

THE PALIMPSEST

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The Call to Arms

On Saturday night, April 21, 1861, Captain John B. Smith called the Cedar Falls militia company to attention at precisely eight o'clock. As the orderly sergeant clipped through the roll, Smith listened to the staccato responses of sixty of the eighty-two members on the roster of the Pioneer Greys. A strange tenseness pervaded the company facing their captain in the improvised armory on the third floor of Overman Hall. War loomed ominously near. Both the captain and the Greys knew that within the hour they would vote for or against offering their services in defense of the Union.

The rising tide of Southern hostility, the secession of several States, and the attack upon Fort Sumter had aroused the resentment of loyal citizens. Throughout Iowa national patriotism flared high. Among the 1600 inhabitants of Cedar Falls, as elsewhere, the words "secession", "Confederate States", and "rebellion" elicited

emphatic endorsement of the slogan: "*The Union must and shall be preserved.*"

Captain John B. Smith was nearly forty years old, able-bodied, intelligent, and popular. On New Years Day, 1861, he had become host of the Carter House in Cedar Falls, having left the management of the Julien hotel in Dubuque. He had been active in the organized militia of Dubuque as a member of the famous Governor's Greys. Upon the solicitation of Cedar Falls citizens who were alarmed by the threats of secession, he had immediately organized the Pioneer Greys. In recognition of his well sustained reputation for leadership, the men elected him captain at their first meeting.

As he stood before the Pioneer Greys on that fateful Saturday evening in April, 1861, Captain Smith held in his hand three important documents. Very gravely he began to read aloud President Lincoln's proclamation calling for 75,000 volunteers to suppress the rebellion. With special emphasis the captain read the President's "appeal to all loyal citizens to favor, facilitate, and aid this effort to maintain the honor, the integrity, and the existence of our National Union and the perpetuity of popular government and to redress wrongs already long enough endured."

Assuming that most of the Greys had read this

proclamation the day before when it appeared in the Cedar Falls *Gazette*, he laid it aside with little comment. More gravely he began to read the second proclamation which most of the Greys had had no opportunity of seeing since it had been issued by Governor Samuel J. Kirkwood on April 18, 1861, and sent to Smith too late for publication in the weekly *Gazette*. The captain's voice moved slowly over the closing phrases: "The Nation is in peril. A fearful attempt is being made to overthrow the Constitution and dissever the Union. The aid of every loyal citizen is invoked to sustain the General Government. For the honor of our State let the requirement of the President be cheerfully and promptly met."

After reading these appeals for enlistment, Captain Smith, with a few terse remarks, laid the calls to arms before his company. Better than the Pioneer Greys, he knew what war would mean to them, and he also understood how apprehensively many citizens of Cedar Falls awaited the decision of this meeting. Preservation of the Union could mean nothing short of war, and war meant the summoning of every military unit to arms. At first the thought had been appalling. Who would be left to carry on the work of the community if the eighty-two men of the local militia company were mustered into service? If the

Greys went to war, their departure would mean that one out of twenty men, women, and children in the town would be absent on military duty. But the wrongs too long endured must be redressed.

Many of the Greys were young married men just beginning to make headway on farms, at trades, or in the professions. To enlist was to subordinate allegiance to family and business to the welfare of the nation. That night as one after another expressed his opinion the tenseness of the first moments gave way to noisy applause and loud cheers. There was no doubt about the ultimate decision. At last Captain Smith put the question of volunteering. The vote stood fifty-seven in favor and three against.

Tremendous applause shook Overman Hall, but Captain Smith checked the cheering of the men while he read an order from Jesse Bowen, the Adjutant General of Iowa. Apparently Bowen entertained no doubt that the Pioneer Greys would offer their services to the national government, for he directed Captain Smith to bring his company up to war-time strength and have it ready for rendezvous by May 20th. According to the official regulations issued by the Adjutant General of the United States on May 4, 1861, each company in the Union army was to consist of a captain, a first lieutenant, a second lieutenant,

a first sergeant, four other sergeants, eight corporals, two musicians, and not less than sixty-four or more than eighty-two privates.

Before adjournment the Pioneer Greys "solemnly expressed" to the Chief Executive of Iowa their loyalty to the Constitution and said they considered "secession traitorous to the country." Last, and most important to them and the community, they duly informed Governor Kirkwood that the Pioneer Greys "cheerfully tendered their services and earnestly entreated him to accept the same."

After the momentous business in hand had been accomplished, Captain Smith surprised the boys with a curt, "Company, fall in!" In double file the Greys followed him down the two flights of stairs into Main Street where all day a great flag had floated over the thoroughfare. Before it had been elevated by a rope, flung from the top of Overman Hall to the roof of the Carter House across the way, some one had inscribed upon it in huge letters, "OUR FLAG — WE WILL DEFEND IT!" At Captain Smith's command the Greys wheeled into a hollow square beneath the emblem and loudly cheered the flag. Taking their stand nearby, members of the Cedar Falls Brass Band played their repertoire of patriotic airs.

The martial music attracted a crowd of Satur-

day-night shoppers who quickly caught the spirit of the hour. Joining in the cheering, they called out, "Now one for the Greys", or "One for Old Glory", or "One for Our Country — Our Whole Country". If any bystanders had entertained any suspicion that the local company would not elect to follow the standard of Lincoln, the spontaneous demonstration gave full assurance that the Pioneer Greys had answered the call to arms.

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