

A FILIPINO IMMIGRANT GOES TO WAR FOR MICHIGAN

by **Leslie S. Edwards**

It is hard to imagine how a young Filipino man could find himself fighting in the U.S. Civil War. However, Felix Cornelius Balderry (1842–1895) did just that. Small in stature at 5'4" and weighing only 110 pounds, Balderry served in the Eleventh Michigan Infantry. His commanding officer described him as strong, tough, intelligent, and a faithful soldier. Balderry's story began on Batan, a small island in the South Seas.

During the mid-nineteenth century, it was common to see a half dozen or more American whaling ships in the Basco harbor on the west coast of Batan Island. The island is part of Batanes, the northernmost province of the Philippines in the Bashi Channel, near what is now Taiwan. The archipelago comprises ten volcanic islands, only three of which are populated. Batan, the smallest of these, is surrounded by the Pacific Ocean to the east, the China Sea to the West and the Bashi channel to the north.

In September 1856, the *Milton*, a successful South Seas whaling ship for decades, left Bedford, Massachusetts for what would be a nearly four-year whale hunt. She arrived in Lahaina, Hawaii, in late February 1857 and spent the next three years sailing back and forth from

**Felix
Cornelius
Balderry
in uniform,
c. 1864**



Hawaii to Japan and the Sea of Okhotsk, which borders Russia. Batan was the last stop for whalers to stock up on fresh provisions before sailing north. At the age of 16, Felix Balderry stowed away on the *Milton*.

After the *Milton* set sail, first mate Joseph L. Foster discovered and befriended Balderry, who then joined a crew that was probably a multi-racial mix of Americans and other men picked up in ports along the way. They harpooned whales from six-man rowboats lowered from the deck. Once they shot a whale, it could drag the rowboat for hours in an attempt to escape, colloquially known as a “Nantucket sleigh ride.” Once a whale was on the ship, the work turned to boiling down blubber to oil and storing it in casks below deck.

In March 1860, the *Milton* returned to Massachusetts. Balderry lived with the Foster family in Southampton, New York. The Fosters relocated to Leonidas, Michigan, the following year, taking Balderry with them. Balderry spent the next two years working for Foster as a farmhand. In December 1863, he enlisted in Company A, Eleventh Michigan Infantry and, with other recruits from his adopted community, joined the regiment at Rossville, Georgia, on January 28, 1864.

During the late spring of 1864, as part of the Atlanta Campaign, the regiment participated in continuous marches and skirmishes with the enemy in damp, humid conditions. In late June, after the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain, the Eleventh Michigan waded across the

Etowah River. Balderry, already feverish from the spring marches, became chilled. Heavy rains followed, and the soldiers had no shelter. Balderry’s condition worsened, and a severe cold settled in his lungs. He also experienced partial paralysis on his left side. Unable to continue with his regiment, he was treated at the Union army field hospital near Lookout Mountain. After spending the remainder of the war in a Chattanooga hospital, Balderry was discharged at Nashville on September 16,

1865. In Balderry’s application for a pension, Lieutenant Stephen Marsh, who had known him prior to the war, described him afterwards as a “broken down man.”

Balderry returned to Leonidas weakened by respiratory illness and suffering from sustained partial paralysis in his left arm. Unable to perform manual labor, he opened a tailor shop on the western edge of Foster’s property on what is now Jacksonburg Road.

He continued to live with the Fosters until 1882 when he relocated to Colon and found employment as a tailor. In 1885, Balderry married 16-year-old Ada May Barns. The couple had one

son, Frank. The family returned to Leonidas in 1889, settling in a small home bordering the Foster’s land. Balderry was a member of the Henry M. Liddle Post of the G.A.R. and attended the Methodist Episcopal Church in Leonidas. He died of tuberculosis on August 18, 1895. He is buried in the Leonidas Cemetery where the military attends to his grave to this day. Felix Balderry, a South Seas immigrant, whaler, Michigan farmhand and tailor,

was one of approximately 30 Filipinos who fought for their adopted homeland during the Civil War.



Portrait of Felix Cornelius Balderry in uniform, 1864

0 77 Felix to Balderry
5 60 Varace Cornelio

Balderry’s signature from the Muster Out Roll of Company F, Eleventh Michigan Infantry, September 28, 1865. (Balderry was transferred to Company F in March 1864)