Tesdall about one-mile north of the present location of Palestine Church in rural Story County. In the spring of 1856 the family built their first log home and began clearing and farming the land they had purchased beside their immigrant neighbors.

When Civil War broke upon his new homeland, Severt enlisted into the 23\textsuperscript{rd} Regiment of Iowa Volunteer Infantry and mustered with his regiment at Camp Burnside (in present day East Des Moines near what is now Redhead Park, named for early pioneer business man, Wesley Redhead) on September 19\textsuperscript{th}, 1862. Once enrolled, he was assigned to Company “A” of the new regiment. Here he trained and received his initial issue of uniforms and equipment before marching to Eddyville to board the train for Keokuk and points south. By the time the war ended for the 23\textsuperscript{rd} Iowa, only four of the original fifty-eight men of Company “A” had survived. (Severt Tesdall, of Sheldahl, Iowa; S.P. O’Brien of Ames; Christian Torkelson, of Story City; and Willis Gossard, of Ogle County, Illinois). Over the course of their service the regiment had travelled by foot, boat, rail, ship, and wagon train, over 10,000 miles.

During their years of service, the 23\textsuperscript{rd} would suffer the losses of 9 Officers and 119 Enlisted men killed or mortally wounded; and, another 3 Officers and 212 enlisted men would succumb to disease or injury before the regimental colors were furled and cased for the last time at Savannah, GA., on July 17\textsuperscript{th}, 1865. In total, 343 members of the 23\textsuperscript{rd} Iowa would never again see their homes and families, having paid the ultimate cost of freedom and unity on distant battlefields, far from home. The remains of this proud regiment’s colors now reside in the collections of the Iowa Battle Flags Project, State Historical Society of Iowa Museum in Des Moines.

The original letters transcribed below were written home in his native Norwegian language by Severt, as his family spoke little English. They were later translated into English by Sanford Tesdall, a son of Severt', and typewritten by Rosalie Tesdell Locker. They have been made available to us by Kenneth Wald, a Great-grandson of Severt Tesdell and new member of the Major General Grenville M. Dodge Camp # 75, Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War.

In some military records the Tesdall name is spelled variously as Tesdahl, Tesdel, and Tesdell. Not unusual for the period, Severt himself often appears to have spelled his name using one or more variations of his last name.
To the extent possible, the editor has cross checked the dates and place names found in these letters and referenced them to both the “Adjutant General’s Report and Record of the War of the Rebellion” in the State Archives and Library of the Iowa State Historical Society; and, to “A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion” Vol. 3 (the Regimental Histories), by Frederick H. Dyer, published by Thomas Yoseloff, New York and London, 1959; and found them to coincide in every instance with the official records of the movements of the 23rd Iowa and the engagements in which they fought as part of the Armies of the Tennessee and Gulf.

*Dyer’s Compendium of the War of the Rebellion (Vol. III, pp.1174-1175)* states, in part, that 23rd Regiment of Iowa Volunteer Infantry was mustered into service on September 19th, 1862, at Des Moines. They trained at Camp Burnside, Des Moines, until being ordered to proceed first to Keokuk, Iowa and then on to Saint Louis for further deployment with the Department of Missouri at Camp Patterson and West Plains, Missouri until February of 1863.

No alterations from the original spelling have been made, and the grammatical and syntactic style are completely those of the original author; Pvt. Severt Tesdall, Company “A”, 23rd Iowa Volunteer Infantry.

*Pilot Knobs*

*October 12, 1862*

“Dear Father, Brothers, & Sisters

Now that I have the opportunity, I will tell you about my present status. First to tell you that my health is good, and secondly I will let you know what we have done since we left Des Moines.

On the 21st of September, we marched from Des Moines to___________(Eddyville), according to records) 75 miles away. It took us four days. There we went on board a railroad train, which took us to Keokuk where we stayed two days.

Then we boarded a large steamboat which took us down the Mississippi to St. Louis, where we stayed ten days. A lot of sick and wounded soldiers came there by steamboat and I helped to carry these soldiers from the boat to a hospital. Ten of them were dead and seven hundred sick and wounded. It was a gruesome sight to see all of those poor fellows.

The rest of the time in St. Louis I was a guard at a large house where rebel prisoners were kept. We got orders to leave St. Louis and boarded a train at 12:00 at night. We traveled ninety miles south West of St. Louis where we are camped between four mountains. It has rained continually since we came here. We have slept on the wet ground and our clothes have not been dry since we came.

The Second night some of our guards came into camp and reported that they had seen a lot of enemy troops which caused a lot of excitement in camp. Immediately we ordered to have our guns loaded and ready and to sleep with them in our arms all night. In the night, I heard our cannons begin to fire on there fort but otherwise we did not do any fighting.

We have ten regiments here now and will stay here until twenty or thirty more regiments come. I do not know how long it will be until they come, but when they do, we will march south from here.”
Severt Tesdel  
St. Louis Missouri  
Company A 23rd Regiment  
Iowa Volunteers  

December 21, 1862

“On December 20, we left camp Patterson and marched 5 days on muddy roads. We got here on Christmas Eve. It has been quiet during the Christmas Holiday. We are eight regiments and fifteen cannons fifty miles south of Patterson. They say that about fifty miles south of here, there is a rebel army and we expect to engage them in battle, however we hear so many rumors, we don’t know what to believe.

The second day out of Patterson, one of my Norwegian comrades become lost. (Christopher Ness) Some of us hunted for him, but couldn’t find him. We heard the enemy had attacked Camp Peterson, what we had worked so hard to build.”

New Madrid, Missouri  
March 22, 1863

“I’m still well for which I thank God. I sent $40 home with our Chaplin and asked him to leave it with the Swedish Pastor, R. Peterson, in Des Moines. Will you go there and get it? We left Pilot Knob March 9th and marched to St. Geneva on the Mississippi and boarded a steamboat and came here. We spent two days and 2 nights on the boat. It has returned and we are going on board now.”

Vicksburg  
July 2, 1863

“I will tell you of two very hard battles which you have undoubtedly heard about.

On night at 2:00 while marching, we met the enemy and engaged in battle which lasted for two hours and then quieted down until morning, then kept on the next day until the enemy took flight. Sever were killed and twenty-seven injured in our regiment. But our enemy lost many more.

There was a little town nearby where we stayed for two days. Then we started marching to Jackson, Mississippi and when we got near, we heard that it was surrendered and the Rebels had left, and the next day we started for Vicksburg. When we came to the railroad, we could hear the cannon where they were fighting and we fought until evening. We came to the forts and the next morning our regiment charged
the fort with bayonets. Almost half were either killed or wounded, and we took a lot of prisoners. The river bend was on one side and we were on the other and they had no way out.

The next morning we left and crossed the river to Young-Point. We spent two weeks there guarding 5,000 prisoners. Then we took them to Memphis and returned to YoungPoint after a day and stayed there for several more days. We heard that the enemy was fifteen miles away and then we went on steamboat to meet them. The next morning we engaged the enemy in battle, but they drove us back to the river and a gunboat shot at them and the enemy had to retreat. All we had to help us fight were some negro soldiers and we lost twenty-five that were killed and forty-two were wounded in our regiment and how many negroes, I have no idea.

In this charge, the strap from my knapsack was shot off and I took a knapsack from a dead rebel officer and he even had butter. The enemy lost an awful lot of killed and wounded. The next day we returned to our camp and crossed the Mississippi and came to Vicksburg where we are now. We are entrenched on the East of Vicksburg with a line of defense fifteen miles long, and with gunboats on the other side and have surrounded the town for some time. How long it will take, I have no idea, but were lying in the trenches in a gully, in such a position that they can not hit us with rifle fire. When we are out in picket duty in front of the line, we are so near the enemy that we can talk with one another, but we are not allowed to shoot at them at such a time. We are having soldiers killed and wounded every day. The enemy is being shot at from all sides. The plans now are to starve them out because it is almost impossible to conquer them in battle. It’s quite warm here now. We get plenty of clothing whenever we need it. We get flour, sugar, coffee, dried peas and beans, and bacon and meats. We get even more than we can use.

I sent home a dress coat and a blanket and shirt with a man by the name of Young that lives on the Bardwell place and I paid him for bringing it.”

August 2, 1863

“I hope you have heard the enemy surrendered at Vicksburg on July 4th and we took all enemy soldiers prisoners there. 27,000 soldiers, 200 cannon and lots of rifles.

I was in an outpost trench on July 3rd. We worked and dug a tunnel to try to get under the enemy fort and planned on blowing them up. We got about three rods from them and they discovered what we were doing, but at the same time they were digging a tunnel to get under us and blow us up. And one night while we were sleeping they tried to blow us up with a lot of powder. The earth blew up all around us, but none were hurt. Everything is high priced-butter 25 cents a pound, cheese 30 cents a pound, potatoes 5 cents a pound and sweet potatoes 3 cents a pound. (sold butter in Des Moines at 4 cents a pound).

On the 5th of July, most of our Army went to retake Jackson, Mississippi. We took that place three months ago, but we couldn’t hold it, because we had to have all our Army at Vicksburg. When we got near Jackson, we found that the enemy had thrown up forts all around the town and then made fortresses outside of the enemy. Five nights later, the enemy fled from the town and we went in and it was burning
in three places. We tore up ten miles of railroad and returned to Vicksburg where we are not camped one-half mile away from the Mississippi River. We got here July 26th, and how long we’ll stay, I have no idea. Two of our company went home on furlough. My lieutenant told me that I could go home this summer on a furlough if I cared to.”

Vicksburg
August 21, 1863

“A cook, Andrew Chamberlain of Cambridge has been discharged, I hope to send a letter and $25 to you, with him. Do what you wish with it. You might buy some cattle. Butter is $.50 a pound now.”

Careltown, Louisiana
August 31, 1863

“I am still alive and well for which I thank God. We left Vicksburg on the 13th of August by boat, on the Mississippi. We got here the 16th. I got a pass from General and went to New Orleans by train, to see the town. It is quite large and has many ships. It cost me $.20 for a round trip ticket. I talked to Torres and Weir Weeks and Anfin Ersland and Andrew Nelson. They are all well. I saw John Johnson (relative) at Vicksburg.

We hear that we will move and take Mobile. It will be hard to take. We are expecting to hear that Charleston will be taken. It isn’t as hot here as in Vicksburg. Breezes blow in from the ocean.”

Careltown, Louisiana
November 2, 1863

“I took sick at Brasier City, eighty miles west of New Orleans and was sent to New Orleans by train to a hospital for six days. Andrew Gravdahl and Christen Sande have also been sick and returned also. I’m due to go back to the regiment but don’t know where they are. I think they may be in Texas. I’ll go by railroad and steamboat. It is very warm here. They tell us that there hasn’t been any snow for several years.

Fort Experanza, Texas
December 10, 1863

“We left Careltown (Louisiana) on November 18th by train for Brasier (Brashear) City. In three days the regiment went by rail to New Orleans. We boarded a ship that used steam and sails and traveled 800
miles south-west in bad weather and a rough sea. Some of our men were washed over board and one man of our regiment drowned. In four days, we came to an island and marched twenty miles to a bay, which we crossed, and marched forty miles more, where we came to the enemy and fortresses. When we were within two miles of the Fort, we were shot at by cannon and the cannon balls were so big, I couldn’t lift one of them. When it got dark, we moved closer, and dug trenches and made forts. The next morning we shot with our cannon. One of the warships came up and started to shoot at the enemy. That night the enemy fled and the next morning we went to their fortress and found their cannon and cannon balls they couldn’t move. That day a Norwegian with a sailboat loaded with corn came to sell the enemy. We took the corn and the boat and put him under guard. His home is forty miles from here.

By the way, when we were at YoungsPoint, I found a Norwegian prisoner of war from Texas, and he said his wife was a sister of Henry and Eric Eggland (they live east of Huxley; brothers were fighting against brothers.) The weather is warm. They don’t cut their hay, because it lives all winter. There are lots of reindeer on the island. We went deer hunting four miles from camp and killed many deer.

We expect to stay for three months. I have not had a letter for some time. I can go (home) ten days from now, but it is so far from home that I couldn’t stay more than two weeks and it would cost me $40 and they also have said that we are going down the Mississippi later and I feel I should stay with the Company. It is quite warm here now. I believe the next place we have to take is Mobile and I understand it is going to be very hard to conquer. I think it’s about 500 miles from here. They say it isn’t so hot as on the sea shore. Many of our Company are sick now. Seven have died lately and five were discharged. While we were at Jackson, I was the only Norwegian because all the others were sick. Now since we arrived here, Tores Upststivet has returned to our company and is well. Thor Nelson is back but is not too well yet. Elias Ersland went up the river a few weeks ago. Andrew Gravedahl and Christen Sunde are with the ambulance corps now. We have an easy time now, not much excitement.”

Indianola, Texas

February 4, 1864

“We left Fort Experanza three weeks ago and marched fifteen miles north. Our regiment was quartered in the Court House for two days. We marched 3 miles farther to this town. Many soldiers have been in the war over two years and will re-enlist for three years more, but none of our regiment can do that yet. Most of the Wisconsin, Illinois and Indiana regiment(s) will They’ll have a thirty day furlough. They’ll get $23 a month and $400 bounty. The weather is nice and warm now and we have no snow, so we have an easy life now. I would like to buy a couple of yearling colts, so tell me how much they cost when you write.”

Matagorda Island(Texas)

March 23, 1864
“Your letter of February 20, I received on March 15th. We left Indianola March 13 and came here the 15. We are camped three miles west of Fort Experanza on an island and we work on building up fortresses every day. We got ten new soldiers from Iowa in our Company and I understand more will be drafted. I don’t suppose they will draft brother Amos because he is not a citizen of the U.S., although I think he should help at home. I’m wondering if Amos has a horse for plowing corn. I’m thinking of having you buy a mare or a couple of colts. What do you think? I understand that a yearling mare would cost over $100. Our camp is only one-half a mile from the ocean and we have a net and every night we catch a lot of fish.”

Madagorda (Matagordo) Island, Texas
April 25, 1864

“I sent $65 home with our Lieutenant. His name is Steve O’Brien. He lives north of Walnut Grove. He was one of the best officers we have had. There is nothing much to write about here. It seems like it would be a healthy place to live.

We left Madagorda Island April 26 and went by ship to New Orleans and stayed a few days and we went up the Mississippi River to the mouth of RED River 90 miles to meet General Banks Army, but they were too strong so we had to retreat back to the Mississippi River and soon we saw many of our dead soldiers coming down the Red River killed by the enemy. A good friend had both hands tied on his back.”

Mergausa Bend, (Morganza) Louisiana
August 17, 1864

“We are camped here yet. Our company is serving as guard for General Lalle. We are on guard every other day. It isn’t hard because we have a roof over our heads. We have rebels and a few of our own and a few other things under guard. They’re bringing many in and we have to guard until they send them to New Orleans. We are in skirmishes with the rebels often and a while ago, we thought they were going to take this place and so they sent many more regiment to help us. They’ve been building forts every day and if they don’t come before we get done, I don’t believe there are enough rebels on the west side of the Mississippi to take us. Our regiment is encamped one mile south of here. There is some talk of us going to Mobile soon. I talked to Thor Nelson a day ago and he is very well and healthy. Our Company is not camping with the regiment while we are on guard duty. Our regiment is sent out to hunt the rebels every
now and then, but we have not been on the march since we took over the guard duty. I think its best if you sell my oxen and if you can buy some land in the Norwegian settlement”

Marguase, Louisiana

September 18, 1864

“There are many sick here now. One to four die every day. Most of the sick are new soldiers that can’t stand the climate as us who have been here for a year. It is very hot. I’m having an easy time, standing guard two times a week. We have heard that Atlanta has been taken. We fired 35 cannons as a salute to that. I hope that General Grant will take charge of our regiment. I hear that will start drafting in Iowa. There are several what would like to get out and fight and for others it would be unfortunate. I suppose you are through haying. How is the wheat and corn?”

Mobile, Alabama

February 20, 1865

“We left Cainville, Louisiana, on February 11, and marched to a little town and went aboard a steamboat and went over a large body of water called lake Pajystran, we were two days on the way. We are thirty miles from Mobile on a large peninsula now. We have many gunboats and monitors so the rebels can’t come near us. Our gunboat has 40 cannons, w0 on each side, so that the rebels don’t dare show their ships and we are just a little way from the ocean. I hear the waves day and night.”

Spanish Fort in Alabama

April 20, 1865

“Since I wrote, we fought with the enemy for 13 days, before we took this fort. On the 9th of this month, we stormed the right wing of the fort and chased the Rebels out and took a lot of prisoners and shortly after, we took Blakely and approximately 5,000 prisoners, lots of cannon, both large and small, bomb shells and ammunition. Rebels had planted bombshells in the ground so when we stepped on them, they would explode. They were placed in the road and around the fort. We marched in at night, but none of the regiment was injured. During bombardment, we had 30 hurt and one killed. Considering the danger, we were fortunate. Our gunboats and monitor could not do us much good because the sea was full of torpedos. We lost two monitors and one gunboat was blown up. Since Mobile surrendered, and the Spanish fort and all torpedos were taken away, boats come and go as they wish. We are ten miles from
Mobile. They surrendered because they didn’t want the town to be burned. It seems like the war will soon end if rumors are true.”

Columbus, Texas

June 28, 1865

“We left the camp near Mobile June 19 and marched to Mobile and came by steamboat to Galveston on June 22 and stayed there one day and went by boat up Buffalo Bay to a small town where we stayed on the boat until morning. We went by Railroad eight miles and marched three miles to Columbus where we are now. We came here to parole all the Rebel soldiers and to take charge of all the belongings of the southern Army. There is a lot of cotton, horses, wagons, mules, and rifles that we are taking over. Yesterday we found 30 500 pound bales of cotton. I see by your last letter that you could have sold my six best oxen at $50 a piece. Go ahead and sell them for the best you can get. I may not be home for a long time. I think that our time is up September 19 and it will take one month to get home. Try to make a lot of hay so I can buy a lot of cattle to feed.”

But, “get home” he did; and, sooner than he expected in his last letter, for the 23rd Iowa was mustered out of Federal service on July 26th, 1865, at Columbus, Texas. They would then take one more long riverboat trip up the Mississippi to Davenport where they parted ways from one another to return to lives left on hold so many long years ago.

Once back in the Norwegian settlement in South Story and Northern Polk Counties where he would spend the rest of his days, Severt Tesdall made plenty of hay of his own, and he prospered.

He married Ingeborg Lee (herself a Norwegian born immigrant) in 1876, and fathered eight children.

By his later years he had acquired as many as six farmsteads of some of the most fertile ground that Iowa could offer. Nearly one-thousand acres of ground that he sometimes paid the premium price of one-dollar and twenty-five cents per acre for. Severt and his family farmed these tracts of land until 1904; when, at the age of 62, Severt and Ingeborg left the farming to younger hands and, “moved into town”, building a fine house on Tama street in Slater.

Severt died in 1920 and is buried in Bethlehem Cemetery in Sheldahl, Iowa.