THE CIVIL WAR VETERAN AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS IN OHIO

by

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One of the more important contributions made by the Civil War veteran to the lives of Ohioans after 1865 lay in the field of social activities. At the full vigor of his existence, the Union soldier performed numerous social functions from the peculiar advantage of affiliation with large-size organizations such as the Grand Army of the Republic, and at a time when other groups did not always enjoy large memberships or close-knit structure.

Of the various veterans' societies which appeared in the post-war period, the G. A. R. was by far the most outstanding. There were few veterans who did not come into contact with the organization in some way during its existence, and the social history of the comrades who were affiliated with it dominated the scene. Grand Army gatherings of any sort were sure to attract attention of both membership and public alike, and were anticipated as occasions of entertainment and merry-making. Encampments were welcomed by cities and towns all over Ohio, and sometimes competition ran high among places which wanted to act as host to the next campfire.

Veteran gatherings were usually marked by the same general sort of activity, with story telling, song singing, and speech making as major items of interest. Dramatic offerings and musical recitals were often presented. Veterans enjoyed good stories, especially if the persons who figured in them were prominent individuals. Occasionally, the same story might be told of different persons; William McKinley related a heroic anecdote of Rutherford B. Hayes in Canton in 1894 which was told of an unnamed Negro color-bearer in Dayton as early as 1880.\(^1\) It is hardly necessary to state that

such tales brought out volumes of applause, but sometimes the comrades chaffed one another concerning veracity in story telling.

Along with tales told by the veterans, encampments and campfires were diverted by the reading of poetic material by individuals who possessed, or who thought they possessed, dramatic ability. Much of this verse has long since been forgotten, if indeed it was ever intended it should be remembered for long. Yet, applause always greeted such titles as “The Hospital Snipe,” “An Irishman’s Eulogy on the Soldiers,” “The Nation’s Volunteer,” or “General Stedman at Chicamauga [sic].” In a typical statement descriptive of such efforts, the Cincinnati Commercial for January 19, 1882, stated

Mrs. Elizabeth Mansfield Irving, a beautiful woman, with decided and clearly-cut features, fine form, and apparent adaptability, especially to heroic reading, read with fine effect the poems, “The Drummer Boy of Mission Ridge,” and, in response to an encore, “Sheridan’s Ride.”

Much time was spent by the veterans in singing of patriotic and sentimental songs related to the War. Representative titles from the G. A. R. Song Book (priced at ten cents) included such selections as “We’ve Drank from the Same Canteen,” “When Johnny Comes Marching Home,” “Tenting on the Old Camp Ground,” “Tramp, Tramp, Tramp,” and the ever-popular “Marching through Georgia.” “Marching through Georgia” was without doubt the most popular of all Civil War songs; the stanzas dealt with exploits still vivid in the minds of many Ohioans; and besides, audiences liked to join in on the chorus. ²

anecdote ran as follows according to the exact remarks of McKinley: I saw Hayes with my own eyes, impetuous, impulsive Hayes, ***, seize the flag of his regiment, ***, and rush up to the parapets of the enemy, and I heard the general commanding say, in the presence of the troops: “Bring those colors back to the line.” And Hayes answered back, as with an electric shock: “Bring the lines up to the colors.”

² When the National Encampment of the G. A. R. was held in Columbus in 1888, a chorus of five hundred children sang “Marching through Georgia.” This is possibly one of the largest organized groups ever to sing the song.
It would be difficult to measure the quantity of oratory to which veterans' groups or their friends in the citizenry listened. Such men as Rutherford B. Hayes, William McKinley, and William Gibson were especially skilled in the art of arousing audiences. Gibson was probably the most popular speaker of the Ohio Department of the Grand Army; when he spoke, eloquence rose to its highest pitch. James G. Blaine claimed that Gibson was unequalled in speech-making, and General Sheridan is said to have exclaimed with reference to Gibson, "Could I speak like that man, I would willingly forfeit all my stars." Sometimes the veterans tired of long speeches, nor could they be blamed for objecting when lengthy remarks contained such comments as those offered by one old soldier:

I was taken like a bald-headed eagle on the wing, and came fluttering down from the highest atmosphere to the floor * * * I made a speech that I had not expected to make, and heard a speech which sounded like the song of a siren in my ear, which charmed me, and paralyzed [sic!] my tongue.  

Public entertainment conducted for various purposes was also a matter of concern to the Union veteran in Ohio. Bean bakes, oyster suppers, and sham battles might be presented to those interested. Lectures on such topics as Andersonville prison, the Andrews Raiders, and John Morgan were a source of profit and membership alike. In 1888, what must have been a spectacular show for the public on the occasion of July Fourth was held by G. A. R. groups in Akron and Summit County. A naval battle between the Monitor and the Merrimac was listed as one feature of the proceedings, while a thousand infantry with cannon demonstrated the taking of Atlanta. The Summit County Beacon of July 11, 1888, described the event at length but noted that the success of the occasion was marred by a brawl between some "rascals" and the Sons of Veterans.

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3 David Dwight Bigger, Ohio's Silver Tongued Orator. Life and Speeches of General William H. Gibson (Dayton, O., 1901), 481; 530.
4 Proceedings of the Thirtieth Encampment of the Department of Ohio, * * *, 173.
Parades of the veterans were also an item of social interest for the public. Sometimes, a parade lasted for hours particularly when the membership was vigorous and numerous. In 1888, when a National Encampment of the Grand Army was held in Columbus, the number of veterans gathered for the occasion set a record never equaled before or since. The parade of this event overshadowed all others, and although accounts vary, it is estimated that no less than 70,000 men marched past the reviewing stand. Mrs. Foraker spoke of the procession as "* * * a thrill * * * unlike all thrills since." Columbus newspapers added their comments to the effect that the parade was without parallel and that High Street was a river of people. Seats in windows along the line of march ranged in price from five to fifteen dollars. As years passed, however, parades became less and less popular, and when adequate provisions for them were lacking, marches were very unpleasant.

The public contributed to the comfort and entertainment of the assembled veterans. Civic pride in those days was swelled by the possession of such items as new fire engines,

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5 Julia B. Foraker, I Would Live It Again (New York, 1932), 117. The parade in question began in late morning and lasted until late afternoon, or for about five hours. The proceedings were broken from time to time by marchers who broke ranks to give presents to dignitaries, and by residents who invited the veterans into their homes for refreshments. A great Union Army reunion was held at Newark, Ohio, in 1878 which attracted thousands of men from all over the state. See Major C. D. Miller, Report of the Great Re-Union, (Newark, Ohio, 1879).

6 Ohio State Journal, Sept. 12, 1888; Columbus Dispatch, Sept. 11, 1888. Other attractions of the 1888 gathering included a display of the famous war engine "The General" which was brought to Columbus for the occasion; views from the roof of the State House, trips to the Ohio State Penitentiary, and rides through Goodale Park. Ohioans played a large part in the capture of "The General" which is still displayed from time to time in various parts of the nation. The standard work dealing with the event is William Pittenger, The Great Locomotive Chase A History of the Andrews Raid Into Georgia in 1862 (New York, c. 1868, 1887, 1893).

7 Barrels of ice water, pots of coffee, and other items were frequently provided for thirsty or hungry marchers. With the passage of years it was also very suitable if parades could be held on well-shaded streets. Sometimes, the marching was interrupted by street-cars or other vehicles such as loaded hay wagons. See Proceedings of the Twentieth Encampment, *, 183, citing Cleveland Plain Dealer, April 30, 1886.
and on more than one occasion trial runs of the fire department were for the diversion of the old soldiers. Street cars, electric lights, skating rinks, points of interest, and means of accommodation all had their place in caring for the veterans. At Lancaster, trips to the Boys' Industrial School were listed as a special inducement for the holding of a Grand Army meeting in that town.8 Emphasizing the point of comfort for the comrades, the city of Youngstown in 1899 called the attention of Grand Army veterans to the bathing facilities of the Y. M. C. A., and the "Boston Painless Dentists" of the same city offered to extract teeth of G. A. R. comrades "painlessly and free of charge." The dentists were equipped also to install at a price of eight dollars "corrugated suction plates. One 10 year written guarantee goes with every set."9 Local merchants vied with each other in supplying uniforms and other equipment for the veterans; newspapers of the period bear witness to the money-saving values which the thrifty old soldier could expect to find.10

No discussion of the social activities of the Union veteran would be complete without a reference to Memorial Day. A Cincinnati veteran is credited with taking the initial step leading to grave decoration, according to the custom of his German homeland.11 May 30, 1868, was the first G. A. R. sponsored Memorial Day observed in Ohio; the date was selected so that flowers would be available in northerly states. Most veteran groups took the occasion seriously from the start, and support from the public was soon forthcoming.

8 Proceedings of the Thirty-Fourth Encampment of the Department of Ohio, * * *, 144-149. The comrade who extended the invitation to come to Lancaster remarked that some of the membership may once have been at B. I. S. and there was no place like home!

9 Semi-Weekly Telegram (Youngstown), June 9, 1899.

10 See advertisement of the Boston One Price Clothing Store, Zanesville Daily Courier, Jan. 30, 1884. In 1888, the Lazarus Company of Columbus advertised its uniforms as follows: "Blue! Blue! Blue! The True Blue Indigo Suit! Just the thing for the Veterans, with Change of Buttons. Prices $8, $10, $12, $15, $17." See Columbus Evening Dispatch, Sept. 14, 1888.

11 Robert B. Beath, History of the Grand Army of the Republic (New York c. 1888), 90-91. Other groups and persons were interested in Memorial Day observances in addition to the Grand Army. See Paul H. Buck, The Road to Reunion, 1865-1900 (Boston, 1937), 116-121.
Sometimes there were those who departed from the original purposes of the occasion, but such offenders were sure to draw fire of criticism from the old soldiers. It is impossible to say how many graves of service personnel have been decorated and honored on Memorial Day since 1868, but the practice soon became a fixed institution everywhere throughout the United States.  

"Memorial Halls" were built in great numbers in Ohio, and they too served as headquarters for activities associated with Memorial Day and for various types of social matters in which the veterans and the public were interested.  

To the average citizen, the Union veteran or the society to which he might belong once stood for something as significant in community life in Ohio as church or school. Contributions of the old soldiers no doubt added many a bright page to a social pattern that was restricted and perhaps dull. Their gatherings and celebrations, and their reverence of the dead reminded Ohioans of memorable events which had gone before and in which they or their loved ones had played a part. The direct social influence of the Union veteran in Ohio has all but disappeared, but even so thousands of mature people in the state which furnished the greatest number of troops for the Union Army will remember for years to come the men who once played so prominent a part in their lives.

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12 As an example of the work of grave decoration, the chaplain's report to G. A. R. headquarters listed 41,848 graves as being decorated. See Proceedings of the Twenty-Seventh Encampment, * * *, 100.

13 The Memorial Hall in Newark, Ohio, the home of the writer, has for many years housed the Auditorium Theater, and many prominent entertainers have appeared there. The building was for years considered one of the most beautiful structures in central Ohio, and is still in good repair.