

## A 'Tater Patch for Soldiers

The summer of 1863 brought bitter disappointment to Northerners who had hoped for a speedy termination of the Civil War. During 1861 and 1862, Cedar Falls with but sixteen hundred inhabitants had sent two companies of soldiers to the front. As casualty lists in wounded and dead from the Iowa Third and Thirty-first Regiments lengthened, local citizens grappled with two grim aspects of the national emergency — wheat, corn, and wool for the men at the front, and clothing and food for their families at home, many of whom were without means of support.

On June 1, 1861, the people of Cedar Falls had watched the entrainment of the first contingent of soldiers. Each of the hundred boys carried away with him as a gift from the citizens a fatigue uniform — trousers, shirt, belt, and cap. Each man left knowing that a fund of \$500 had been locally subscribed for general relief of soldiers' families. Within a few weeks a Soldiers' Aid Society began to function actively. It sought to encourage the knitting of socks and men's shawl-like scarves, and urged farmers to draw upon their shrinking reserves of dried apples, onions, and turnips.



These they packed into barrels and shipped to the South.

As prices for commodities rose and as the supply of ready money sharply lessened, it became increasingly difficult to obtain funds for relief. Treacle was substituted for sugar, scorched barley for coffee, and corn meal for wheat flour. By the close of April, 1863, the Soldiers' Aid Society had exhausted its exchequer and seemingly faced the end of its resources. During that month in response to an urgent appeal from Mrs. Annie Wittenmyer who was one of the State Sanitary Agents of Iowa, it dispatched a barrel, "filled with old cloth for bandages, old linen, lawn, and gingham dress skirts, half-worn shirts and drawers." In the same month the Society appealed to the farmers for root vegetables still stored in potato caves or dug-outs. The same appeal was sent to all the towns on the Dubuque and Sioux City Railroad from Cedar Falls to Dubuque. Out of the fifty-seven barrels shipped from these towns to Dubuque and from there on the *James Means* to Vicksburg, the people of Cedar Falls supplied a large quantity of catsup, a half barrel each of pickled cabbage and sauerkraut, and ten barrels of vegetables — onions, turnips, and potatoes. Yet each week more and more calls came in personal appeals from the soldiers and from the Sani-



tary Commission which had been organized to promote the welfare of men in the army.

On May 23rd, the local Soldiers' Aid Society, disheartened by insidious Copperhead propaganda and by the appalling needs of hospitals and camps and demands at home, gathered for their weekly meeting at the home of Henry Wright at the corner of Washington and Twelfth streets. That afternoon one by one they discarded as no longer practicable "ice-cream parties", amateur musicals, programs of pantomimes and dramatic readings, and house-to-house solicitations — plans which for nearly two years the community had loyally supported.

A half hour later, when Dempsey Overman pushed open the door of the square parlor, depression had settled upon the group. Rather glumly they returned his cheerful grin. Without preliminaries he broke the gloom with a plan which he had been formulating all day as he plowed his ten-acre tract fronting on Walnut and Twelfth streets. He proposed to harrow and furrow one acre of that tract, turn it over rent-free to the Society, and suggested that they raise potatoes for the soldiers and their families. He was very confident that certain public-spirited gentlemen could be counted upon to supply ten bushels of seed potatoes which he had calculated would



be sufficient. If the members present saw fit to accept his proposal, all they would have to do was to plant, tend, and harvest the crop.

The shadows of discouragement lifted. Questions and suggestions came from all sides of the parlor. Dempsey Overman volunteered to interview the owners of seed potatoes.

"You might name it the 'Tater Patch", drawled one member.

"Why can't we turn the planting into an old-fashioned pioneer bee and invite the public?" suggested another.

Before the meeting broke up, Mrs. B. F. Perkins, President of the Society, had appointed the necessary committees and the secretary had recorded in her minutes a proposed "Potato Planting Bee" for June 3rd to be followed by a "Hoeing Bee" and still later by a "Harvest Bee".

As secretary, Mrs. Lennox H. Barnes duly explained the idea of the 'Tater Patch to the public. In the edition of the *Gazette* for May 29th, she invited all who were interested in war relief to assemble at the Dempsey Overman home on the following Tuesday and to participate in the "Planting Bee". A picnic supper was offered as a reward.

On the afternoon of June 3rd twice as many women as men appeared. The ladies, it seems,



willingly volunteered their services, following the men down the rows and dropping the potatoes into the holes with the primary result that the tubers "disappeared like magic", and with the secondary one that, after the spades had been wiped clean of black Iowa loam, both the gentlemen and their "lady assistants" were ready to enjoy their picnic supper, spread out upon the grass before the two-story brick house of Dempsey Overman.

After the potatoes were well started, abundant showers in early July made it imperative that the 'Tater Patch be weeded and cultivated. Mrs. Barnes apprized the public of the Patch's need of hoers and again promised "a Pik-Nik supper" to all who would present themselves for work on the afternoon of July 23rd. "The young ladies and gentlemen are requested to attend", she explained, "the ladies to contribute their mite toward the supper and the gents their hoes to the work. Do not forget, — on next Tuesday afternoon at D. C. Overman's — Society and 'Tater Bee combined."

The response was excellent. Before sundown the men had eradicated the weeds and fully earned their ham sandwiches and pound cake, and even relished their coffee substitute of oven-browned barley. On this occasion they were thanked for their cordial coöperation, for their hoeing skill,



and for clearing the 'Tater Patch project of all financial indebtedness.

Unfortunately the date set for the final Potato Digging Bee coincided with heaviest fall work of the farmers. Only four men answered the call of Mrs. Barnes and the Aid Society. The potatoes, however, were dug and heaped into piles before nightfall, for with spades, baskets, and determination the women harvested the crop. Editor "Hank" Perkins, who was doing his own and his brother's work at the *Gazette* office while George D. Perkins lay in an army hospital, drove up to the tract for a short time. On Friday in his news column he lauded the potato diggers by writing, "These women of the Soldiers' Aid Society deserve the highest praise which can be bestowed upon them for their self-sacrificing efforts in behalf of our brave soldiers. If our gallant boys," at Vicksburg, "could have witnessed our fair ones with rolled up sleeves and blackened hands digging potatoes — the fruits of patriotism, care, and toil, their hearts would have been warmed with grateful pride."

The Society had reason to congratulate itself, for the 'taters, when sacked, had increased tenfold. Sixty bushels were delivered at the Dubuque and Sioux City depot for transfer to the Sanitary Commission and forty bushels were re-



served for the needs of soldiers' families during the approaching winter. With potatoes selling locally at thirty cents a bushel, and at Vicksburg at the rate of fifteen pounds for a dollar, the Soldiers' 'Tater Patch amply justified Dempsey Overman's tithing-acre loan and the labors of the Aid Society.

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