



GAR Campfires

by Edith W. Harwood

WE CALLED THEM "The Old Soldiers' Campfires," and the first one I encountered began as a disappointment. The place was Wapello, Iowa, a small, county-seat town, built on the bluff side of the Iowa River. The time was nineteen hundred and seven. I was ten years old and a campfire meant to me just that, a roaring bonfire outdoors. So, when I found myself being ushered into Myron Hall over the Express Offices for what promised to be an ordinary and probably dull program — with speeches from a platform instead of songs under the stars — I felt I had been a victim of a double-cross for sure! But as I looked and listened I forgot my disenchantment. This was not a perfectly ordinary program after all. Something very different and special was in that hall. And the next year, and the next, and the next — for many years, in fact — the "campfires" that were held each autumn

became events to anticipate, to enjoy, and to remember.

The "Old Soldiers" were old indeed, for they were veterans of the Civil War. It had been many years since they had been mustered out of the Grand Army of the Republic to take up life again — to marry, to rear children, to seek their various fortunes. They were old, but not so old that they could not enjoy an annual day of fellowship and of reminiscence, climaxed by the evening campfire.

I was a fortunate child, for my grandfather was one of these soldiers. His name was Alford Chilcote, and he lived in the neighboring Iowa town of Washington, some thirty-odd miles northwest. His regiment had been the Twentieth Wisconsin, but he had been "adopted" by the members of the Nineteenth Iowa Infantry, who largely made up the Washington GAR Post. His yearly trek from Washington to Wapello for the campfire heightened its signifi-

With flag and drums, the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) leads a Maquoketa parade, May 30, 1934.

cance, and wove into the fabric of my family's life a special, recurring pattern, still cherished in memory.

Although the GAR post at Washington always sent a sizable delegation to the affair, Grandpa did not come over with them. He and Grandma arrived by train here in Wapello the afternoon before. Besides the valise containing their night clothes, Grandpa's good black suit, and Grandma's best black dress, they always carried a cloth-covered basket. In it we found tomatoes, ornamental gourds, a mold of freshly churned butter, and a dozen fresh eggs.

After breakfast the next morning he would strike off alone, bound for the courthouse lawn, spacious under old trees — there to meet, and greet, and “chin with” the comrades, who all day long, by ones and twos and larger groups, arrived to join the conclave. They came from nearby towns — Grandview, Columbus Junction, Morning Sun, Toolesboro on the Mississippi, Mediapolis, Washington — and from surrounding farms. They came by train, by spring wagon, buggies, a few by car. Some were accompanied by wives, sons, or daughters, who had to find their amusement elsewhere; that day the courthouse lawn was strictly reserved for the veterans. The benches filled, the lawn became dotted with groups that assembled, disintegrated, reassembled, as the hours wore on. Sack lunches and restaurants took care of the noon meal, and in the evening the Ladies' Aid of one of the churches served a chicken pie dinner.

Our family did not go to the Ladies' Aid meal, but ate at home. After supper we would see Grandpa, dressed in his best, slowly walking back and forth in front of the house, hands clasped behind his back, head down. Grandma would admonish my two brothers and me not to bother him; he was “thinking over his speech.” My mother, who “gave readings” and was always a part of the evening's entertainment, would also be getting dressed up for the occasion.

By eight o'clock the selected hall was well filled and only the front platform's tiers of chairs were empty and waiting. Then, from the

GAR Hall above the Post Office at the far end of the only business street would come the sound of fife and drums, and then the tramp of marching feet. The honored guests were approaching. By the time they reached the door we were all standing. Then they were marching in: the flag bearers, the fife and drum corps, then two by two in perfect step, the soldiers. They wore no uniforms, no insignia other than the small bronze buttons in the lapels of their good black suits, but there was no mistake about it — they were soldiers. Tomorrow knees might be throbbing with rheumatism, backs stooped, but not tonight. Chins up, arms swinging rhythmically, treads even, they came down the center aisle, climbed the steps, and took their places on the platform. The invisible bond of their shared experience was in that hour apparent, setting them unmistakably apart from the rest of us. Under the spell of the pulsing drum beats, the high leading voice of the fife, all history seemed to move down that center aisle: Shiloh, Vicksburg, the Battle of the Wilderness, Bull Run, Prairie Orchard, Lincoln, Gettysburg, the Emancipation Proclamation, George Washington, Paul Revere, the Spirit of Seventy-Six, and Glory Hallelujah all rolled into one!

Then the drums were still, the flag set in its place, the invocation given by a local minister. When we were seated the platform chairs were filled. How many were there? I don't know. There seemed to be quite an army, but I realize that my memories are viewed through the lens of a child's eyes, and magnified accordingly. With the exception of a very few, I can't remember names or faces. From Wapello there was Dan McKay, whose short goatee, trimmed moustache, and broad-brimmed hat made him the perfect prototype of the southern colonel (“uncle” to every child in town because on circus and carnival days he stood on downtown street corners and distributed quarters for spending money to all comers under the age of ten). His brother Bee (short for Willoughby) McKay was also there. Captain J. J. Kellogg, from Washington, a natural-born comedian and wit, perennial master of ceremonies, only had to step to the center of the stage and raise an eyebrow to set up a roar of laughter and applause. The audience well knew what was

coming, and they were never disappointed. There were many beards and bushy moustaches, and bald heads gleamed under the high bright lights. The current president of the Women's Relief Corps and my mother were the only women on the stage. Mother looked remote and unfamiliar, separate from the rest of our family group.

The program began. The Relief Corps lady made a speech of welcome and was duly answered. We sang: "Mine eyes have seen the glory/Of the coming of the Lord/He is trampling out the vintage/Where the grapes of wrath are stored." Everybody joined in the chorus: "Glory, glory hallelujah!" And we sang: "Just before the battle, Mother,/I am thinking most of you," and "Tenting to-night, tenting to-night/Tenting on the old camp ground." Someone, usually a gifted high school senior, "delivered" (that's the word) the Gettysburg Address, and there would be a vocal solo.

The old soldiers themselves made speeches. This part of the program, if the truth were told, I suspect would bear out my first fear of boredom. Probably certain soldiers were selected to do the honors for the rest, but it always seemed that anyone who had anything he wanted to say could have the floor as long as he wished. And most of them were definitely not public speakers. They talked very little of their battlefield experiences. They were interested in the affairs of the present, and, as do the rest of us, they had their opinions on almost everything. Some of them were dull indeed. Not that it mattered. No performers ever had a more willingly captive audience.

There was a great deal of what my grandfather, who had the unusual gift of viewing all things (himself included) with a humorous eye, called "flag waving and eagle soaring." Once, when it was his turn to speak, he electrified himself and everyone else by allowing that humor to show; he finished his speech by declaiming dramatically, "And may the old eagle soar, sir, and soar, sir, till he gets so sore he can't soar anymore, sir!" It brought down the house, and thereafter, at Grandpa's turn to speak, someone always called out, "Soar the old eagle, Alf!" I think he tried it once, but it was anticlimactic. Such flights of spontaneous oratory are not good warmed over.

When it came my mother's turn to speak I always found myself with clammy hands and a fast-beating heart, sick with stage fright for her. What if she were to forget? She never did. With her readings we returned to the 1860s. She always gave something new, and then "by request" her encores, until I almost knew them by heart myself:

All quiet along the Potomac, they say,
Except, now and then, a stray picket
Is shot, as he walks on his beat to and fro,
By a rifleman hid in the thicket.
'T is nothing — a private or two, now and then
Will not count in the news of the battle;
Not an officer lost — only one of the men
Moaning out, all alone, the death-rattle.

...
All quiet along the Potomac tonight —
No sound save the rush of the river:
While soft falls the dew on the face of the dead —
The picket's off duty forever.

Another was "Night on Shiloh," the story of a picket who investigated the shining object he noticed on the breast of the enemy sniper he had just killed, to find a locket. Opening it, he sees the picture of "my brother's fair bride." The old, sad story of the war of brother against brother.

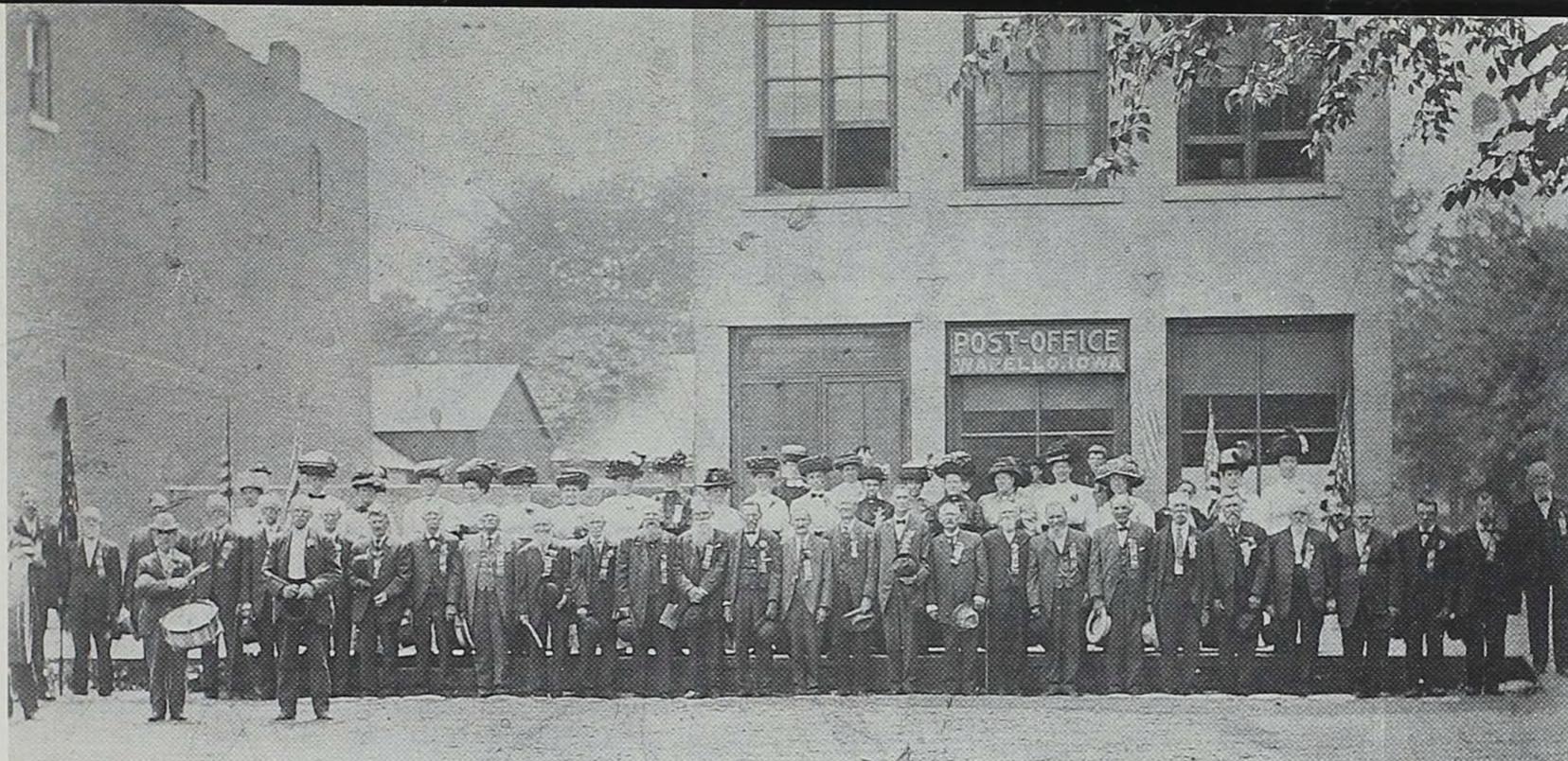
There was the simple story of an aged farmer whose three sons were all reported "lost in battle." Wearily the farmer goes out to the pasture one evening to bring in the cattle. He finds that the cattle are already being driven through the gate by the youngest son:

Loosely swung in the evening air
The empty sleeve of army blue;
And worn and pale from the crisping hair
Looked out a face that the father knew.

For Southern prisons may sometimes yawn,
And yield their dead unto life again;
And the day that comes with a cloudy dawn
In golden glory at last may wane.

The great tears sprang from the father's eyes;
For the hearts must speak when the lips are dumb;
And under the silent evening skies
Together they drove the cattle home.

But the best-loved and most often called for



GAR headquarters were above the Wapello Post Office.

was a courtroom dialogue between one Abe Bersey and a presiding judge:

“Your Honor, I plead guilty, I’m a bum.
I don’t deny this cop has found me drunk;
And I don’t deny that through the whole long
summer
The sun-warmed earth has been my only bunk.
I ain’t been able fer to earn a livin’
A man with one leg planted can’t get a job —
And I’ve a strong misgivin’
About bein’ cooped up in a Soldier’s Home.”

Then follows Abe’s recollection of the “hellborn frightful roar of battle,” and how he had saved a famous colonel, “Old Sweety,” who had fallen wounded from his horse. The judge listens to Abe’s war story, then pronounces the sentence:

“Such shiftless, worthless creatures
Should never be allowed to roam and beg;
Of course your case has some redeeming features,
As in your country’s cause you lost your leg.
But yet, I feel the world needs an example
To check this tendency of men to roam.
The sentence is that all your life — your bunk
Will be the best room in my humble home.”
The soldier stared, dumb, silent as a statue.
Then in a voice of trembling pathos said,
“Judge, turn your face a little — that voice was
like an echo from the dead.”
Then forward stepped he, grimy hand extended,
While tears adown his sunburned face did roll,
And said, with slang and pathos strangely mingled,
“Why Colonel Sweety, darn your brave old soul!”

Unabashed sentimentality every one of

them; “tear jerkers” they would be called today, and so they were. Off would come Uncle Bee’s glasses, out would come his handkerchief; all through the audience men and women wiped away surreptitious tears. And all my stage fright for my mother turned to pride.

There was a solemn little ceremony in memory of the ones who hadn’t come back or who had left the ranks by more recent death. Taps were sounded in the hall, to be answered from somewhere outside in the darkness by a second bugle, high, clear and unutterably lonely.

The program was over. There was a great scraping of chairs; hands that had been clasped in greeting were shaken all over again in farewell “until next year.” And soon we were walking home together beside the quiet Iowa River. It had been a good day. We were content, replete, and, looking back, adults and children alike, we were strangely innocent. That is the only word I can find for it. All day we had remembered, we had talked of, we had celebrated in memory of a war. We had been touched even at times to tears — but we were uncommitted. After all the years, even to the “Old Soldiers,” the reality of war had been engulfed in legend. It belonged now to “far away and long ago.”

We slept soundly that night, lulled by the lapping of the river against pilings, sustained by pride in the past and faith in the future. How could we know, how could we dream, that August 4, 1914, toward which our spinning world inexorably sped, would be any different from any other tomorrow? □