

Kansas, the "Soldier State"

Editor's note: Our readers are familiar with the story of the Swedish pioneers who settled in the Smoky Valley area of central Kansas. They were only a small part of the massive migration to, and through, the American Midwest. Civil War veterans were a much larger numerical group settling in Kansas than the Swedish immigrants. Dr. Bruce Kahler, has recently begun a several year study of Civil War Union Army Veterans who settled in Kansas. Below is an introduction to the subject of his study.

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As many as 1.5 million men who fought for the North in the American Civil War (1861-1865) survived the conflict, yet the literature on this significant group of Americans remains quite small.

While the Civil War is the subject of more than 50,000 books, no more than a dozen titles focus on the Union veterans, men whose wartime experience had become an essential part of their identity.

By 1890, over 400,000 of these "old soldiers" had joined the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.), a powerful lobbying group that wielded enormous influence over the Republican Party. In the last third of the nineteenth century six of our nation's seven presidents were veterans of the Union Army. Kansas can serve as a fruitful setting for a more intimate study of the veteran at the state level, and in his local community.

Having become a territory only in 1854, and a state in 1861, Kansas did not provide a very large number of soldiers to the Northern cause. But in the 1870s thousands of former boys in blue, especially from Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, flowed into the region to buy, claim and farm its abundant, cheap land. By the 1880s and 1890s, Kansas was widely known as the "Soldier State," indicating that veterans and their supporters were numerous, prominent, and active. In fact, these people wove a rich fabric of inter-related organizations and activities to honor the Union veteran, creating in the process an important Kansas subculture.

There were at least 400 local G.A.R. posts in Kansas, and a state organization as well. Its very active women's auxiliary was called the Women's

Relief Corps and numerous towns boasted a Sons of Veterans group. All three groups held bi-weekly or monthly meetings and local, state, and national reunions which could last up to four days.

Another aspect of the veteran subculture was the network of healthcare institutions established for them and their families. The state's soldier home was built near Dodge City, with a branch in Ellsworth named after the famous Union Army nurse who lived in Bunker Hill, Mary Ann "Mother" Bickerdyke. An orphans' home for veterans' children was located at Atchison, and the western branch of the National Soldiers' Home was in Leavenworth. Most of the old soldiers in

these institutions received a federal pension.

Kansans found other ways to show their gratitude to the veterans. At least one hundred monuments were erected in public squares and community cemeteries throughout the state. Most monuments were probably dedicated on a Memorial Day, the holiday founded to commemorate Civil War soldiers. What were the usual activities in a community on Memorial Day? What contribution did Memorial Day speeches make in defining the meaning of the War? Memorial Day was also known as Decoration Day because a key part of the holiday ritual was to decorate the graves of soldiers with flowers. This leads us to look further at the decoration of the town as a whole and to the material culture of the veterans' world: the uniforms, medals, badges, canes, and reunion souvenir paraphernalia.

Finally, we can gain much insight into the veterans by reading their memoirs. Most of these appeared during the 1890s in the form of books, magazine articles, or columns in veteran newspapers, such as Topeka's *Western Veteran*. What ideas, values, and perceptions did the veterans convey in those texts about the war and their post-war lives? I suspect that the veteran point of view played a crucial role in the writing of the early histories of Kansas and in the creation of the state historical society.

The American South, historians tell us, was heavily burdened by the outcome of the Civil War. Blacks were emancipated from slavery but would have to struggle long and hard for equal citizenship. Whites resisted change and remained stubbornly proud of their lost cause. The North, by contrast, has been portrayed as a society energized by the conflict. Northerners looked to the future, tackled new problems like labor unrest and immigration, and built a modern world of factories and cities. However, the death and wounding of over 360,000 men is not something that any society can quickly or painlessly overcome. The evidence outlined here of a Union veteran subculture suggests that the entrepreneurial spirit of the North was accompanied by, perhaps even mixed with, a powerful memory of the past and a backward-looking gratitude for the saviors of the Union.

The North, as well as the South, was very much a post-war society and there are few better places to see this than the Soldier State of Kansas.



Photos by Bud Rothgeb

Civil War Monuments common in Kansas. The statue of Major General James B. McPherson, the namesake of McPherson County and the city of McPherson, Kansas is one of many Civil War monuments in the state. McPherson was the highest-ranking Union officer killed in the Civil War, falling in the Battle of Atlanta on July 22, 1864.