

Oil City's first police chief was a detective at heart

Staff writer | Posted: Friday, September 20, 2013 3:00 am

The 150th anniversary of the Civil War has drawn an enormous amount of history onto center stage as communities and families mark their connections to that era.

Bob and Linda Steiner of Cooperstown recently came across a brochure on "The Elk County Rifles," a unit from that county that saw action in the Civil War, and unexpectedly learned a relatively unknown fact - the identity of Oil City's first police chief - that relates to Venango County.

Drawn to the Oil Valley

One soldier who was profiled in the brochure, written by Robert Winslow Nay, was Private Thomas Furlong, born in Jamestown, N.Y. His parents were immigrants from Scotland.

While working as a teamster and lumberman in Benezette, Elk County, Furlong enlisted in the Union Army in April 1861 and joined the Pennsylvania Bucktails Co. G, 42nd Pennsylvania Volunteers, also known as the Elk County Rifles.

He was wounded in the Battle of Dranesville in late December 1861, recovered and rejoined his unit.

His service record shows some unusual twists and turns. In February 1962, he was reported as a deserter. Other records show he enlisted in the 66th U.S. Calvary during the same period. He was apprehended and found guilty of deserting but special orders handed down by his commanding general absolved him of desertion. Other reports show he was admitted to a Virginia hospital leg wound but there is no record of his treatment.

Some historical accounts suggest Furlong was a spy for the Union Army and his special service was classified as detective work. In May 1864, he was mustered out of the service while a member of the Invalid Corps, later known as the Veteran Reserve Corps.

Furlong took a job as head of the Missouri Pacific Railroad Police but was soon drawn to the oil boom in western Pennsylvania. In Oil City, he continued his detective career by joining the Allegheny Railroad as a special agent.

In October 1864, he married Elizabeth Haggerty of Franklin.

Elected first chief

Several accounts note Furlong was elected the first chief of police in Oil City on May 1, 1871, and served two 2-year terms as chief. He was re-elected to a third term in May 1875 but turned it down to become the chief special agent for the rapidly expanding Allegheny Valley Railroad, later part of the Pennsylvania Railroad.

In 1880, Furlong and his wife, parents to 11 children, moved to St. Louis, Mo., where he eventually started the Furlong Secret Service Co., a direct competitor of the famous Pinkerton Detective Agency.

By 1912, his detective agency had branch offices in Chicago, Houston and Cincinnati as well as operatives in foreign countries. The Furlong company, a business in which founder Thomas Furlong served as president, general manager and chief special agent, achieved national recognition as a leading detective agency.

The owner became well-known for his disguises and impersonations, including that of an oilman from Pennsylvania. The agency worked with similar professional investigative companies to solve and eventually stop train robberies in the U.S. and Canada.

One of the company's most notable cases, according to a 2003 Kansas State Historical Society article written by Jim Hoy and entitled "Chasing Cattle Thieves in the Flint Hills in 1899," was its infiltration into a suspected gang of cattle thieves that year in Kansas. The Furlong agency was hired by the Kansas Livestock Association to identify the culprits.

Furlong put his story in print in 1912 with the publication of his "Fifty Years A Detective" book that highlighted his career and offered "35 real detective stories."

He died in 1918 in St. Louis and is buried in that city.