

THE CIVIL WAR

As the Civil War approached, a great deal had happened in the United States since the founding of West Bend. There had been a successful war with Mexico; gold had been discovered in California and some fortune-seeking youths from West Bend, among them Tom Farmer, had gone west, only to return disillusioned. Edwin's discovery of an oil well in Pennsylvania promised to revolutionize American heating and lighting and the local wives were discussing the possibility of acquiring one of the new fangled kerosene lamps. Men spoke in awe of the Winchester repeating rifle, while farmers talked excitedly of a new machine called a binder that could save hours of toil. New music appeared and people were humming and singing the tunes of Stephen Foster ("My Darling Nellie Gray," "My Old Kentucky Home" and "Jingle Bells" their favorites.

But there as a disturbing cloud on the horizon, for Kansas had its civil war, a man named John Brown had been hung, and the southern states had seceded when word of the election of Abraham Lincoln reached the south.

A meteorite shower deposited the largest meteorites ever discovered in Wisconsin in an uninhabited spot near the village, and in 1858 a comet frightened many who felt the end of the world was at hand. It was seen for all of four minutes in West Bend.

West Bend was growing, though, and most of the news seemed remote from their mid-west isolation. By 1860, fifteen years after its founding, the village had 28 city blocks; Cedar Street was the main east-west street, and River Road (the current Main Street) was heavily travelled. The Farmers were beginning to prosper and much of their money was spent in West Bend.

The most difficult of all nineteenth century subjects to discuss is that of the Civil War, for the West Bend history of that era is full of ambiguities. On the one hand are the patriotic meetings, beginning shortly after the war was declared. Amid general enthusiasm for the flag and country the local citizens resolved on April 23, 1861, in a meeting in the Court House: "Whereas our government has been attacked by rebels and traitors, and the Union thereby endangered, therefore let it be resolved that our sentiments are: "The Union forever, and if necessary our blood and treasure to sustain the conflict." G. H. Kleffler, B.S. Potter, W. Horton, W.P. Barnes and L.F. Frisby signed the resolution. After the unanimous agreement they gave the flag a tiger and a three times three and the old wooden walled Court House rang with their enthusiasm.

But the reality was that they were ready to give neither their blood nor their treasure. Washington County paid the highest bounties, \$625 average, of any county in Wisconsin to keep their blood at home. West Bend contributed the least amount of money of any of the "major" cities in the county, so they were not willing to part with their treasure either. Hartford collected \$41,000.00 Germantown \$31,000, Kewaskum \$21,000 and West Bend but \$13,600 of which taxes paid \$10,000 and the rest was raised privately.

West Bend simply did not like the war. This was, primarily, a German community and amount the major reasons for coming to America was the desire to escape the continental wars and the mandatory every-man draft. Many of them were trying to make a living on marginal land, most were clearing land for the first time, and they said they needed every boy home to help. Never mind that other counties had the same problem and they had no trouble finding volunteers. That was the reason given in West Bend, at any rate. Their parents were not about to send their boys to a shooting war in their adoptive country.

Then, too, most people were anti-Republican. In Wisconsin this brand new political party was composed largely of Whigs, who were noted for their anti-Catholic and anti-foreigner feelings, especially if the latter did not speak the English language. Lincoln was a Republican. A third reason was that West Bend simply was not interested in freeing the slaves. They could have cared less about that, most of them. (On the other hand, Barton was alleged to be one of the stations on the underground RR to help the escaped slaves flee to Canada.) When the report of thousands of free Negroes coming to the north reached West Bend an editor wrote: "We look upon this extensive immigration of these free blacks to mix with and compete with free white labor of the north as a most outrageous policy. The equality will be formed by reducing the whites to a level with the blacks. It must be stopped soon, if ever. The only way to stop these sons of Ham from over-running our state and disgracing our race is left with the Democrats. See that you vote for men who will free our state from the curse."

The issue for those who did support the war was preservation of the Union. They knew it had to be saved. But the anti-Negro feeling ran deep. Newspapers, letters and memoirs are replete with expressions of that sentiment; "We believe in guaranteeing the protections of life and property, but why assist them? They are of an inferior and weak race."

West Bend and the Army

It is time to look at the record and see what West Bend actually did do. Shortly after the war was declared, Governor Randall appointed George H. Kleffler, a West Bend resident, Colonel of the 23rd Regiment of the Wisconsin State Militia. He had served previously, but had been removed for an unstated cause and was now recalled to duty.

At first, of course, there was no draft, for the army relied on volunteers. Because there is no breakdown by town as to the residence of the men, it would be difficult to know how many of the first group of Union Guards came from West Bend, but some number between 57 and 112 (figures differ) began training on the Court House Square. Mary Goetter, a pupil at the private German school in the Court House, recalled the men drilling on the grounds and sleeping in the tents pitched on the lawn. As they left for service, the boys were each given a warm blue flannel shirt and the women gave the entire group a handsome flag, valued at the time at over \$40. The men took an oath to support the flag and bring it back unsullied or die in its defense. In truth, the flag was returned in fine condition after the war and it now rest in Madison. The incentive for enlistment for that first group had been \$100 in gold and 160 acres of land, and the soldiers were promised that their land could not be sold for unpaid taxes nor would they owe any mortgage payments during their enlistment period. A volunteer's family would receive five dollars a month while he was gone.

On the day that they departed for Camp Randall in Madison, 45 wagons took them and their family and friends to Schlesingerville for a rousing sendoff. They entrained for Milwaukee, stayed there overnight, and then left for Madison the next day. After training for two months they enjoyed a brief furlough at home and left for the front, still not having been issued any rifles, indicative of the frightful unpreparedness of the north for the conflict.

The second group of young men to leave the area was the Corcoran Guards, composed of 75 "mostly Irishmen" who left for Madison in January of 1862. The third group was the 95 "mostly German" Washington County Rifles, whose leader was Captain Jacob E. McMann, editor of the West Bend Post. In his absence his wife managed the newspaper. One must remember that anyone who could find enough recruits to serve under him could be an officer. Jacob Heipp served as First Lieutenant and Charles Otille Second Lieutenant and formed Company G of the 26th Wisconsin Regiment. Hartford, which had raised a considerable number of men, asked to join the group, but West Bend declined their offer, unless they all wanted to be privates, an offer that Hartford in turn declined.

Six months later Captain McCann wrote: "Six months ago we raised a company of brave and sturdy men and joined the 26th Regiment bound to fight, bleed and die in the defense of that glorious Constitution bequeathed to us by our forefathers. But alas! How soon was our youthful ardor dampened under the influence of a Southern clime, hard crackers, and Mother Earth for a pillow. All our ambition... all our eagerness and anticipation of a glorious death on the battle field soon vanished and after a protracted illness we turned our faces homeward. Enlistment periods were short then usually for a period of three months, and it was true that many of that first group served out their brief terms and returned home.

West Bend Resists the Draft

It was possible to legally pay a substitute \$300 and local boys were urged in the pages of the newspaper to bring the money with them when they came to register "for there would be no opportunity to go after it." West Bend helped to raise money to keep the local boys at home. One notice in the local paper read: "Wanted! Five able bodied men for substitutes. Forward your name to the West Bend Draft Agency and state your terms. The amount agreed upon to be paid in gold." A typical 1862 newspaper item read; "Lyman Root, a drafted man, procured a substitute. Price \$150.00." Inasmuch as men were credited in the draft from the place of enlistment and not from their place of residence young fortune seekers drifted around to find a place with the highest bounty. West Bend proved to be that place; therefore West Bend was the only town in the county to fill its quotas. At first, too, the immigrants claimed that they were not yet citizens, but inasmuch as Wisconsin permitted them to vote if they had started their citizenship proceedings, this reason did not hold. So the immigrants simply failed to begin their citizenship requirements. After 1864, they were supposed to prove they were really conscientious objectors, a more difficult task, but it was still legal to pay a substitute. Many were desperate and paid \$1000 to escape and those who were paid the most usually served the least. Mary Goetter told of one young man who was paid \$2000 to serve for another, but by the time he reached Milwaukee to start his enlistment the war was over.

It was the draft that was so unpopular in West Bend, but this was equally true of the whole county, for Washington County had the lowest proportion of volunteers of any county in the state. Therefore it received the highest quota in the 1862 draft, and it was highly unpopular. One of the first troubles with the draft was the problem of obtaining a proper draft list. Men who were over 25 claimed they were over 35 so they would not have to go, and many who were under 21 claimed they were 19 and thus exempt. Sons of widowed or aged parents were legally exempt.

Whether or not any West Bend people were responsible, there was even a riot in the town. On November 16, 1862, the second day of the drafting process, a mob alleged to be "primarily German," and inflamed by an angry man from Trenton, threatened E. Gilson, the Draft Commissioner. He picked up his precious papers and fled down the hill from the Court House with the mob in pursuit. When he dashed into the comparative safety of the law office of Frisby and Weil, Frisby, who had himself been drafted, came out to soothe the mob, giving Gilson enough time to flee out the back door and make his way to Milwaukee where he spread the alarm of a riot. Inasmuch as Port Washington* had a dandy riot just previously, the state government took no chances and dispatched six companies of soldiers to the village so the draft then proceeded in orderly fashion. A total of 758 names were drawn, "mostly Germans," and it was they who were so incensed. That night an angry mob, possibly the same people, marched down the main street to the store of H. Trakot, who had made known his belief in the abolition of the slaves, and demanded drinks. When they were not forthcoming, the mob broke his store windows with rocks. "Just as California has seen the inherent danger in the German immigrant and excluded them from the voting process, so should Wisconsin" (exclude the black). "Iowa voted to put blacks on an equal basis, so let's send them the blacks from Wisconsin." Those were the local sentiments. Many of these protestors were Copperheads who urged that the war end by compromise to save the Union, stop the fighting and bring the boys home.

“Slavery was a necessary evil, not a crime. The crime was that Africans were in the country in the first place!”

When it comes to the names of the boys who either volunteered or were drafted, there is no complete record. In various places one finds a name here or a list there and from those oddments we learn that Thomas Farmer, W. Dennison, Isaiah Culver, Oscar Rusco, Wm. Ducher, W. Aiken and Wm. Lowe were “early enlistees.” A list of commissioned officers includes Isaiah Culver and Thomas Farmer as 1st Lieutenants; Andrew Fullerton, Captain; Jacob McMann, Captain; Jacob Heipp, 1st Lieutenant (out in ’62 with McMann); John Jones and Charles Lemke, 2nd Lieutenants; Wm. Norton, 2nd Lieutenant (dismissed); and Charles Otille, 1st. Assistant Surgeon.

Another list gives the following names from the Union Guards as killed in battle or dead of wounds: Corporal Emery Smith and Privates Edwin Frisby, Wm. Hockman, Mathias Lampert, Wellington Stannard, Chris Schmidt, Nicholas Harris, Terry Goldman and John Holt. Two boys died in the infamous Andersonville prison camp: David Waller and Moses Whalen. All may not have been from the village.

From the Washington County Rifles Jacob Dixheimer, George Rusco, John Schmidt, Ermerson Smith, Peter Stoffel and Richard Daily were killed; Christian Frenz and Peter Ruplinger were listed as wounded. A complete accounting awaits a historian with unlimited time to put it all together.

*(If it is any consolation, the draft riots were worse in neighboring and rival Port Washington. There they wrecked homes, threw people down the Court House steps, loaded the cannon and declared they were ready for the army! Then followed a day of imbibing and when the army came they were so inebriated that they could do nothing but allow themselves to be peacefully arrested, 120 of them.)

Village Life During the War

In the meantime the village of 800 population suffered comparative little. Farmers prospered and brought their business to town. Merchants shared in that prosperity and those who repaired machinery made a small fortune. Labor’s wages rose but slowly, out of keeping with the prosperity, but as the number of job openings increased, it became more difficult to recruit soldiers. The ladies were faithful to their knitting of sox and mittens; they rolled bandages, and made necessity bags. Mary Goetter’s account is one of the few extant, and she recalls that coffee reached a dollar a pound which nobody could afford, so they roasted barley and called it “Lincoln’s coffee.” Women also collected clothing and food for the families of the soldiers; the winter of ’63-64 was a terrible one when “it was dreadful to be poor.”

The worst burden was born by the families of the soldiers, for it was not common for the women to leave the home to work, and the federal allotment of five dollars a month was insufficient. Some suffered; others were helped by family, friends or charity.

In addition, there were deserters. One day Mr. McDonald was visited by three men who had come to capture his workman, Henry Allen, an alleged deserter. McDonald took his pitchfork to the agents and they fled.

For those who did serve, being from Wisconsin was a bit of advantage at first, for the state sent men with the various regiments to look after their health, and to provide such amenities as fruit and tobacco. But, of course, the medical trials were grievous, and the boys wrote home about the rampant diarrhea which could become a killer. Maggots infected their wounds; infection was rife. Influenza drilled men, too, and amputations were carried out wholesale in lieu of other treatment, often without benefit of any anesthesia, so the shocks were great. One local resident, Matthew Regner, receive a gun shot wound in the legs at the battle of Hatcher’s Run in January, 1865. The surgeons amputated his left leg so maladroitly that a second operation was necessary, nearly costing him his life.

When news of the medical troubles reached West Bend the paper began to advertise patent medicines to take to the front. "Don't trust the army surgeon. Take along Holloway's pills and ointment." Other advertised cures were for fatal fevers, sores, dysentery, etc. Possibly the worst disaster of all was to be a prisoner in a southern camp, for which there as no cure available.

Several soldiers brought back souvenirs. Adolph Lemke, for instance, was the proud possessor of an order signed by General Lee himself. He was there at the surrender and when the Union army entered Petersburg they took everything they could get their hands on as souvenirs.

At war's end (1865) West Bend had a population of 941, and soon it was impossible to rent a house, for there were none vacant. Picket fences now enclosed most residences. Lots were only forty feet wide but many owned more than one, and huge gardens were everywhere. Most families now owned a horse n addition to their cow, pig or sheep, and chickens, so there were outbuildings on each piece of property. People felt that civilization had indeed arrived, for the last bear on the streets of the city had been reported in 1862. The biggest need was for a train to move supplies, and agitation to persuade one to build tracks to the village had already begun.

Later Celebrations

When the first Memorial Day was celebrated in West Bend in 1880 the Andrew Fullerton Post # 193, the first Veteran's organization in the county, gathered in the Court House Square under their Captain, George W. Jones and Orderly Andrew Schmidt. From there they were led by the Geier band and accompanied by three young ladies (Tenie Everly, Hattie Miller and Ada Farmer) carrying wreaths, marched to the cemetery to lay the wreaths n the "graves of the six heroes." That seems to be the only record of the number who lost their lives in the conflict fro West Bend. (When the Soldiers' Memorial at the Court House was prepared, no one could find an accurate Civil War list.) After the appropriate ceremonies the veterans were treated to a big dinner in Schlitz Park.

And those who did serve and lived to return were proud of their service record in the defense of their country. Mr. Ethel Weiss Gill wrote of the pride of her grandfather when he marched in later Memorial Day parades, flag held high—the flag they had fought so hard to retain.

By 1885 the paper reported that 25 veterans lived in West Bend. Their biggest concern was with the indigent veterans among them, and by 1888 they were instrumental in securing awards of from four to eight dollars a month pension for their comrades, which of course was immediately insufficient. That was the same year that the locally hated war taxes were removed.

In 1911 the Jubilee Celebration was memorable, for Billy Mitchell, who would gain fame n the next war, played drums in the city band under Commander Heipp. Mrs. C. D. Henry sand patriotic songs from the Civil War, "Tenting Tonight on the Old Camp Ground" and "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp the Boys Are Marching."

So ends the Civil War Story. Men from West Bend served in every major campaign from Bull Run through Gettysburg and the infamous march of Sherman from Atlanta to the sea. They fought in Kansas and Kentucky and Tennessee. And six graves in the Union Cemetery are the sole remaining testimony in West Bend of man's inability to solve his problems peaceably – the county's one rebellion – the Civil War.

Source: Williams, Dorothy E. "Chapter 4 - The Civil War." "The Spirit Of West Bend" Madison: Straus Printing, 1980. 39-48. Print.

Submitted by: Elizabeth Weninger

