

The Hardest Battle We Have Yet Witnessed

by Kenneth Lyftogt

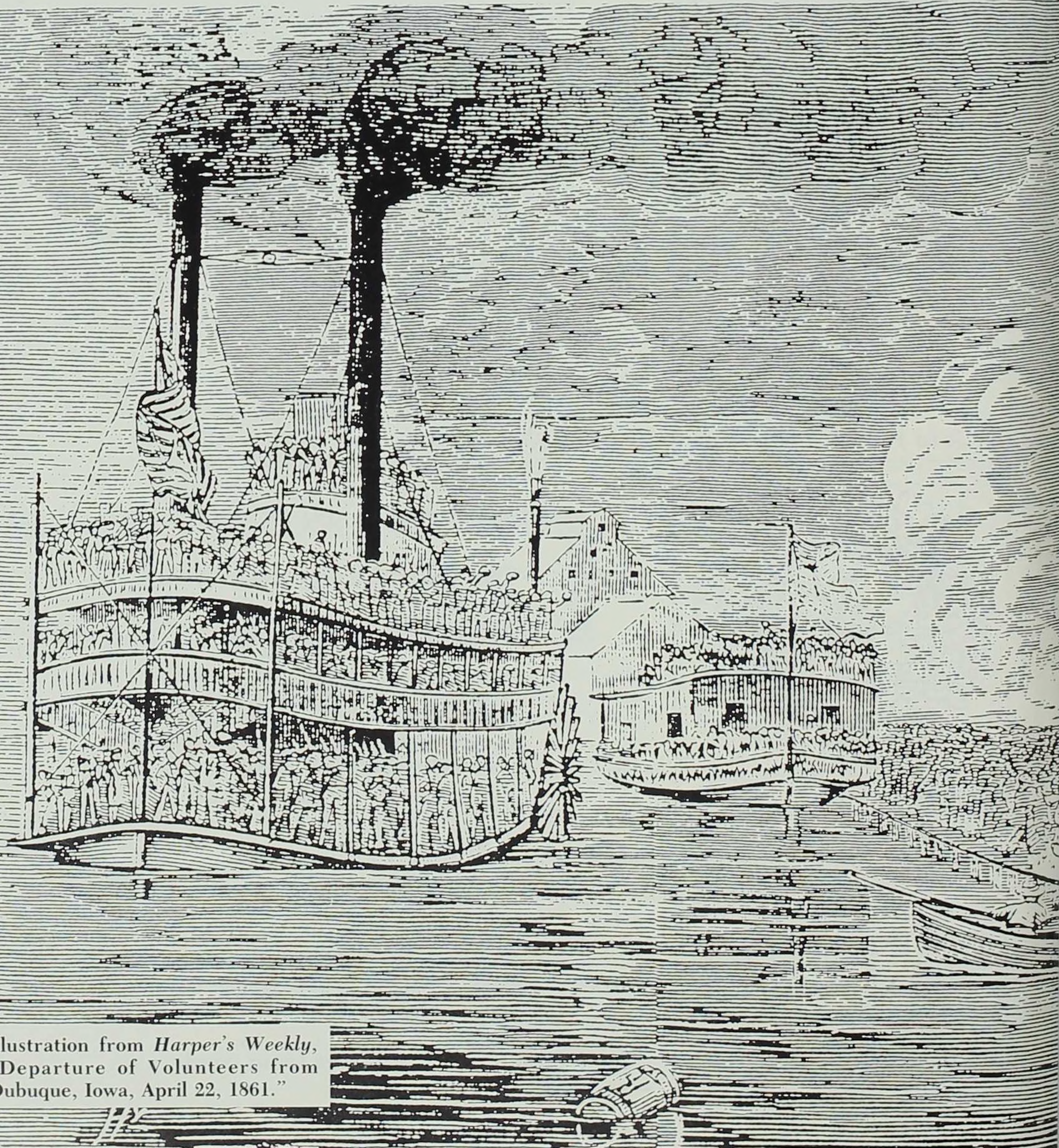
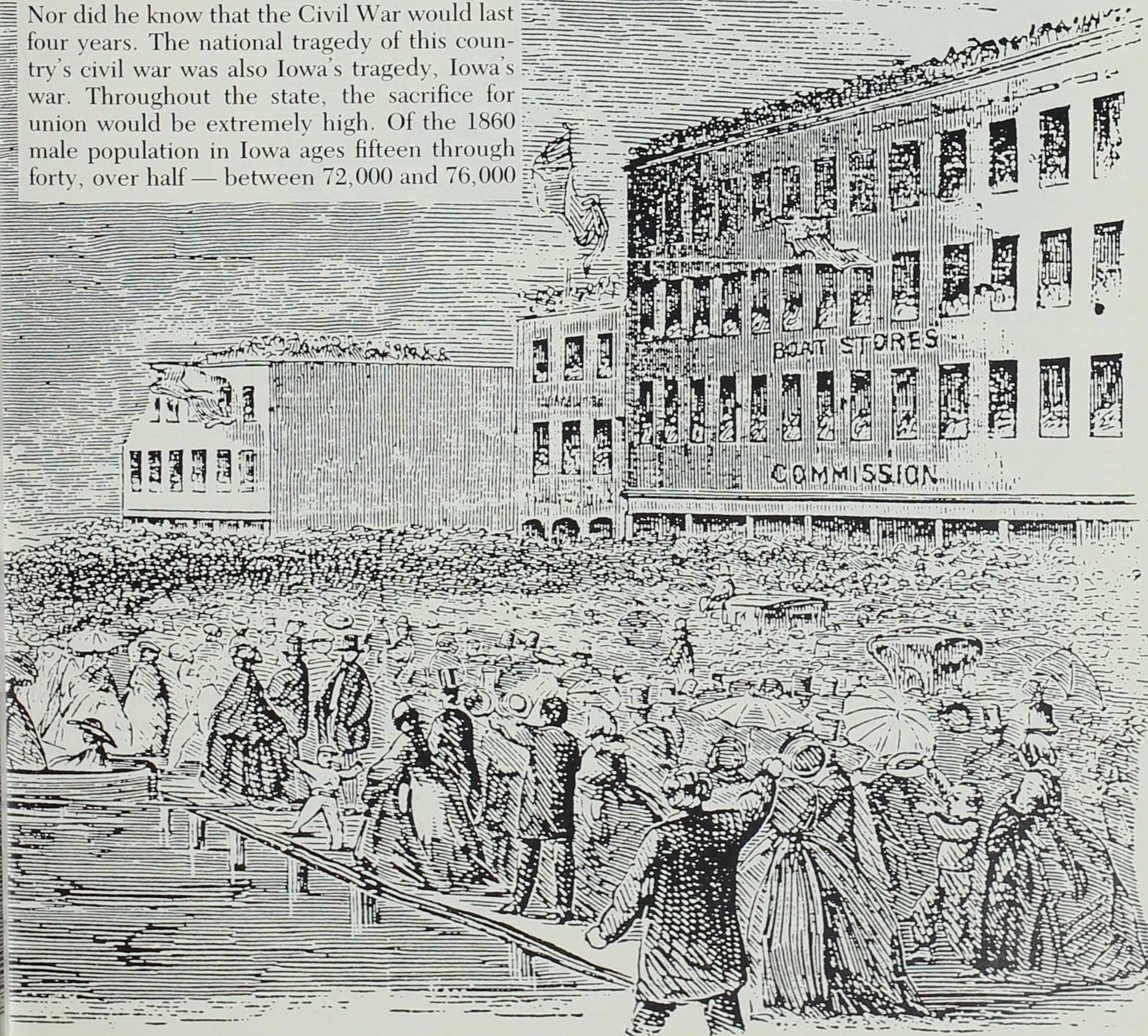


Illustration from *Harper's Weekly*,
"Departure of Volunteers from
Dubuque, Iowa, April 22, 1861."

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The Cedar Falls soldier who wrote this in February 1862 had not yet witnessed a much harder battle still three months away — Shiloh. Nor did he know that the Civil War would last four years. The national tragedy of this country's civil war was also Iowa's tragedy, Iowa's war. Throughout the state, the sacrifice for union would be extremely high. Of the 1860 male population in Iowa ages fifteen through forty, over half — between 72,000 and 76,000



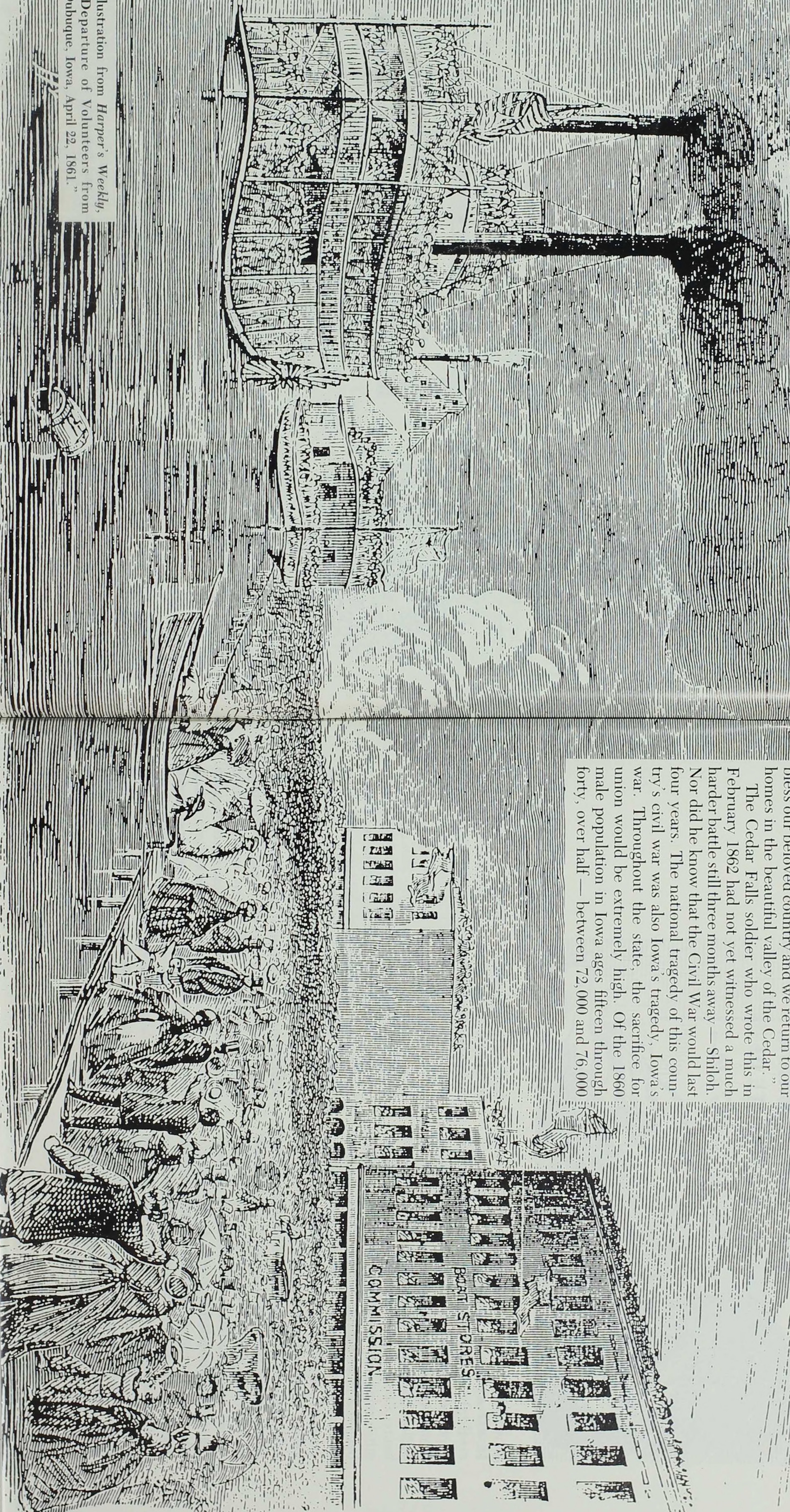
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— would serve in the Union army. More than 13,000 of these men would die.

Shiloh would awaken Americans to the depth of sacrifice the Civil War would ask of them. An Iowa soldier who passed over the Shiloh battlefield after the April 6-7 battle wrote: "I saw where the 3d Iowa and some other regiments fought yesterday. There has been the most terrible destruction. I counted 26 dead battery horses on a few square rods of ground and the men were lying almost in heaps. Blue and gray sleep together. Oh my God! Can there be anything in the *future* that *compensates* for this slaughter. Only Thou knowest."

One company of the Third Iowa Regiment that fought at Shiloh was from Cedar Falls, a typical Iowa community that proudly, almost eagerly, had sent its sons into national service and, unknowingly, into this "most terrible destruction." In Cedar Falls, as in many small towns, the preparations for war had been marked by the rhetoric of making sacrifices and preserving the Union. But it would seem that

no one then guessed the depth of the sacrifice, judging from the announcements and farewell ceremonies in Cedar Falls in early 1861.

THE LONG BITTER QUARREL over states' rights versus national authority had reached the breaking point in the presidential election in November 1860. Lincoln's election marked the break-up of the Union as the Southern states began to withdraw and form their Confederacy. Southern secession saturated the news of the day; each state, each community was forced to choose sides. Iowa was not prepared to go to war, but its communities began to form volunteer militia companies in case they were needed. The first company of volunteers from Cedar Falls began to form in January 1861 when the prospect of war was still far off — and exciting.

"We have the material here from which to form a 'crack corps,'" announced the Cedar

To Arms, To Arms,
Your Country calls.



ALL ILLUSTRATIONS (EXCEPT PAGES 98, 99, AND 110) ARE TAKEN FROM ENVELOPES PRINTED DURING THE CIVIL WAR (SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, SHSI, IOWA CITY).

Falls *Gazette*, "which, if properly organized and equipped, would be of great advantage to us on our gala days and public occasions, — and who knows but in these troublesome times might be the means of preserving the country from ruin and give some of the members an opportunity to cover themselves with immortal glory. Let's have the 'sogers' by all means."

By the spring of 1861 it had become obvious that the soldiers — or "sogers" as the *Gazette* chose to colloquialize — would indeed be needed. On March 8 the *Gazette* announced the formation of Cedar Falls' first militia company, the Pioneer Greys: "We now have a real live 'Infantry Corps,' numbering 60 rank and file, and is composed of men whose motto is 'Excelsior,' and who are determined to do their whole duty under any and all circumstances, men who respect and revere the names and memories of those who have sacrificed so much that we their descendants might enjoy the blessings of a Government free and based upon equality and intelligence, as contrasted with aristocracy and ignorance."

The issue of "equality and intelligence, as contrasted with aristocracy and ignorance" bespoke dual mythologies of antebellum Americans: the self-reliant, self-governing pioneer in the North, and the landed gentry in the South. States and soldiers would go to war carrying these myths, just as politicians and editors were carrying the myths behind the podium and onto the printed page.

In 1846 territorial Iowa had become the first free state admitted to the Union from the Louisiana Purchase. The great promise of the American frontier — and the free states that would be carved out of it — was one of individual potential, in contradiction to the almost feudal image of the Southern plantation. Although Iowa was not entirely spared the mob violence and threats that would accompany the division of the nation, the state's early and popular affirmation of the Union came as a result of faith that the Union stood for equality and individual potential. For many, the Republican party best represented these principles, and Republican domination of Iowa pol-



YOUNG AMERICA OFF FOR THE WAR.

itics was a key factor in Iowa's decision.

The pride that Iowans took in being "free" had more to do with labor than with race, as the *Cedar Falls Gazette* editorialized in 1861: "A government founded by the slave oligarchy, with slavery as the corner stone, must, of necessity, be hostile to freedom. — Mechanics, laborers, farmers, how do they speak of you today? Do they not call you serfs, white-slaves, mudsills, and every opprobrious epithet a pampered and haughty aristocracy can invent? Should the Southern cause prevail the condition of the middle and laboring classes of the North would be on the same footing as those in Poland and Hungary."

The democratic promise of Iowa, and of the Union, was a promise of advancement through individual effort. The institution of slavery was viewed as a threat to this promise because of labor competition. According to historian Morton Rosenberg, "Most believed that slavery was the only natural condition for the Negro. Most also opposed the advance of slavery into Iowa and elsewhere above the limits imposed by the Missouri Compromise — not, however, for moral reasons but from economic consid-

erations. These people feared the unequal competition from slave labor or the cheap labor of free Negroes." In 1850 these feelings had been translated into law when the Iowa General Assembly passed a law making it a penal offense for free blacks to immigrate to Iowa. This and other restrictive laws on free blacks would be a part of Iowa until after the war.

Early Iowa was a state of small farms. Those who did not actually make their living by farming lived in a small-farm environment. Towns had grown up along the waterways that carried produce to market or powered the mills. Merchants serviced the needs of farmers; the laborers worked in the mills and lumberyards.

Cedar Falls was such a town. The first cabin was built in 1845. In 1853, with a population of forty men, women, and children and only four buildings, the town was incorporated and a school district established. By May of 1860, as Southern Democrats muttered over secession at the national convention, the Cedar Falls population had exceeded 1,500. From that 1,500 came the sixty men who called themselves the Pioneer Greys.



IN FEBRUARY OF 1861 the newly formed Pioneer Greys leased a large hall on the third story of the Overman Block building to use as an armory. Each night the company met for voluntary drill and each Saturday night for drill and company business. The men were serious about their duty and appearance as soldiers, as their first statement proclaimed: "We intend, by gentlemanly and soldierly deportment, and strict drill and discipline, to earn a name which shall neither discredit ourselves or the town in which we live."

The Pioneer Greys were fortunate in that the man who initially organized the company and was elected captain, John B. Smith (manager of the Carter House hotel), had formerly been a captain of Dubuque's militia, the Governor's Greys. The Pioneer Greys' orderly sergeant, Fitzroy Sessions, also had had military experience as part of a Massachusetts militia company. Unlike many volunteers early in the Civil War, the Pioneer Greys could boast of at least an elementary military training.

Official regulations of the Adjutant General of the United States required that each company of Federal soldiers consist of a captain, a

first lieutenant, a first sergeant, four other sergeants, eight corporals, two musicians, and sixty-four to eighty-two privates. Captain Smith recognized that if his company mustered the required number of troops, almost one out of every twenty Cedar Falls citizens would go to war, leaving the young community severely short of a much needed labor force. Yet, when asked to cast ballots, fifty-seven of the Greys voted that the company nevertheless should be sent into national service; three voted against. The Pioneer Greys were willing to go to war.

On April 18, 1861 — three days after Lincoln's call to arms for 75,000 volunteers — the Pioneer Greys received a communication from the Adjutant General of the Iowa Militia, Jesse Bowen, asking that the company be brought up to wartime strength and stand ready to be called. Two days later the Greys met in their armory to adopt resolutions supporting the Union. The list included: "Resolved, First, that we condemn in severest terms the actions of those engaged in the insurrection and all who sympathize with them as unpatriotic, unloyal and the insurgents as traitors to the country," and "Resolved: That the general



**OUR HEARTS
ARE WITH OUR BROTHERS
IN THE FIELD.**

Government ought to be sustained by every true and loyal citizen and that we hereby pledge ourselves as a company to rally to the support of the Star Spangled Banner at any and at all times when the country shall need our services."

Resolutions completed, Captain Smith called the Greys to fall in, and in double file they marched down the flight of stairs and onto Main Street. A large banner stretched across the street from the Carter House hotel to the Overman Block, emblazoned with "OUR FLAG: WE WILL DEFEND IT!" At Smith's command the company wheeled into an open square beneath the banner and gave three cheers. The Cedar Falls Brass Band marched up and began to play patriotic martial music. Passersby downtown this Saturday night cheered, "Now one for the Greys. One for Old Glory. One for our country — our whole country!" Thus began a round of celebrations and ceremonies as the Greys stood ready to be called.

IN THE WEEKS that followed, Cedar Falls became a hotbed of patriotism. "War! War! is all the talk — everybody is for War! Most assuredly this is no place for traitors!" the *Gazette* warned. Flags flew from fences, windows, and porches; one observer counted twenty-seven flags in the four-block business district. Many citizens paid a quarter and proudly wore silver star pins engraved with the words "Constitution and Union." A young bride had her wedding cake decorated in colored sugar spelling out "The Union Forever."

The Pioneer Greys' company roll, as of April 21, listed eighty-two names, but this included men with physical disabilities and some with obligations that prevented them from enlisting in the regular army. The company wanted to recruit many more than the minimum required by Adjutant General Bowen, so they sought recruits from nearby communities. Two men were dispatched by



horseback to Waverly, Charles City, and other towns. Three days later they galloped back into town followed by fifteen riders and with pledges from twenty other volunteers. The horsemen's arrival was an excuse for a large, energetic demonstration and parade.

In May Iowa Governor Kirkwood ordered the companies that would make up the Second and Third Iowa regiments to rendezvous at Keokuk. His order included the Pioneer Greys. To organize a proper send-off and to consider plans for financially aiding the soldiers' families, the town editors and other prominent citizens called a mass meeting for Monday night, May 27. Over six hundred filled Overman Hall that night. The meeting was chaired by Colonel W. H. Sessions, a veteran of the Mexican War and father of Fitzroy Sessions, the Greys' orderly sergeant. While a committee of five drew up specifics downstairs, the crowd listened to impromptu patriotic speeches. Iowa Representative Zimri Streeter

and Senator J. B. Powers gave keynote addresses. Congregational pastor R. B. Fifield declared his deep regret that the state of his health prevented him from enlisting. Presbyterian minister William Porterfield announced that he was willing to join and that if his five sons were old enough, he would be proud to watch them march against the South. The crowd called upon a local merchant to speak. Remarking that he had no gift for words, the merchant pointed to the flag draping the speaker's stand and said, "There's Old Glory! That's my flag!"

That Wednesday nearly sixty women gathered in the large Horticultural Room of Overman Hall to sew uniforms of grey woolen trousers and navy blue cotton shirts. They worked for five days. Local tailors J. J. Ball, Rob Roy, and Samuel Berry had set up sadirons, pressing boards, and a half-dozen sewing machines, and directed the work of their own apprentices and the local women



(who also supplied shoes, socks, and under-clothing for the company).

The sewing marathon ended on Sunday, June 2, in time for a farewell that would extend through three days of flag-waving and speeches. All Sunday morning the Greys drilled upstairs in their third-floor armory. Below, the streets were filling up. Farm wagons, buggies, and horses brought hundreds from surrounding farms and communities. In the grove along the Cedar River, people opened up picnic baskets. At noon Captain Smith dismissed his men as a special committee moved in to decorate the hall.

Early in the afternoon, Smith led his company, followed by the town clergy and the brass band, back up the two flights of stairs to the hall. They lined up in front of the speaker's platform, from which Pastor Fifield praised them for volunteering and warned them of the temptations and vices they would encounter as soldiers.

About noon the next day a caravan of nearly 40 wagons and teams and 350 citizens from Waverly arrived, escorting their 20 volunteers. A parade formed, led by the brass band

in their new wagon and four-horse hitch, followed by veterans of the War of 1812. The Pioneer Greys formed ranks and met the Waverly volunteers with cheer after cheer. Later that afternoon Captain Trumbull of Butler County arrived with his company, the Union Guards, en route to Waterloo. The two companies greeted each other enthusiastically, exchanging cheers and salutes. After less than an hour, Trumbull and his men marched out of Cedar Falls to Waterloo, where twenty volunteers awaited and where more than a thousand people were also celebrating the war. After the Guards left, the Greys formally elected their officers by acclamation — John B. Smith, captain; Fitzroy Sessions, first lieutenant; and Charles Mularky, second lieutenant.

That night eight hundred crowded Overman Hall for more speeches, prayers, and patriotic songs. Representative Streeter begged that the Greys not lay down their arms until every rebel flag had been trodden underfoot. A speaker announced that funds had been raised to purchase a sword and epaulets for Captain Smith. Lieutenant Sessions was presented with a navy Colt revolver. Equipped with honor and



THE WAR FOR THE UNION.

draped in glory, the company was ready, in the view of the citizenry, to depart the next day.

On Tuesday morning Main Street, from the river to Second Street, bulged with over five thousand citizens from Cedar Falls and the surrounding area. The Greys mingled with the crowd and said their farewells to friends and families. When the order came for the soldiers to march, a parade formed. Led by the Cedar Falls Brass Band and the veterans of the War of 1812, the huge mass of people followed the Pioneer Greys across the Millrace Bridge to the new depot on the Dubuque and Sioux City railroad line.

To many in the crowd, there was a certain irony that just weeks earlier Cedar Falls had celebrated the arrival of the first train at the newly completed depot. It was as if the trains had arrived just in time to take their men away. The train sat there now, decorated with flags and cedar branches, smoking and hissing, waiting to depart.

The company broke ranks one last time before boarding, for one last farewell. The reality of what the departure meant struck at least one woman who broke down in sobs, holding

tightly her two small children. She begged her husband not to go, but he refused. Moved by her appeal, three young men offered to take the husband's place in the Greys. Again he refused.

THE BRASS BAND and about fifty citizens accompanied the Greys on the train. In Waterloo, six miles down the track, the Butler County Union Guards boarded, conspicuous in their civilian clothing next to the well-uniformed Greys. The five passenger cars reserved for the soldiers were soon filled, and many people rode in the baggage car.

The train took the two companies and the accompanying townspeople to Dubuque to board a steamboat. There the Washington Guards escorted the two companies to a park — for more speeches and band music. The Pioneer Greys made such an impression that six Dubuque men offered \$6 apiece to join, but were refused. Quartered overnight in a large brick building near the steamboat landing, the Greys reversed the farewells the next morning

TOO LATE FOR COMPROMISE.



Southern Sympathisers,—Confound the luck, there goes the Steamer Compromise, and we are left behind.

by escorting their hometown citizens back to the Dubuque depot. The band members presented the Greys with a new tenor drum. Tearfully, Lieutenant Sessions called for three cheers for the people back home.

An incident at the send-off the next evening gave the Pioneer Greys a glimpse of the violence and hatred into which the war would take them. A crowd had gathered at the Dubuque wharf to watch the soldiers board a steamboat bound for Keokuk. The crowd included several Southern sympathizers who jeered at the troops. In anger, a member of the Greys on the boat grabbed a bucket and hurled it at them. On shore one of the Southern sympathizers grabbed a rock and threw it at the soldiers on the boat. The rock struck Lieutenant Fitzroy Sessions in the chest. In an instant the lieutenant drew his bowie knife and revolver, and with knife clenched between his teeth and revolver

in hand, he jumped from the steamboat into the crowd. With one punch he knocked the rock-thrower to the ground. As the boat pulled away, Sessions leaped several feet across the water to the reaching hands of his men. The Pioneer Greys from Cedar Falls were on their way to war.

In Keokuk the ten companies that would make up the Third Iowa Volunteer Infantry were read the Articles of War and sworn into regular service. The Pioneer Greys were mustered in as K Company. On June 29, 1861, the regiment — issued grey dragoon style uniforms by the state, armed with smoothbore 1848 Springfield muskets, but lacking both cartridge boxes and cartridges — were crowded aboard two ferryboats lashed together and sent south.



RALLY, BOYS.

EPILOGUE

A YEAR LATER, in the summer of 1862, in response to Lincoln's call for more volunteers, Cedar Falls fielded a second company of soldiers, the Cedar Falls Reserves. The Reserves were made up of many of the young businessmen of the community. Mayor Edwin Brown took on a partner in the flour mill so that he could join; Edward Townsend gave up his position as bank partner to join, along with *Gazette* editor George Perkins and over ninety others.

The Cedar Falls Reserves were not sent out of town with the brass band playing. The war had become a grim, tragic business by then. The Pioneer Greys had fought their first battle at Blue Mills, Missouri, in September 1861; one of their men had been killed and five others

wounded. In December another member had been killed, accidentally by a comrade, while in winter quarters. That spring on the first morning of the Battle of Shiloh, April 6, 1862, the Greys with the rest of the Third Iowa had taken their stand in the Peach Orchard. It had been a bloody day for the Cedar Falls troops: seventeen had been shot, two had died.

Cedar Falls and the state of Iowa had few romantic illusions of war left by September of 1862, when the Reserves left home. There was no parade for the Reserves or cedar wreaths on the train. The men left Cedar Falls for Dubuque riding on the flatcars of a gravel train. The crowd that saw them off was not cheering. □



CEDAR FALLS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

A bird's eye view of a tranquil, orderly Cedar Falls, three years after the end of the Civil War.

NOTE ON SOURCES

This article was developed from a paper submitted at the request of the Northeast Iowa Civil War Association to mark the 125th anniversary of the departure of the Pioneer Greys. The most important primary sources were the newspapers of the time. The *Cedar Falls Gazette* covered the Pioneer Greys quite extensively, as well as often printing soldiers' letters. Of earlier *Palimpsest* articles on the war, those by Luella M. Wright and Mildred Throne are invaluable to anyone studying the subject. The University of Northern Iowa library contains many sources on Iowa and Cedar Falls history, including brief sketches of the different regiments. Some of the most important are in the five-volume *Roster and Record of Iowa Soldiers in the War of the Rebellion* (Des Moines, 1908/11). Lieutenant S. D. Thompson's *Recollections With the Third Iowa Regiment* covers the first three years of the regiment's service and is a well-written contemporary account of a soldier's life. The author thanks Jeff Piper (President, Northeast Civil War Association) and Dr. Alvin Sunseri (University of Northern Iowa) for their support and valuable suggestions. Michael Prahl patiently proofread the many drafts and offered valuable criticism.

Two Songs

In February 1862 the *Cedar Falls Gazette* reprinted this item from the *Third Iowa Gazette*, a newspaper produced by soldiers in the Third Iowa Regiment in Missouri. The Pioneer Greys, now known as Company K, were represented in a parody to the tune of "Dixie."

"COMPANY K IN DIXIE"

From Cedar Fall we took our leave
The fourth of July, we went by steam.
Look away, look away
Look away, look away.

At Keokuk we first encamped
Many miles we had to tramp.
Look away, look away
Look away, look away.

Then we wished we was in Dixie,
Oh! Oh! Oh!
In Dixie land we take our stand,
To win or die in Dixie land;
Away, away,
Away down South in Dixie.



Two years later another song appeared in the *Cedar Falls Gazette* (January 1864). For the unidentified songwriter, the war had lasted too long and the price of sacrifice had been too high. The willingness to fight was now replaced by a sense of relief. Having filled its quota, Cedar Falls would not be asked to send more men.

"SONG OF THE STAY-AT-HOME"

Hurrah, our quota's filled!
And we are out of the draft;
Hurrah, hurrah, let all hurrah
For we are out of the draft.

Cedar Falls has her quota full!
The best of the news I've heard!
No draft! all danger o'er, hurrah!
I feel I could fly like a bird!

Last week I thought they wouldn't fetch it,
And I dreamed of the draft to be;
I saw myself with accoutrements
Standing picket in the army.

But, oh! how happy wife'll be
When she hears the glorious news;
She so sure that I'd be drafted,
Now will slightly change her views.

But tell you what I feared it,
With no hope to get exempt,
For I'm young and strong and rugged —
'Twould be nonsense to attempt.

I have no taste for soldiering,
And my business ties are strong.
Then my wife — I know 'twould kill her,
And for me to go! how wrong.

But those boys who've volunteered,
They as well as not can go.
'Tis for their interest every way,
And so the bounty makes it so.

Brave boys they are, and patriots
Who've gone to join the holy fight,
Not hesitating till conscripted
Into the triumphing cause of Right.

To Cedar Falls 'tis creditable
Thus answering Abraham's call;
And I hope that now Rebellion
May in its last ditch fall.

Hurrah! our quota's filled,
And we are out of the draft!
Hurrah, hurrah! let all hurrah,
For we are out of the Draft!