

A Grand Rally

The citizens of Mt. Ayr and the surrounding country in Ringgold County planned a Fourth of July celebration in 1878. It was in the form of a "Grand Rally of the Veterans of the Late War". With this in mind a meeting of the soldiers who had participated in the Civil War was called during the early part of June. Lieutenant John McFarland, of the Twenty-ninth Iowa Infantry, presided and preliminary arrangements were made. The program committee chosen that day consisted of Captain E. L. Williams, Edward B. Heaton, and Thomas Liggett. Among other things they were instructed either to find a speaker of the day or to provide for an address by one of the committee. D. B. Marshall was appointed drum major.

Before the rally of the old soldiers could be held with success, they needed practice in marching. The *Ringgold Record* on June 13th notified the veterans of Mt. Ayr Township to meet in town on Saturday, June 15th, to elect officers and to organize. The veterans living in Liberty Township were to meet at the Bennett school the next Monday. G. A. Kinblade was in charge of the

soldiers of Lotts Creek. In asking them to meet at Caledonia on June 25th, he said, "We can have a grand time. Let us all come." Indeed, all the soldiers in the county were urged to organize and attend the festivities. Money was raised and extensive preparations were made. Fifers and drummers were requested to report to Marshall the day before the Fourth at Mt. Ayr. The veterans in all townships, however, did not organize as the time was too short.

So well developed were the early plans that the editor of the *Record* boasted three weeks before the celebration that, "If any town in Southwestern Iowa will have a grand time on the Fourth, Mt. Ayr will have it." One of his reasons was the fact that the Mt. Ayr band, "one of the best in southern Iowa", was to be there "to discourse sweet sounds to the Fourth of July revelers". Just a week before the rally, reports from all parts of the county indicated that many people were planning to come to Mt. Ayr. Even the *Argus* of Bedford, in neighboring Taylor County, was commenting on the celebration.

The soldiers who were to participate in the demonstration were called into camp on the third of July to perfect their organization. The program as arranged for the next day was an elaborate one with Reveille at sunrise, Sick Call at 8 o'clock,

Guard Mount at 9, Company Drill at 9:31, Battalion Drill at 11:30, Skirmish Drill at 2 p. m., and Dress Parade at 3 p. m. Edward B. Heaton had been commissioned to provide hard tack and pork for the soldiers' rations.

The crowd commenced to gather in Mt. Ayr on the evening before the Fourth. All the next day until noon the roads were lined with the patriotic people of Ringgold County riding horseback, walking, and traveling in wagons and surries. There were also a number of people from the neighboring counties of Taylor, Worth, and Decatur. Estimates placed the size of the crowd from five thousand to somewhat higher figures.

On the morning of the Fourth a good many skeptics prophesied that there would be rain during the day. This seemed very probable as the sun was obscured by heavy, black clouds, and the air seemed laden with the usual oppressive heat that so often goes before a rain. Indeed, the weather offered a serious obstacle to many people who gave up the idea of coming to town for fear of being caught in a storm. The committee in charge rejoiced, however, to see the clouds roll away, and the "day shine forth hot enough for anybody."

One thing marred the day's celebration. A number of "roughs" carried their exuberance "too

high" and were taken down to the "lock-up". Somehow they secured an iron bar and escaped. But they did not venture to "make themselves very numerous around town" during the remainder of the day. Those who returned the next morning were each fined five dollars and costs.

For the afternoon program the old soldiers provided the principal attraction, and "they acquitted themselves well". The very limited time for organization prevented them from being thoroughly drilled and caused the ranks to be rather thin. A number of veterans on the grounds had not formed companies and so did not participate. On the whole, however, the maneuvers were a complete success and everybody appeared to be pleased. The band did so well that their listeners "stood wrapped in admiration", while the glee club was repeatedly cheered, although they too had had little time for practice.

As a test of General Grant's popularity, some one in the crowd proposed three cheers for him. They were given with a vim, and some thought thrice three more would have been given had they been asked for. "Those were not partisan cheers, but the almost unanimous sentiments of the multitude", reported the *Ringgold Record*.

The main feature of the afternoon program for the thousands congregated in the public square

in the center of Mt. Ayr was the address of the day. The program committee had followed the second alternative suggested to them on the day of organization in June by having one of their own members deliver the patriotic oration.

Edward B. Heaton, a veteran of Company G of the Thirtieth Iowa Infantry and of the Eleventh Ohio Cavalry, was chosen as speaker. Perhaps there was no more versatile man in Ringgold County at that time than Heaton. In the first place he was county surveyor. Moreover, he was at various times a farmer, school teacher, preacher, writer, and singing master. This was the man whose speech that day was considered an "able effort" and "worthy of perusal".

The orator of the day began by addressing his fellow soldiers and citizens. "Once more have we gathered ourselves together to commemorate the birth of a great nation, the mightiest, as well as the one representative republic on the globe. Once again have we met to renew our vows of love and fealty to that flag, that, wherever it floats, is the emblem of liberty and equal rights, and the symbol of the most beneficent form of government known to man."

He thought it was not difficult to read in the eyes of the soldiers that day a deep love for their country — a love that had sustained them on

many a long, weary march; that had inspired them with courage to withstand the shock of conflict; that made them invincible to traitors; that saved to the world and to the descendants of American citizens a "glorious country one and indivisible".

The county surveyor stressed the fact that the gathering that day in Mt. Ayr was not only in honor of the soldiers, but "also to bequeath to the young who are fast taking our places that gift, that dower of patriotism in which is grounded the foundations and which guarantees the stability and perpetuity of our institutions. We fought in hope, we live in hope that when our summons comes to join the grand army on the other shore, our places shall be filled by worthy sons of sires who carried the stars and stripes, the blazonry of heaven, upon a hundred fields of victory."

Heaton then considered national affairs. "Thirteen Fourths of July have passed since we laid aside the bayonet and the sabre and resumed the implements of peace. Those years have beheld a national progress unequalled in the annals of the world. New States have sprung into life, other stars have beamed in the national firmament. The West and the East have joined together in bonds of iron, the North and the South are fraternizing in bonds of fellowship more enduring than ribs of steel. That 'I am an American citizen' is uttered

with pride and confidence" whether by a citizen of Georgia or of Minnesota. All these things had transpired in spite of the fact that "the close of great wars, especially of civil wars, have always been followed by years of great social and moral, as well as financial depression and demoralization."

Since many soldiers were present who had been members of regiments from Illinois, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, and other States, he did not address himself to Iowa veterans alone. "It would be invidious", he thought, to give precedence to any special group. "Blessed be an All-wise Providence, as our trials and hardships and privations were one and common to all, so the beneficent results are universal, and one common glory is the meed of all."

Heaton thought it was especially fitting to remember those who had died in action. Miller fell on the Yazoo. Conly slept at Helena. Others lay on various southern battlefields. "Shall they have died in vain? No! by all the blessed privileges that we enjoy. No! by all the hardships that we endured. By the hope and faith that we have in the immortality of our institutions, they shall not die, but live, and live, and each generation shall upon this birthday of our Liberties rise up and call them blessed."

The speech ended with a prophecy. "Our names will shine with the steady lustre of the men of the revolution", he predicted. "In the future, when your strength fails, your chair shall be lifted upon the platform so that the people may see the gray-haired veteran who did what he could to suppress the rebellion."

This completed the formal program of the celebration that afternoon. By sunset many of the people had returned to their homes. There were some "festive dancers", however, who held forth until midnight. "Thus passed the most successful celebration ever held in Mt. Ayr."

The Grand Rally was so popular that the veterans met the following week to form a more permanent organization and elect officers. John McFarland was chosen Colonel, I. W. Keller, Lieutenant Colonel, W. H. Alexander, Major, W. H. Struthers, Adjutant, and E. B. Heaton, Sergeant Major. A number of people expressed the hope that the "regiment" would attract all the old soldiers in the county. If the veteran militia could be organized in a proper manner, the State would furnish arms, and the next reunion would be an even greater success.

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