

## **The Grand Army of the Republic**

**Presented by Roy Wohlert—Summer Fest, 2013**

On April 12, 1861, the Confederate forces opened fire on the Union garrison, at Fort Sumter, Charleston, South Carolina, and thus, began the American Civil War. It would be almost four years before General Lee would surrender to General Grant at Appomattox Court House, Virginia. Over 600,000 Americans would perish in the war. Iowa, being a slave-free state, provided over 75,000 men to the Union effort. Over 13,000 would lose their lives; approximately 3500 died in battle and from wounds received in battle. 9,000 would die from disease.

Obviously, when men come home from war they want to forget about the horrible events they experienced in battle (At Stone River, over 7,000 Union troops fell in less than a half-hour. The men knew before the charge it would be futile and hopeless, and so they pinned their names on their lapels so it would be easier for their kin to be notified!). Not only were the battles horrific, but so were the other conditions, with disease, lack of food, and being a prisoner-of-war was the worst. But they also realized there were things they remembered that were good memories. The camaraderie, the devotion and loyalty of serving with others, caused many men to want to find something that would re-capture some of those memories.

There were also social and political issues that needed to be dealt with after the war was over. Widows, orphans, disabled veterans, and a whole new group of veteran – soldiers who had once been slaves along with their entire, newly-freed families all needed to be cared for. Promises had been made but there was little political pressure to ensure those promises would be kept.

As a result, men began joining together, first for camaraderie and second for political power. Veterans clubs began to spring up all over the country. Most did not last very long, but a few went on to become nationwide organizations. The most powerful of these would be the Grand

Army of the Republic, made up of Union veterans. Its motto “Fraternity, Charity, Loyalty”, would be abbreviated FCL. The “F” represented brotherhood and sisterhood of those who served. The “C” represented work for the well-being of the widows and orphans of veterans, and pensions obtained for them. And the “L” represented loyalty to the Constitution and to the flag.

Dr. Benjamin Stephensen, a surgeon with the 14<sup>th</sup> Illinois Infantry, is credited with starting the first GAR Post, based partly on military tradition and partly on the basis of free-masonry. The post was chartered in Decatur, Illinois, on April 16, 1866, with twelve charter members.

The Illinois state convention convened on July 12, 1866, with 39 posts being organized and chartered.

Ten states and the District of Columbia held the first GAR encampment on Nov. 20, 1866, at Indianapolis, Indiana.

Peak membership numbered 490,000 members in 1890. There were over 7,000 posts ranging in size from a few dozen members in small town posts to more than a 1,000 members in larger cities.

Community level organization was called a “post”, and it had the name of someone deceased (Hartley Post #451 was called by that name) and they were numbered consecutively within a Department. The Departments generally consisted of the posts within a state or district. (The method of establishing posts and departments was later used by other veteran’s organizations such as the American Legion and The Veterans of Foreign Wars). At the National level, the organization was operated by the elected Commander-in-Chief.

Each member was voted into membership using the Masonic method of casting black balls (reject) or white balls (accept). More than one ball was required for rejection (but my source

didn't say how many.). A candidate that was rejected was reported to the Department and his name was maintained in a "Black Book" at each meeting place.

Meeting rituals and induction of members were similar to Masonic rituals and passed on to the Sons of Union Veterans.

The official body of the Department was the called the annual encampment. Presided over by the Department Commander, Senior and Junior Vice-Commander and the Council; these were multi-day affairs, consisting of camping out, formal dinners, and memorial events. National encampments were presided over by the Commander-in-Chief, who was elected in political events which rivaled national political party conventions.

The organization wielded considerable clout (even though it was stressed throughout its history that politics was not to be part of the organization.) Between the years of 1868, to 1908, no Republicans were nominated to the United States Presidency without the endorsement of the GAR. Ulysses S Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, James A. Garfield, Benjamin Harrison, and William McKinley all were Republican Presidents during those periods that had been endorsed by the GAR.

Influences from the GAR established retirement homes for soldiers. Legislation for veteran pensions was passed and Old Soldier Homes were established. Members of the GAR helped solicit funds for monuments and memorials. The GAR encouraged the preservation of Civil War sites, relics, and historical documents, donation of battle flags to museums, and the placement of cannons on courthouse lawns and parks.

In 1868, General Order #11 of the GAR, designated May 30 to be called "Decoration Day". The wife of General John A. Logan, Commander-in-Chief, was so moved by observing the women of Virginia, decorating the graves of fallen Confederate soldiers, that she influenced her

husband to request the members of GAR posts to decorate the graves of their fallen comrades with flowers on May 30, 1868. Decoration Day would eventually evolve into Memorial Day.

There was a National Encampment every year from 1868 to 1949. At the last encampment the few surviving members voted to retain the existing officer in charge until the organization dissolved. Theodore Penland retained position of Commander-in-Chief until his death. The last surviving member was Albert Woolson, who died in 1956. GAR records went to the Library of Congress; badges, flags and official seal went to the Smithsonian.

Iowa's GAR documents and assorted materials are housed in the University of Iowa's Library Collection in Iowa City.

Iowa's Department of GAR was organized September 26, 1866, in Davenport, with JB Locke elected Commander. At this time, Iowa had 45 posts and approximately 350 members. Membership grew to 408 posts and 19,400 members. (Hartley's Post # 451, had 13 members. I can't explain why there are Post #'s going to 457; possibly some posts dissolved!). Encampments were held annually in April.

The last surviving Civil War veteran in the State of Iowa was James P. Martin from Sutherland, who died on September 20, 1949, at age 101! Martin was born in Scotland 1847, and at age five, came to the United States with his family, and they settled in Wisconsin. He was 16 years old when he enlisted in the 1<sup>st</sup> Wisconsin Heavy Artillery. Four brothers also served with the state of Wisconsin, and all survived the war. He moved to Iowa in 1886, settling on a farm east of Sutherland. Mrs. Martin died in 1916. Mr. Martin was named state Commander-in-Chief of the GAR Department in 1947. He marched every Memorial Day parade until 1946.

During its existence, the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) was aided in its work by five organizations, which are now referred to as the Allied Orders of the GAR.

**Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War:** Membership open to men who have an ancestor who either belonged to or was eligible to join the GAR. A limited number of Associates may be part of a Camp. Associates are men who otherwise qualify for membership except the existence of a Union Civil War ancestor.

**Auxiliary to the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War:** Membership is open to women with Union Civil War veterans as ancestors as well as to spouses and daughters of members of the Sons of Union Veterans.

**Daughters of Union Veterans of the Civil War:** Women with Union Civil War ancestors who either belonged to or could qualify for membership in the GAR.

**Ladies of the Grand Army of the Republic:** An organization of ladies who trace their ancestry to Union Civil War veterans.

**Woman' Relief Corps:** The official woman's auxiliary of the GAR. Organized in 1883, membership is open to all women, regardless of ancestry, who ascribe to the principles of the Order. (There are many of these grave markers scattered throughout the cemetery here in Hartley).

The GAR admitted its sole woman member in 1897. Sarah Emma Edmonds served in the 21st Michigan Infantry disguised as a man named Franklin Thompson. (There weren't very "thorough" physicals required to get into the army at that time!). She served from May 1861 until April 1863, as a courier and hospital nurse (and spy!). Contracting malaria in 1863, she knew she would be exposed and left and sought treatment in a private hospital. She had intended to return and continue using her disguise, but she learned that her alias "Franklin Thompson" had been listed as a deserter! She returned later to the war effort in Washington, D.C., as a nurse

using her own name. She would eventually marry and have a family, but she was bothered by the fact that her alias, Franklin Thompson, was listed as a deserter and with encouragement from friends, worked to clear the name. In July 1884, a special act of Congress granted Emma Edmonds, alias Franklin Thompson an honorable discharge from the army along with a veteran's pension. She died in 1898.

Sources:

Glenn B. Knight – *Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War*

*Department of Pennsylvania Memorial Day Services Ritual Manual*

Sharon R. Becker

“Spies & Spymasters of the Civil War” by Donald E. Markle