

How Companies & Regiments Were Organized

by James E. Jacobsen

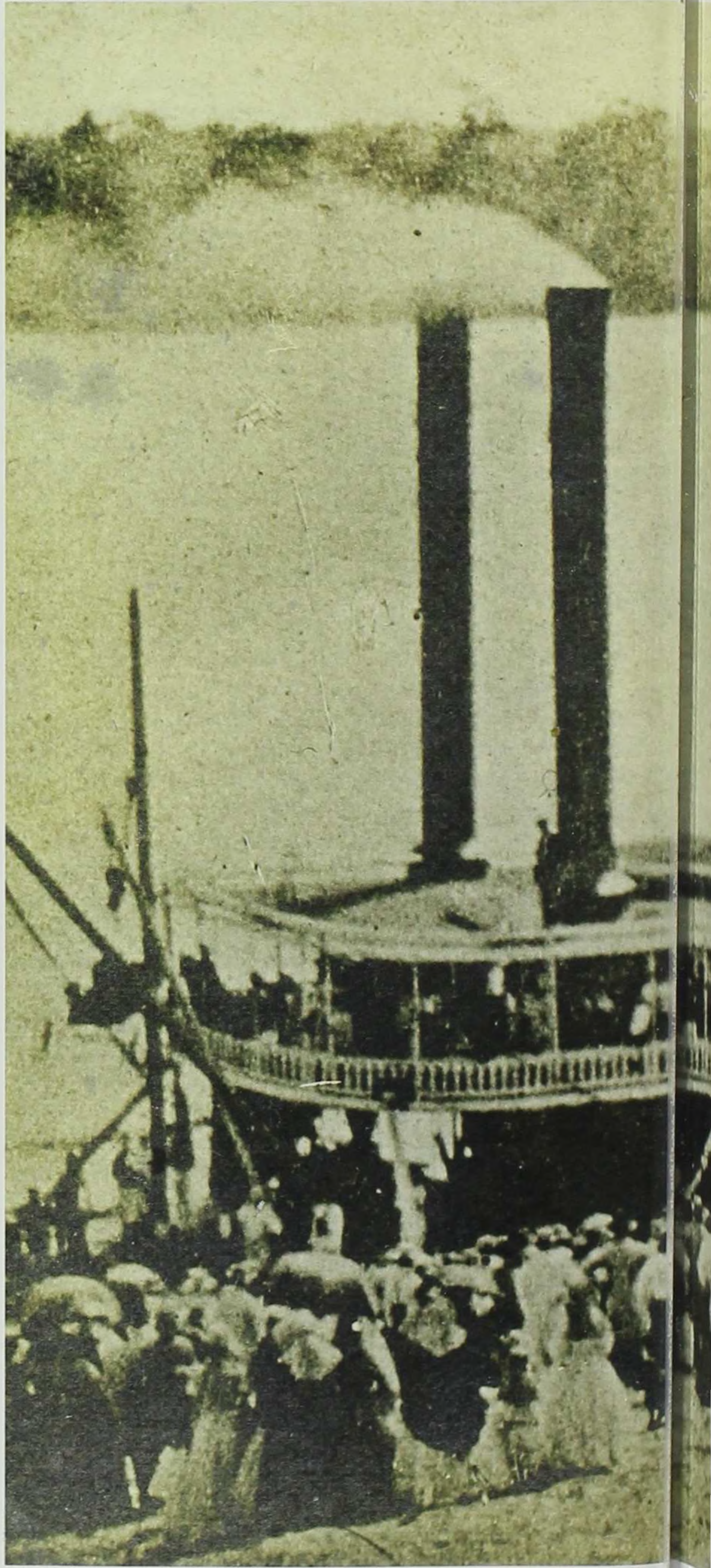
The organization of military companies began with individuals of local prominence, either in a town or county. Those who deemed themselves to be leaders in some capacity had the draw to assemble a company in whole or in part. Previous military experience could be useful, but many a former militia officer with a reputation for being too strict would likely be shunned.

During the first months of the war—say, from May to July of 1861—forming a company was very much a locally controlled process. Companies would spring into existence overnight and would clamor for a regimental assignment from the governor. Since there were still but a handful of regiments and no shortage of new companies, those companies that failed to win a berth right away risked withering away. Which companies won out in the battle for a regimental berth depended on higher level politics, with urban companies having the advantage.

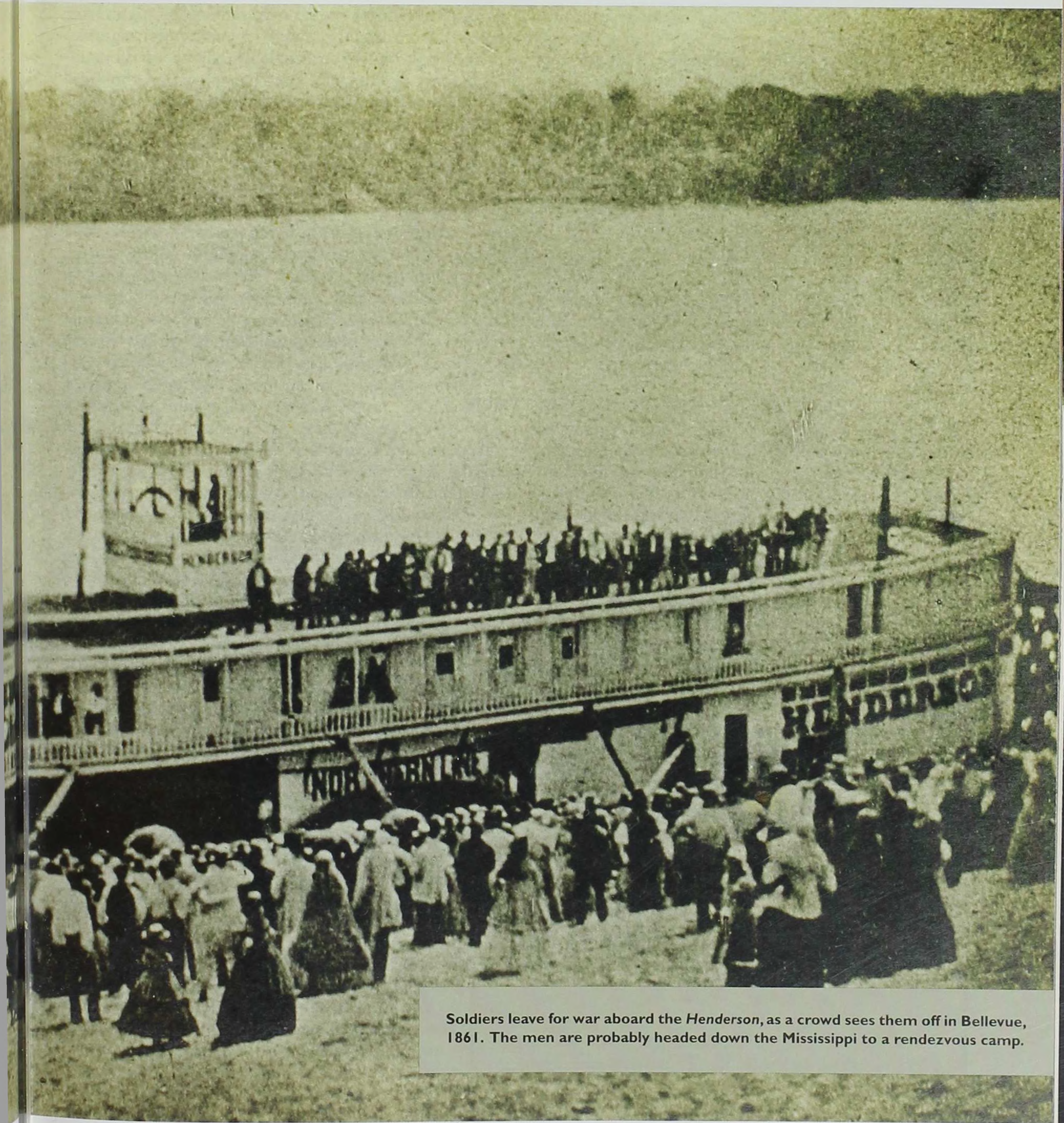
The aspiring company recruiter had to have authorization from the state adjutant general in the form of a recruiting commission. Armed with the proper paperwork, the company recruiter would publish notices in the local newspapers; perhaps establish an office in a larger town or city; hire the requisite wagons, flag, drummer, and bugler; gain the support of high-ranking community leaders to serve as speakers; and otherwise set out to fill up a company. The magic number was 83 men, the minimum needed for an infantry company.

As the roster approached that number, the captain could be authorized to place his men "in quarters." This meant that they could be locally boarded and housed. This was done for several reasons. The recruits had to be assured that there was indeed a bona fide company, as did the state. Company spirit could then develop

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Iowa and the Civil War



Soldiers leave for war aboard the *Henderson*, as a crowd sees them off in Bellevue, 1861. The men are probably headed down the Mississippi to a rendezvous camp.

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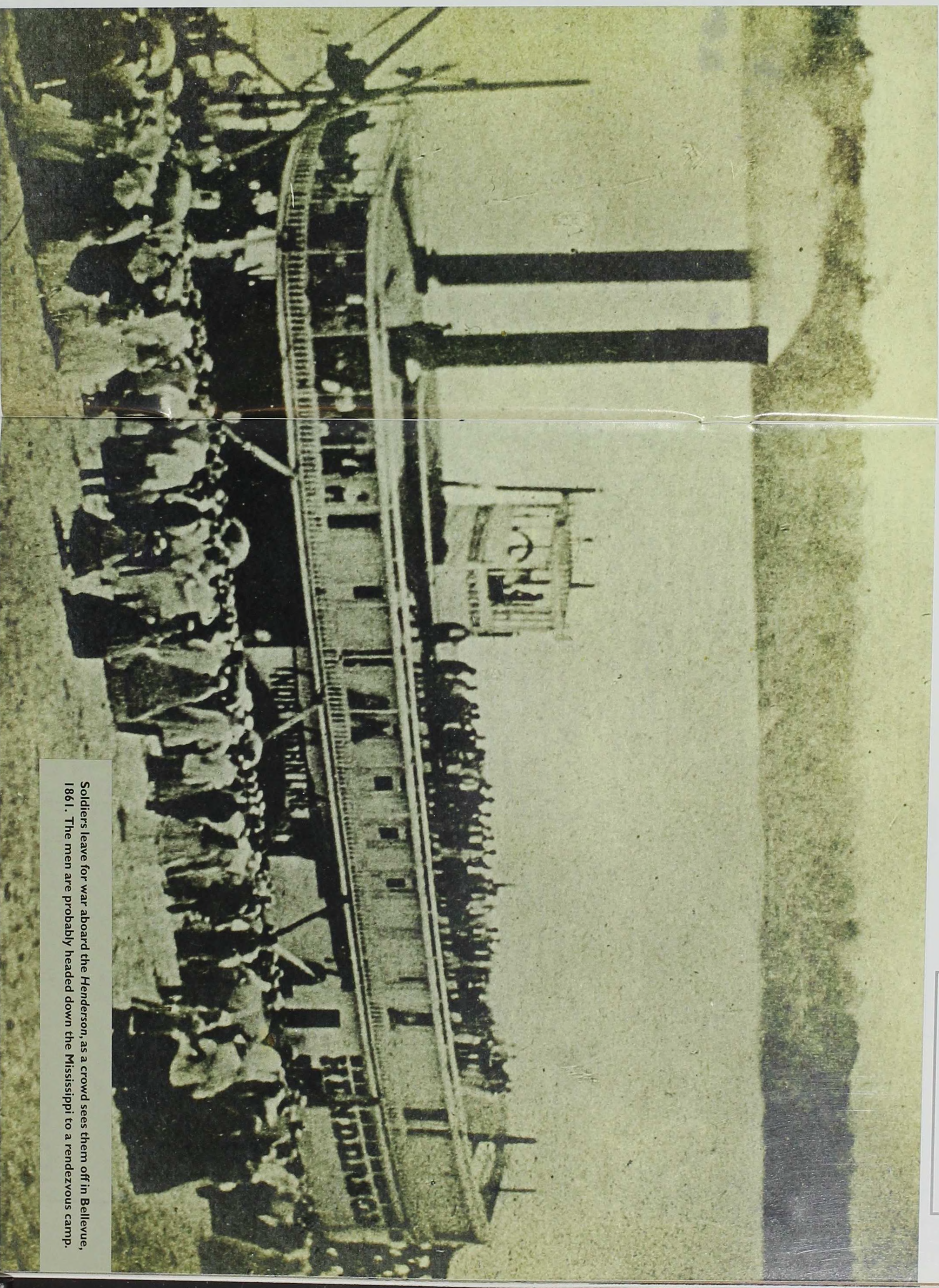
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and the company could become a cohesive group. The recruits, likely single young men, had to receive tangible results for their commitment, in the form of room and board, or their interest could wane. Most important, the recruiter had to hold the roster together. The recruits were sworn in to the equivalent of state service by local justices, but this doesn't seem to have been very binding.

There were problems with this system. Recruits had a multitude of needs, including medical and travel expenses, blankets, clothing, and shoes. But the recruiter had no monetary advance from the state, and anybody that he contracted with had to be content with holding the bill, sometimes for a very long time.

The major challenges were competing recruiters and, over time, a dearth of recruits. Partial companies either consolidated or they vaporized. This problem was most acute when a company was being raised across an entire county. Each town or farm neighborhood would provide a contingent, and depending on how the men identified themselves—by ethnicity, politics, religion, or even occupation—these contingents would have more or less in common.

These different loyalties played out when the men in the company voted for officers. Usually an initial election was held locally, and officers generally were elected to ranks proportionate to their contributions in forming the unit. But that was not always the case.

An aspiring officer could be astounded to find himself voted out or farther down in rank. For example, candidates who lost out for the captaincy would make a go for a lieutenancy. Most cruel, when the final election was held at the rendezvous camp, the company at full strength could contain a different demographic, and many a man who marched to camp as an officer left without that title.

Then it was time for community farewells. After the company banner (usually designed and sewn by local women) was presented with the requisite speeches and dinners, the new company would ride off by wagon or stagecoach to the nearest railhead, and then speed off to the rendezvous camp (many soldiers taking their first train ride). Iowa rendezvous camps were in larger towns with river or rail transportation, like Davenport, Keokuk, and Des Moines.

The challenge was to hold the ranks together numerically until official mustering in. Speed was always of the essence as recruiters struggled desperately to complete their companies and join a regiment. Partial companies accumulated in camp, and they either coalesced or withered away.

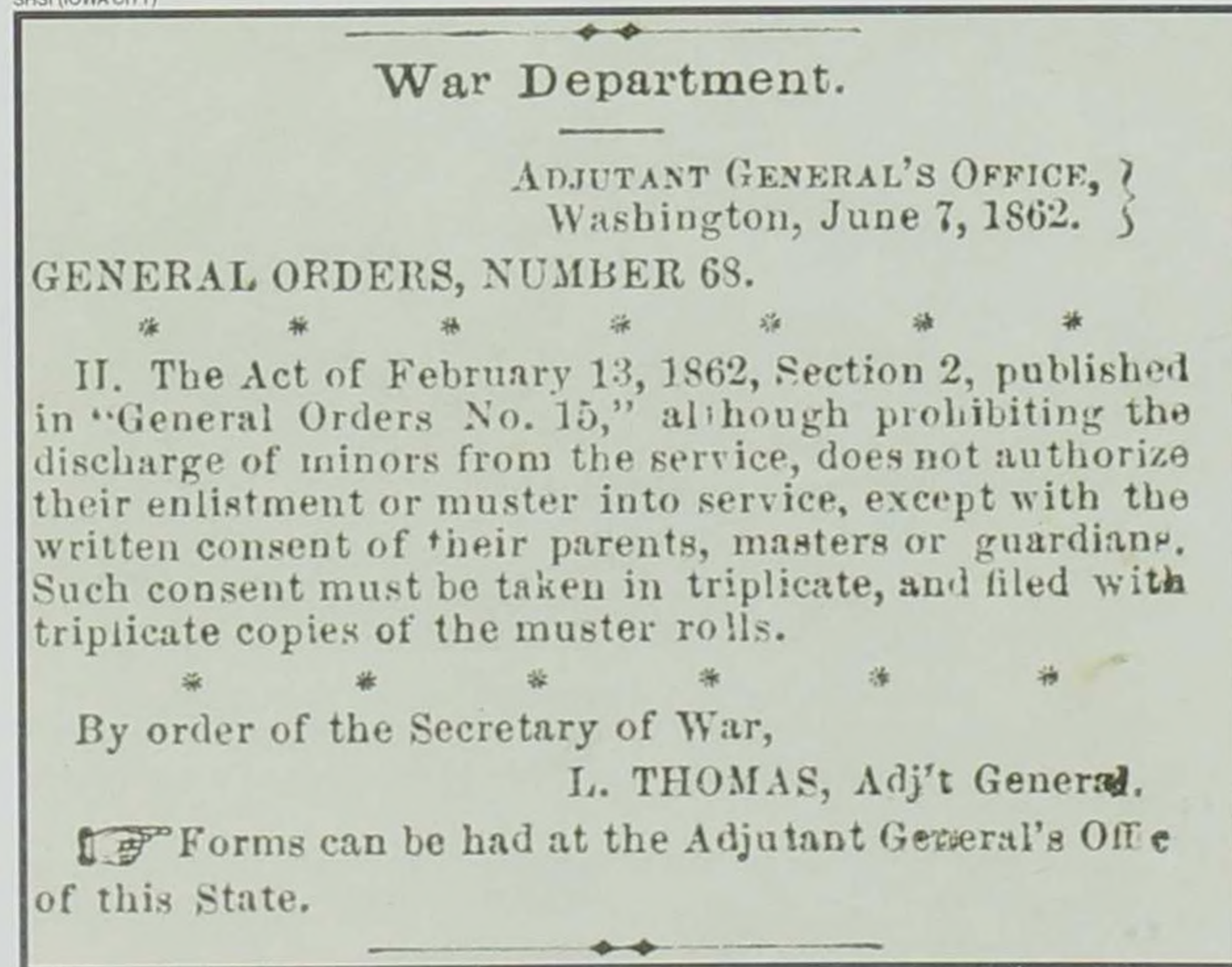
The final test was the medical review; companies could be rendered nonviable when as many as a dozen eager recruits were sent home. Another cause for loss of men was the refusal of a few to take the federal oath (even though they had already taken the state oath). These men were publicly humiliated and drummed out of camp, but their departure also threatened the minimal strength of the promising company.

Once these adjustments were made, a recruiting feeding frenzy ensued, targeting the fragmentary squads in camp to finalize both the companies and their regiment.

The first company to muster in at the rendezvous camp—which meant that it had reached mustering strength and its men had passed their physical examinations—would get the coveted “Company A” designation in a new regiment.

A regiment (which comprised 10 infantry companies or 12 cavalry companies) could be formed in at least three ways. First, influential individuals could apply to the governor for authorization to raise an entire regiment. Second, the state could form a regiment in the rendezvous camp by assigning companies to it.

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The third way to form a regiment was for quite prominent individuals to bypass the state and receive direct authorization from the U.S. War Department. These individuals often assumed incorrectly that such authorization would bring immediate support in the form of equipage, commissions, and funds, and that the regiment would be more quickly organized and sent into active service. The reality was that these new regiments "fell through the administrative crack" and found themselves orphan organizations and sometimes faded away. The War Department lacked the wherewithal to directly support the units it authorized, and the state was more than pleased to be relieved from assuming any responsibility for yet another new regiment.

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State of Iowa.

ADJUTANT GENERAL'S OFFICE, }
Clinton, Aug. 11, 1862. }

GENERAL ORDERS, NUMBER 84.

I. The Camps at different places in this State for the new Regiments, will be known and designated as follows:

- At Keokuk, Camp Lincoln.
- At Clinton, Camp Kirkwood.
- At Dubuque, Camp Franklin.
- At Iowa City, Camp Pope.
- At Des Moines, Camp Burnside.
- At Muscatine, Camp Strong.

II. Passes from this Department will hereafter be either signed by me, or by M. H. Tyrrell, for me. If signed "N. B. Baker, Adj't Gen'l of Iowa, by Tyrrell," they are to be respected the same as those signed by me.

N. B. BAKER,
Adj't General of Iowa.

Raising an entire regiment brought rich rewards. The principals would receive field officer commissions (colonel, lieutenant colonel, or major). In turn, they could reward others by influencing the awarding of staff officer berths (adjutant, quartermaster, commissary, or surgeon). But the real plum resided in the social status that came with these positions, not to mention the opportunities for meteoric advancement, either during the war or later in politics.

The real work in organizing a regiment lay in completing the requisite number of companies. The aspiring colonel, in the early war years, was often given complete control (particularly for cavalry regiments). Again, the state was more than pleased to have one fewer new regiment to deal with, and these delegated units were usually placed in one of the isolated and less important rendezvous camps. It was the colonel-to-be who was now deluged with requests for recruiting commissions from aspiring captains-to-be.

The same dynamic exhibited in company organizations now played out times ten or more. Invariably the regiment ended up in camp short at least a few companies. As promised units collapsed, entirely new ones had to be started. The regiment couldn't organize until it had all of its companies in camp at minimum strength. Aspiring field officers accumulated personal expenses as they awaited their commissions and authority to spend funds.

This situation was worst in the camps at Council Bluffs, where the 29th Infantry was sorely delayed in finalizing its company rosters. The recruits lacked

clothing, the officers had exhausted their own funds, and nobody was getting paid until they were mustered in. The state had no authority or obligation over recruits until the mustering in took place, so it was powerless to help.

Like the company, the regimental community elected its initial roster of field officers. Many difficulties resulted as candidates were denied their "promised" rank or the state intervened with its own chosen colonel. A number of regimental colonels were washed out at the rendezvous camp; commanding a regiment required a somewhat different skill set than did raising one. Once in active service, the real winnowing out began as the regimental officer corps reshuffled their rosters. ♦

James E. Jacobsen is a historic preservation consultant in Des Moines. This article is an excerpt from Jacobsen's "Iowa's Civil War Rendezvous Camps, 1861-1866: A Study." Funded by the Iowa Army National Guard, State of Iowa, and National Guard Bureau, Department of Defense, the study will be posted on www.IowaNationalGuard.com.