Civil War Memory in Colby, Kansas

By Ray Nolan, Colby

Ray, a Ph.D. student at Kansas State University, has contributed several articles to the Prairie Winds. Thank you for this indepth look at Civil War veterans. Check out his research on our website under News & Newsletters, "Beulah Project".

In Race and Reunion, David W. Blight argues that there existed three national memories after the Civil War. The reconciliationist vision formed in response to the carnage of the war. It put the war in a safe place so that northerners and southerners could once again be part of one country. The white supremacist vision contained blatant racism. It fused with the reconciliationist vision to end the war on southern terms. The third, the emancipationist vision, got lost in the fusion of the other two. Blight details the aftermath of the war and the story of how Reconstruction was lost. The famous newspaperman Horace Greeley, the one time abolitionist, desired to move forward because Reconstruction was bad for corporate America. In the Decoration Days that followed, northerners and southerners got together for commemoration. On Memorial Day, 1877, New York commemorators laid flowers on the graves of Union and Confederate dead. At the Brooklyn Academy of Music, ex-Confederate general, Roger A. Pryor spoke on "healing" and on the devotion of soldiers, no matter their cause. To Pryor, the Union had been saved, not due to northern victory in the war, but due to the end of Radical Republicanism and the end of Reconstruction in the South, recently completed through compromise allowing Rutherford B. Hayes the presidency.[1] Pryor had effectively combined the reconciliationist and white supremacist memories, at the cost of the emancipationist memory. This trend continued. The process even began before the Compromise of 1877. In Boston in 1874, at the Charles Russell Lowell branch of the Grand Army of the Republic, the most popular Union veteran organization in America, Reverend C. A. Bartol gave a reconciliationist message, arguing that "conviction, duty, and obedience with an abandonment that neither reserves its resources nor counts the costs is the all-surpassing reason for our approval and love;" of both the Union and Confederate soldier. Union and Confederacy were almost arbitrary divisions because all that mattered was dedication and valor. Thus, the confederate soldier was forgiven and slavery was not a question anymore.[2]

Things were different on the High Plains. Blight's study leaves out the High Plains where there was a different memory of the Civil War taking shape, one that dealt with survival, was based upon the "soldiers' faith" and had roots in the common backgrounds of the soldiers. Like Horace Greeley, the people of the Plains were trying to survive economically. Unlike Greeley, however, they did not have to compromise their Union ties in order to do it. These Plains settlers used their experiences in war, remembered through their local Grand Army of the Republic post, as points of organization and bonding. They were proud of their service to the Union, but did not have to remember the greater theoretical reasons for the war, such as abolition. Thus, on the High Plains the memory of the war that survived was one of pride in service, one Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. called the "soldier's faith". Blight argues that due to the soldiers' faith, "racism never emerged as an enemy of society."[3] What Blight fails to realize is that race was not a legitimate concern in several areas of the High Plains, the question at hand was whether the newly formed towns could survive. Furthermore, the "soldiers' faith" apparent in Colby, Kansas did not serve to unite the north and south, instead the veterans in Colby took great pride in being Union soldiers.[4]

Colby was formed on March 10, 1885 by the Colby Townsite Company. It was first located in neighboring Sheridan County, to the east of Thomas County. Not long afterward, the Company secured 100 acres from the Union Pacific Railroad Company and moved the town to its present location in the middle of Thomas County. The Company went on to sell shares of stock at $100 and lay out the town. The secretary of the Company was the "father" of Colby and future Charles L. Rovohl Post 302 commander, J.B. McGonigal.[5]

As might be imagined, life on the High Plains in the 1880s and 1890s was less than comfortable. The simplest form of evidence to this point is the Populist movement, a reaction to the agricultural problems of the period. The main agricultural

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[1] David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 87-91.

[2] Ibid., 86.

[3] Ibid., 208-209.

[4] The differences of the western branches of the Grand Army of the Republic are described thoroughly in Stuart McConnell, *Glorious Contentment: The Grand Army of the Republic, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). In general, they were not party to the Republicanism of the east, while still caring about the issues of the day, such as pensions.

[5] Wayne C. Wingo,, "A History of Thomas County, KS, 1885-1964" (master's thesis, Fort Hays State University, Hays, KS, 1964), 9-10.

problem was the lack of rain. After the 1870s the rains that brought so many settlers stopped.[6] Survival, in general, was just plain difficult. In Thomas Country, from 1886 through 1892, just thirty of a total of 141 deaths were of people fifty years of age or older.[7]

To make matters worse for the men and women of the High Plains, the US was in the middle of an economic slump in the 1880s, and Colby was connected to Chicago and the East by then.[8] Colby was the center of railroad construction in northwest Kansas. On October 1, 1887 the Union Pacific came to Colby with the Colby to Oakley branch. The Chicago, Kansas and Nebraska Railroad, a subsidiary of the Rock Island Railroad, came to Colby in mid-June of 1888. This line moved east to west through Rexford, Gem, Colby, Levant then Brewster. The Lincoln to Colorado Railroad came to Colby in October of 1888, moving through Menlo, Halford and then Colby. If towns in Thomas County were not on these lines, they died. Thus were the fates of Otterborne, Hastings and Quickville.[9]

Colby's post of the Grand Army of the Republic, Charles L. Rovohl Post 302, named for the "flag bearer" of the 8th Kansas Infantry who was killed at Chickamauga under General George H. Thomas, the namesake of Thomas County, seemed to never give in to the pressures of Plains life.[10] The Post 302 met almost every two weeks. They did not discuss the weather, cooperatives, populism, bad spring wheat or politics, but instead focused on issues of their post, most importantly, membership. There were strict membership rules, as each member had to produce their discharge papers. For example, on April 12, 1890, Post 302 discussed the application of Andrew Gillespie. Usually, as long as the discharge papers were in order, members were mustered in quickly, because Post 302 needed members. They would not bend the rules, though. Gillespie had to wait until the July 22 meeting to be mustered in.[11] Post 302 needed members so desperately that on March 22, 1890 they passed a motion to send a letter out to all veterans of Thomas County to join Post 302 or another local post.[12] Of course, recruiting all veterans to the GAR was a goal of the national organization.[13]

The comrades of Post 302 were very strict as to what could be discussed at their meetings. In 1886, even as Post 302 was forming, it would be understandable for these men, especially investors such as J.B. McGonigal, to at least once mention the strikes that had swept the nation that year, but they did not. During the Great Upheaval of 1886, 610,000 workers struck, mostly demanding an eight hour work day, compared to 258,000 the previous year. A total of 1,400 strikes hit 11,562 businesses across the country, in contrast to 645 "job actions" affecting 2,467 businesses in 1885. According to historian James Green, "nothing like this had ever happened in America, or Europe." News of these events stretched to Europe where famous socialist Frederick Engels, living in London, observed, "history is on the move over there at last." Chicago, linked to Kansas through the rails, became the center of these strikes, with anywhere from 40,000 to 60,000 workers leaving their jobs on May 1, 1886.[14]

Historian William Cronon argued that by the 1860s Chicago and the Midwestern states were well linked by this time economically due to the importation of animals for slaughter to Chicago. In fact, Chicago was an "entrepot—the place in between—connecting eastern markets with vast western resource regions.[15] With Chicago being such an important center of business for the west, it would be likely to see some mention of the Great Upheaval in Post 302's minutes; but, the comrades

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[6] See Robert C. McMath, Jr., *American Populism: A Social History, 1877-1898* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993) and Jeffrey Ostler, *Prairie Populism: The Fate of Agrarian Radicalism in Kansas, Nebraska and Iowa, 1880-1892* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993) for excellent discussions of Populism.

[7] "Thomas County Register of Death, 1886-1910," Thomas County Historical Society, Prairie Museum of Art and History, Colby, KS.

[8] See Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, 2nd ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007) for the classic discussion of how corporations changed the US.

[9] Wingo, 12-16.

[10] Minutes of Charles Rovohl G.A.R. Post 302, May 1, 1886, Box FK 2. T1. C. 8, Thomas County Historical Society, Prairie Museum of Art and History, Colby, KS. Hereafter referred to as Rovohl Minutes.

[11] Rovohl Minutes, April 12, 1890; Rovohl Minutes, July 26, 1890.

[12] Rovohl Minutes, March 22, 1890.

[13] McConnell, 51.

[14] Craig Miner, *Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854-2000* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 146; James Green, *Death in the Haymarket: A Story of Chicago, the First Labor Movement and the Bombing that Divided Gilded America* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006), 149-152.

[15] William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: Norton, 1991), 91-92.

did not discuss these strikes.[16] There was not just a lack of discussion of Chicago's strikes, but there was no discussion of the Haymarket riot of May 4, and the sensational trial of the imprisoned socialist agitators held responsible for the bombing and resulting riot that seemed to make its way into the news of every community in America and abroad.[17]

Even as Kansas Populists were traveling to Iowa in the summer of 1891 and fighting for new Populists in a state that was hopelessly tied to the two party system, no mention of these attempts to spread the concepts of free silver and the direct election of senators, which would make life for Kansas farmers easier, made its way into Post 302 meetings.[18] Instead, during the summer of 1891, the comrades of Post 302 were busy with May 30 Decoration Day and the accompanying parade.[19] On July 11 Comrade Gurwell handed in his resignation as quartermaster and August 8 saw the members discuss a letter from the office at Larned, Kansas telling the comrades that they indeed could muster in a veteran wanting a transfer even if he "may owe money to the other post."[20]

The GAR brought men with common backgrounds together. This also had the effect of making the emancipation vision Blight discusses in, Race and Reunion, unlikely to have been a factor in Colby. The vast majority of the members served in one of the regiments of the Old Northwest, either from Iowa, Ohio, Indiana or Illinois. Although all thirty-five members of Post 302 are never listed in the post's minutes, out of the twenty-five Civil War veterans interred at Beulah Cemetery in Colby, eighteen of the twenty-five are from these four Midwest states.[21] Initially the post opened with fourteen members, all from the Midwest save one member from Pennsylvania.[22]

These states, then as now, had large areas of agriculture, so these men had a shared upbringing if not a shared knowledge of rural America. Even more significant is that these states, being of the north, had a shared racial vision. Northerners were not in favor of releasing African Americans to live amongst themselves, and in fact, often treated African Americans within their states as slaves.[23] Emancipation was not what the soldiers of the Midwest fought for in the Civil War; they fought for the glory of their states and their local military units, the "soldiers' faith".

The emancipationist memory that Blight argues was struggling for life during the populist years never stood a chance on the High Plains. Robert C. McMath argues that the Great Plains Populists were more tolerant of race because the Plains were virtually absent of African Americans. The emancipationist vision was not even viable in Colby because there were no black people.[24] In contrast, over 90 percent of US African Americans lived in the South, therefore an emancipationist vision obviously existed there and challenged the white supremacist vision.[25]

The Civil War also bonded these men through shared struggle, a key ingredient of the "soldiers' faith". Phillip Caputo, in his tremendous book on his experiences in Vietnam, A Rumor of War, details the common bonds of war that soldiers shared. He also details the war's powerful calling. He was drawn back to Vietnam as a reporter after leaving the war as a soldier.[26] In much the same way, the Post 302 members revisited the Civil War's memory from time to time, but certainly lived it—at least every two weeks—through meetings of their post. Just seeing other veterans brought memories flooding back into their minds. The members called on their comrades to share any extreme experiences. On December 15, 1888 the members of

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[16] Rovohl Minutes, April 20, 1886-December 9, 1886.

[17] Green, 174-230.

[18] McMath, 154, Ostler, 162-172.

[19] Rovohl Minutes, May 30, 1891.

[20] Rovohl Minutes, July 11, 1891, August 8, 1891.

[21] Author's trips to Beulah Cemetery, spring 2010.

[22] Rovohl Minutes, April, 17, 1886.

[23] Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1998), 228-255; Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619-1877*, 2nd ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), 189.

[24] There is no mention of African Americans in Colby in any of the literature on Thomas County. This includes Wayne C. Wingo, "A History of Thomas County, KS, 1885-1964" (master's thesis, Fort Hays State University, Hays, KS, 1964); R.I Bruner, ed. *Land of Windmills: Thomas County, KS, A Photographic Perspective* (Dallas: Taylor Publishing, 1976); and *The Golden Jubilee*. Sue Taylor, Director of Prairie Museum of Art and History, interview, April 30, 2010, Taylor said that she has never heard of Blacks living in Colby during the 1880s and 1890s.

[25] Robert C. McMath, Jr., *American Populism: A Social History, 1877-1898* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 172.

[26] Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, 2nd ed. (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), 342.

Post 302 resolved to have comrade J.E. Meglemre share his experience as a prisoner at Andersonville, Georgia.[27] Post 302's desire to hear Meglemre's story is more evidence that these men were not going to forget their allegiance to the North. If they had been concerned with reconciliation or white supremacy, they may have not wanted to hear about the horrors of the most infamous Confederate prison.

The comrades bonded with other veterans by providing charity to struggling veterans and by visiting ill brethren. On August 14, 1886 the members discussed the condition of the orphan child of Comrade Beswich.[28] To their relief the child was doing well. On January 11, 1890, the veterans entertained a letter, but did not actually read it, of a Mrs. Jensie Wells of Arksansas asking for help in defending her veteran husband in a murder charge.[29] On February 8, 1890 the comrades heard that Comrade Dedrick was "very sick and needed the attention of the comrades of the post." At the same meeting, to the comrades' relief, Comrade Gurwell was reported "to be improving in health and not in need of any immediate help." The commander, J.B. McGonigal, agreed that he and his wife would visit Gurwell the next day.[30] At the March 3, 1890 the comrades discussed providing tobacco to an old veteran sitting at the alms house.[31] That same month Post 302 discussed the condition of William Bells, a "demented comrade" sitting at the Thomas County Alms House. Bells had served with the 14th Kansas Cavalry.[32]

Finally, Post 302 served as a reminder of what was the high point in the life of these men, a time when they had lived the "soldiers' faith". The tombstone of Alonzo Ketchum, who served in Company B of the Sixth Iowa Infantry, has carved on it that he served "in march to sea with Sherman."[33] Ketchum's service with Sherman certainly was a point of pride, not just for him, but for the Post 302. After Sherman passed away Post 302's minutes read as follows:

> Resolved-that we gratefully remember his faithful and efficient service not only in the Mexican and Civil War but in all the official positions to which he was called by the government.
>
> Resolved-that we ever cherish the memory of his unfaltering fidelity to the flag of our country and the cause of liberty.
>
> Resolved-that in the death of General Sherman the country has lost a true patriot and defender of our flag and faithful and gallant officer and the GAR comrade whose continued and unflinching devotion to our country's flag in times of peril as well as in times of peace and prosperity should ever stir with in us that spirit of devotion which should characterize every true patriot.[34]

These resolutions illustrate pride in Sherman, but also pride in what he represented, a soldier. These men were certainly subscribers to the notion of the "soldiers' faith", but at the same time, if they were interesting in uniting the reconciliationist vision with white supremacy, they likely would not have held General Sherman, the man who burned the South, in such high regard.

Charles L. Rovohl Post 302 of the Grand Army of the Republic located in Colby, Kansas was the vehicle by which the memory of the Civil War was created in Colby. Not just the war, but the common backgrounds of these men, and the demography of Colby, affected the lasting image of the war. The comrades were mostly from the Old Northwest, a racist area that did not push for abolition. In addition, there were no black citizens in Colby in the late 1880s and early 1890s.

Therefore, the emancipationist memory never had a chance to survive in Colby, Kansas and likely did not have a fair chance to survive in the remainder of the High Plains, save perhaps the all-black community of Nicodemus in Graham County, Kansas. Post 302 was the tool by which the comrades found a sound base for the settlement of a desolate and dry place using the "soldiers' faith" as a point of consolidation. The discipline of the soldier was recreated in the narrow focus of Post 302's meetings, where only membership and other Civil War interests of the comrades were discussed.

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[27] Rovohl Minutes, December 25, 1888.

[28] Rovohl Minutes, August 14, 1886.

[29] Rovohl Minutes, January 11, 1890.

[30] Rovohl Minutes, February 8, 1890.

[31] Rovohl Minutes, March 8, 1890.

[32] Rovohl Minutes, March 22, 1990.

[33] Viewing of tombstone by author; this information is corroborated by www.civilwararchive.com/region.htm. This site draws its information from Frederick H. Dyer's, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion*, part 3. Dyer compiled his information from *The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*.

[34] Rovohl Minutes, March 14, 1891.