

When the sounds of war stop – the Grand Army of the Republic

BY RANDY KOCH



GAR statue with likeness of Albert Woodson, on Cemetery Hill in Gettysburg. The land in the background is the site of the former cyclorama building, which was demolished earlier this year.

The roar of the three-day battle faded away, only to be replaced by the moans of shattered bodies strewn across the field of death. Distraught silhouettes meandered about the bloody Pennsylvania landscape searching for missing comrades. Here and there an

injured horse flailed on the ground, unable to gain its feet. The acrid scent of gunpowder still hung thick in the air while the echoes of death, all so surreal two years ago, now seemed commonplace following the Civil War's greatest battle.

The slaughter would continue for two more years until peace arrived in the spring of 1865, with a myriad of new problems. The nation focused upon the plight of 4 million newly freed slaves, and rightfully so.

But what of the 2 million Union soldiers and sailors who served so nobly? Many of those who survived were maimed for life. What did the future held for the widows and orphans left in war's wake?

With the glut of former soldiers searching for work, too many men were seeking too few jobs. Veterans also struggled with the separation of comrades whom they fought beside in life-and death struggles, and with whom they formed tighter bonds than with those of their own family members. As they mustered out of a massive, highly disciplined organization, they also discovered the difficulty of returning to civilian life with all its freedoms.

In 1866, Dr. Benjamin Franklin Stephenson publicly formed the first Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) post, in Decatur, Ill. This fraternal organization sought to replace the camaraderie of the campfire and also serve as a vehicle to provide benevolent relief to Union veterans.

The organization also conveniently provided nonpublic political support for politically ambitious former Union officers, such as Illinois's John A. Logan and Gov. Richard Oglesby. In 1868, Logan, as the first GAR commander-in-chief, designated the May 30 as the day to decorate "the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion," which evolved into Memorial Day.

Although the GAR never lost sight of providing aid to former Union soldiers, the organization's focus also met the other needs of maturing and aging Union veterans as the years passed. Through the remainder of the 1860s, newly unemployed young men, no longer drawing an income from the military, joined the GAR with hopes of snagging patronage jobs. In the 1870s, membership in fraternal organizations, including the GAR, mushroomed throughout the country.

Until 1880, when the federal government approved the Arrears Pension Act, most veterans' benevolent aid originated from the local GAR posts scattered throughout the country. In 1877, New York built the first state veterans' home. In 1888, Ohio became the 12th state to construct a veterans' home.

During the 1880s, the GAR experienced a resurgence of membership for a number of reasons. Former soldiers flocked to national GAR encampments, which provided tents, army food, bugles and reminiscing during evening campfire chats. During the decade, ambitious middle-aged businessmen also took advantage of the networking opportunities the group provided.

In 1890 the organization reached its zenith with 409,489 members, which influenced the passage of the generous Dependent Pension Act. The GAR also added its influence to the movement to recite the pledge of allegiance in schools and display the American flag in front of all public buildings. With the aging of fellow post members, attendance at funerals became common.

Because the GAR permitted only Union veterans to join its ranks, attrition through members' eventual deaths precipitated a perpetual decline in membership, and also a loss of political clout. By 1900 the group only claimed 276,662 men, although sufficient veterans survived to commemorate significant milestones, such as Gettysburg's 50th anniversary in 1913 and 75th anniversary in 1938. In 1956 the lone surviving GAR member, Albert Woodson, died at 109 years old. It was 99 years after the founding of the GAR.

A variety of non-veterans groups eager to remember Union servicemen also sprang up after the Civil War.

Among these organizations was the Sons of Veterans of the United States of America, which formed nationally in 1882 and later evolved into the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, or SUVCW. Prior to the death of its last remaining member, the GAR designated the SUVCW as its successor and heir to its remaining property.

Today the SUVCW remains a viable organization, promoting patriotism and participating in Civil War commemorations.

Several female organizations also served as auxiliary groups to the GAR. The first to be recognized, although not a hereditary organization, was the Woman's Relief Corps, followed by the hereditary Ladies of the Grand Army of the Republic, or LGAR, and the Daughters of Union Veterans organizations.

Today the LGAR is the oldest women's hereditary society in the United States.

At 1 p.m. Saturday, during the Ohio Veterans Home Civil War encampment in Sandusky, a ribbon-cutting ceremony will take place at the Ohio Veteran's Home Museum, welcoming the LGAR to its new national headquarters.

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