

THE GRAND ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC IN MINNESOTA, 1866-80

Most of the Minnesota regiments that served in the Civil War had been disbanded for less than a year when, on August 1, 1866, the Grand Army of the Republic, newly founded society for honorably discharged Union soldiers and sailors, established a department in Minnesota. Looking at the subject from the vantage point of later days, and having in mind both the later history of the Grand Army and the early history of the American Legion, one might be inclined to say that conditions in 1866 were very favorable for the success in Minnesota of the newly established veterans' organization.¹

The state census of 1865 credited Minnesota with a population of a quarter of a million. By December, 1865, nearly eleven thousand officers and enlisted men had been returned to private life, upon the disbandment of the Minnesota volunteer units. More than thirteen hundred were left in military service, but their units, too, were mustered out before the end of May, 1866. Many veterans from other states might well be expected to make their homes in Minnesota, where an abundance of cheap, fertile land and the business and professional opportunities of new and growing communities beckoned to young men ambitious to better themselves economically. Surely there was plenty of material from which the membership of the veterans' society might be drawn.²

¹ Grand Army of the Republic, Department of Minnesota, *Proceedings of the Annual and Semi-Annual Encampments*, 1866-79, p. 5 (Minneapolis, 1896). This volume was printed, with insignificant omissions and alterations, from a large manuscript volume of minutes, now among the papers of the Grand Army. This collection and all other manuscripts cited in this paper are owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

² Minnesota, *Executive Documents*, 1865, p. 446; Adjutant General, *Annual Reports*, 1865, Schedule C, p. 40.

Yet the Grand Army of the Republic was not firmly established in Minnesota for many years after the initial meeting of August 1, 1866. Not until 1883 did the membership of the department exceed a thousand. The total rose from 176 in 1870 to a high figure of 614 in January, 1873, only to decline to a paltry 170 in 1880, when, according to the national organization, the department of Minnesota ceased to exist and was replaced by a new provisional organization. This rather pitiful record was made in a state with a population of 439,706 in 1870, 597,407 in 1875, and 780,773 in 1880.³

It is of course true that the Grand Army hardly attained more than a foothold in other parts of the United States prior to 1880. The organization had few precedents to follow. For some years it could not rely on sufficient revenue to meet the expenses of maintaining its national headquarters. Its rules, its ritual, its policies, and its practices had all to be worked out and tried out. Some of the changes that were made during its first decade undoubtedly had the effect of slowing up, temporarily at least, the growth of the society. In December, 1880, the adjutant general was able to report a total national membership of sixty thousand, nearly twice the average annual figure for the seventies; and in 1890 the Grand Army reached its high tide, with a reported membership of over four hundred thousand.⁴

The Grand Army of the Republic was divided into departments, with jurisdictions generally coterminous with those of the states or territories for which they were named. The local units, each of which was subordinate to the department in which it was located, were known as posts. Among the post officers were the commander, the senior and junior vice-commanders, the adjutant, whose duties

³ *Proceedings*, 1866-79, p. 44, 94, 178.

⁴ Grand Army of the Republic, *Proceedings of the National Encampment*, 1866-76, p. 35-49; 1893, p. 64; 1896, p. 81; *Journal of the Twenty-fifth National Encampment*, 1891, p. 69.

were those of a secretary, and the quartermaster, who served as treasurer. The adjutant, like other officers, was at first elected, but after 1871 he was appointed each year by the post commander. The department officers, past department commanders, the commanders and past commanders of the several posts, and one or more elected delegates from each post met annually or semiannually for department encampments. At the midwinter encampments of the department of Minnesota, a commander and other officers were elected for the following year.

The relations of the national encampment with the departments were similar to those of the department encampments with the posts. The head of the national organization bore the title of commander in chief. The national secretary was known as the adjutant general, and the equivalent department officer was termed the assistant adjutant general. During the first year or two of the Grand Army, county organizations known as districts also were maintained, at least on paper. The districts, however, soon disappeared.⁵

The activities of the Grand Army of the Republic in Minnesota prior to 1880 were in large measure merely the activities of the local posts. The organization was, of course, a secret one, and the candidate whose application had been favorably received by a post was "mustered" in a manner prescribed by the ritual of the order. For two years, from 1869 to 1871, there were three grades or degrees of membership, known as recruit, soldier, and veteran. The ritual was revised in 1871, when the grade system was abolished; and a short time later another revision became necessary when copies of the secret cipher and key, lost by certain officers in Maryland, appeared in print.⁶

⁵ Grand Army of the Republic, National Encampment, *Rules and Regulations*, 1868, 1869, 1872; Department of Minnesota, *Constitution* (St. Paul, 1866).

⁶ *Proceedings of the National Encampment*, 1866-76, p. 19, 64-67, 83, 114, 138, 152; Headquarters, *General Orders*, no. 14, December 26, 1871, in Grand Army of the Republic Papers.

Between 1866 and 1880 some forty-one posts were organized in Minnesota. They existed for periods varying in length from a few months to several years, but none was active throughout the thirteen years. At no one time, moreover, were there more than nineteen posts in good standing. The number was usually less. The last of the forty-one posts was mustered on January 14, 1876, at Cottage Grove, though its meeting place was later transferred to Newport. It was one of the eight posts represented at the encampment held in Minneapolis late in January, 1876, when eleven posts were reported in good standing.⁷

The first place on the roll of posts, when consecutive numbers were assigned in 1867, was accorded to that at Wabasha. Its first commander, elected in October, 1866, was the second commander of the department. This was Frank E. Daggett, a portly newspaper editor and minor politician, whose avoirdupois and good nature were all but proverbial among his brother editors, whether "radical" like himself, or "Copperhead," as a Republican editor of the period was likely to term his Democratic contemporaries. In spite of Daggett's vigorous pen and personality, however, the Wabasha post seems not to have endured beyond 1868 or 1869. Daggett left Wabasha in 1870, and turned up at Litchfield in 1872 as part owner and editor of the *Litchfield News-Ledger*. In 1874 Edward Branham post number 37 came into being, with Daggett as its first commander.⁸ This organization lasted long enough to turn

⁷ *Proceedings*, 1866-79, p. 137, 178; Phil Sheridan post, Minutes, in Grand Army of the Republic Papers. The total of forty-one posts does not include some that were established in 1866 but were not active after the end of that year or the early part of 1867. See *Proceedings of the National Encampment*, 1866-76, p. 42. For a post to maintain itself in good standing after 1870, it was required to make a quarterly report to the department headquarters and to pay a tax of ten cents a quarter for each member not suspended or expelled.

⁸ *Wabasha Herald*, October 4, 18, December 27, 1866; January 31, March 14, 21, June 20, 27, July 11, August 22, September 12, 1867; February 20, May 21, June 18, 1868; October 13, 1870; *Litchfield News-Ledger*, June 25, August 13, October 15, 1874; October 19, 1876.

out in uniform at its founder's funeral in October, 1876, but even at that time it was not recognized by the department headquarters as a post in good standing.

Some other posts were active for such short periods that they are hardly worth mentioning. In this category were numbers 7 at Rockford, 9 at Warsaw, 14 at Read's Landing, 17 at Waseca, 18 at Dayton, 19 at Monticello, and 20 at St. Charles, all of which were chartered prior to 1870. Several posts established in 1871 and 1872 existed for very brief periods; they include those at Princeton, Fairmont, Le Sueur, Chaska, and Taylor's Falls. Some posts that passed through periods of inactivity were revived, only to decline again. Post number 2 of Osseo is a case in point. Post number 10, with headquarters at Morristown, is another. At Jackson, a revival of post number 28 in 1875 was little more successful than an initial organization in 1872. The Faribault post "went down" at least three times before its name and number finally disappeared from the roster in 1875. On the other hand, the Stillwater post succeeded in establishing a permanent organization in 1875, after the failure of two earlier efforts, the first in 1868, and the second in 1872. Posts in such middle-sized towns as Winona, Rochester, Owatonna, Faribault, Northfield, and Duluth endured long enough to entertain annual or semi-annual department encampments, and those at Rochester and Winona furnished department commanders.⁹

Posts near the frontier of settlement sometimes were more vigorous than those in older, larger communities. That at Detroit in Becker County was far removed from all others. Yet it maintained itself with an average membership of about twenty-five from its establishment in February, 1872, when the settlement was not a year old, certainly

⁹ *Proceedings*, 1866-79, p. 33, 37, 40, 42, 50, 63, 70, 84, 91, 94, 97, 107, 120, 133, 138, 149; *Wabasha Herald*, June 18, 1868; *Stillwater Republican*, March 18, 1868; *Stillwater Messenger*, April 2, 9, 1875; Joseph C. Mold to Henry A. Castle, March 18, 1890; January 14, 1891, Castle Papers.

until 1878; and it was one of five posts that claimed to have survived the hiatus of 1880. The unusual activity of this post may perhaps be explained by the fact that Detroit and the surrounding country were settled largely under the auspices of the New England Colony and Bureau of Migration, an organization which had for its purpose the colonization of veterans in the West. Its leader was Colonel George H. Johnston, who himself removed from Boston to Detroit. He was not only a promoter of colonization, but an active worker in the Baptist church, the Masonic Order, the Republican party, and the Grand Army of the Republic. He served as commander of the department of Minnesota in 1876.¹⁰

When the grasshopper horde settled down on southwestern Minnesota in the summer of 1873, there was only one active Grand Army post in the afflicted area. This was Stoddard post number 34, which had been established the year before, almost at the birth of the village of Worthington, its headquarters. It reported a membership of 43 at the beginning of 1873. A year later the total was down to 34. At the annual encampments of 1875 and 1876, however, Stoddard post, with rosters of 102 and 127 members respectively, was the largest in the jurisdiction. Such a record by a post centering in a village of not more than five hundred inhabitants may be worthy of some special consideration. Even the 55 members reported in July, 1877, would seem a very respectable total for a post so located.¹¹

In May, 1874, the pioneers of Nobles County were much exercised about a species of claim jumping then in vogue.

¹⁰ *Proceedings*, 1866-79, p. 81, 96, 121, 133, 149, 152; *Weekly Record* (Detroit), July 13, 27, November 23, 30, December 21, 1872; January 4, 18, February 8, 15, 22, March 8, 1873; June 6, 1874; *Proceedings of the National Encampment*, 1893, p. 273-276. Other posts that claimed to have maintained their organization through 1879 and 1880 were those at Stillwater, Elk River, St. Paul, and Shakopee.

¹¹ *Proceedings*, 1866-79, p. 96, 121, 133, 149, 152; *Western Advance* (Worthington), March 14, August 22, 1874; William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 3: 97-110 (St. Paul, 1926).

An unusually large number of homesteaders absented themselves from their claims as a result of the devastation wrought by the grasshoppers in 1873. The would-be claim jumpers were filing charges of abandonment against such absentees at the Worthington land office, and it seemed probable that many homesteads would revert to the government and become again available for entry, presumably by the informers. Such conduct was in great disfavor, and Stoddard post took steps to protect its members by sending a committee to wait upon such contestants. As this was only nine years after the close of the Civil War, it may be assumed that the post was able to send a committee whose members were physically able to make verbal argument sufficient for their purposes. With the post performing the functions of a claim protection association, it is not difficult to see why additional recruits were secured in 1874.¹²

Another factor that influenced its growth was no doubt the part which the post played in obtaining direct relief for the grasshopper sufferers. At the semiannual encampment held at Shakopee on July 21, 1874, Dr. R. D. Barber and J. A. Town of post number 34 were present to report on the ravages suffered during that and the previous year in southwestern Minnesota. The encampment voted to remit the dues of Stoddard post for the next six months and authorized the department commander, Captain Henry A. Castle of St. Paul, to report the situation to the commander in chief of the Grand Army. This was done, and on August 15, 1874, the head of the national organization issued a circular urging all posts throughout the country to make contributions from their own means and to interest citizens outside the order in the good work of relieving distress in Minnesota. The circular indicated that the bounty could be effectively distributed by the vigorous post at Worthington. Many contributions were made and handled in this

¹² *Western Advance*, May 9, 1874.

way. The Minneapolis post sent fifty dollars. Acker post of St. Paul sent a quantity of clothing that had been worn by actors in a recent dramatic venture. To this were added gifts of clothing and shoes from the post as a whole, individual members, and other citizens.¹³

At the regular annual encampment held on January 27, 1875, ex-Governor Stephen Miller, speaking for the Worthington post, described the need for seed wheat in the distressed area. A committee was appointed to ascertain what arrangements could be made with elevator proprietors for the storage and shipment of grain, and members voted to remit the dues of posts in the grasshopper region for the first half of 1875. This concession took care, in addition to Stoddard post, of the newly organized post at Windom, which had received aid from Acker post in December, 1874. A fortnight after the encampment, a delegation from Worthington mustered a new post at the neighboring village of Hersey, now Brewster. Still another post within the grasshopper region was chartered in 1875 at Luverne. The post at Jackson, first established in 1872, was revived in time to send a delegate to the July encampment at Worthington.¹⁴

Naturally enough the posts at Minneapolis and St. Paul occupied an influential place in the counsels of the department organization. George N. Morgan post number 3 was organized at Minneapolis early in September, 1866, although post numbers were not assigned until a year later. The annual encampments of 1867, 1868, 1870, 1874, and 1876 were held at Minneapolis, and two of the department commanders, Henry G. Hicks in 1868, and D. W. Albaugh in 1875, were members of Morgan post. Its career, never-

¹³ *Proceedings*, 1866-79, p. 129; *Worthington Advance*, December 11, 1874; January 8, 1875; Headquarters, *Circular*, no. 1, August 15, 1874; Acker post, *Minutes*, 2: 166-169. The two latter items are in the Grand Army of the Republic Papers.

¹⁴ *Proceedings*, 1866-79, p. 133-135, 138; Acker post, *Minutes*, 2: 168, 171-174; *Worthington Advance*, February 19, July 2, 23, 1875.

theless, was not one of unbroken prosperity. In January, 1873, the commander reported to the department inspecting officer that he had been unable to obtain a quorum since July, 1872, although the post numbered forty-eight members in good standing. Yet in 1875 seventy-seven members were reported; in 1876, eighty. By January, 1878, however, only thirty-six veterans remained on the active roll.¹⁵

After the failure of a first effort in 1866, St. Paul waited until 1870 before a successful post was established in the capital city. Acker post, which came into existence in April, 1870, was the twenty-first in the department, but during the next seven years it was one of the most active posts in the state. Despite the fact that many members were suspended or dropped for nonpayment of dues, which for Acker post were two dollars a year, the roster of 43 members at the end of the first quarter of its existence rose gradually to a high point of 105, reported as of March 31, 1875. The actual attendance at meetings was, however, by no means so large as this, even on the occasion of the annual election of officers. The post early found it difficult to compel regular attendance on the part of its officers, and in the summer of 1871 it adopted a rule vacating any office whose incumbent should absent himself from three regular meetings in succession. There were numerous occasions when vacancies of this character necessitated elections.¹⁶

On May 30, 1870, Acker post conducted the first celebration of Decoration Day in St. Paul. This holiday of

¹⁵ *Proceedings*, 1866-79, p. 8, 11, 15, 40, 97, 133, 138, 149, 152; *Minneapolis Daily Chronicle*, September 24, October 5, 1866; January 30, February 22, March 17, 26, 30, 1867.

¹⁶ The primary source for the history of Acker post from 1870 to 1877 is two volumes of manuscript minutes, which are preserved in the Grand Army of the Republic Papers. These volumes are supplemented by copies of the post adjutant's quarterly reports, in the same collection. One of the charter members of the post, Josiah B. Chaney, drew upon these materials as well as on his personal recollections for his *History of Acker Post* (St. Paul, 1891). See also Chaney Diary, August 8, 15, 17, 29, 1866, Chaney Papers.

the Civil War veteran had been initiated by the Grand Army of the Republic, in accordance with the instructions given by its commander in chief, General John A. Logan, in the spring of 1868. Inspired by such instructions, repeated yearly by national and departmental officers, Acker and other Minnesota posts made customary the practice of solemnly decorating the graves of soldiers who were buried in local cemeteries. The planning and execution of these ceremonies was considered one of the major activities of each active post. The program of the day usually included prayers, an oration, the decoration of the graves of Union veterans buried in local cemeteries, and the decoration of a cross in honor of those whose remains rested in southern graves.¹⁷

In harmony with the teachings of the Grand Army motto, "Fraternity, Charity, and Loyalty," Acker post was particularly diligent in its charitable work. Money was voted to provide watchers at the bedside of a sick comrade, to furnish temporary doles to the widows of soldiers, to pay the funeral expenses of a deceased veteran, to bring an ailing and penniless member back to St. Paul from Denver. On one occasion when a veteran sought employment through the good offices of the post, money was appropriated to buy six brooms with which to send him forth to earn his living.

Partly as a means of entertaining members and friends, but more particularly to raise money for relief funds, Acker post promoted a series of dances, excursions, lectures, and other entertainments. A number of dramatic ventures were attempted, in which members and their friends of the other sex formed the larger part of the cast. The financial returns from the first few excursions into the field of the drama were eminently satisfactory. Then the post's luck changed, and a series of failures followed. These failures

¹⁷Acker post, Minutes, 1: 29-36, 2: 38, 88-94, 199; Chaney Diary, June 2, 1878; *St. Paul Pioneer*, June 3, 1868; May 13, 1870.

and an expensive lawsuit arising out of dramatic activities saddled the organization with a debt, which in 1877 compelled it to give up its regular meeting hall and sell some of the furniture.¹⁸

Although a handful of members attempted to meet the technical requirements of continuity by paying their per capita dues to the department quartermaster general, Acker post can hardly be said to have been active between April 23, 1877, and July 15, 1881. The former date is that of the last meeting recorded in the large volume of minutes kept by the post adjutant. The latter is the date of a meeting at which the first serious steps toward reorganization were taken.¹⁹

With the larger posts losing ground, year by year, the annual department encampments of 1877, 1878, and 1879 must have been rather discouraging affairs. In 1877 a loss of 138 members during the preceding years was reported. This reduced the roster of the department to fourteen posts, with 445 members. A year later, the assistant adjutant general reported a further drop to eleven posts and 377 members. The losses were explained by the inability of members to pay dues. In both 1877 and 1878, encampments were held at Stillwater. That of 1879 took place at Shakopee, with delegates and officers present from only two posts, number 14 of Stillwater, and number 31, the entertaining post. The department commander, William Willson, stated that he could not tell how many posts were in good standing, since he had not received reports from the

¹⁸ *Proceedings of the National Encampment, 1866-76*, p. 64, 76; Acker post, Minutes, 1: 55, 62, 69, 72, 100, 2: 18-25, 35, 107, 166, 212, 217, 243-253. While Acker post was perhaps more ambitious in its financial ventures than most posts, there is abundant evidence that others used similar methods to obtain money for relief funds.

¹⁹ Henry A. Castle to Chaney, July 5, 1893, Chaney Papers; Chaney to Castle, July 6, 1893; in *Proceedings of the National Encampment, 1893*, p. 273; Acker post, Minutes, 2:253; Minutes of reorganization meeting, July 15, 1881, and J. J. McCurdy to Adam Marty, August 30, 1881, Grand Army of the Republic Papers.

assistant adjutant general and assistant quartermaster general. He admitted, however, that the department was sadly disorganized. C. A. Bennett, one of the Stillwater delegates, who was elected commander, seemed willing to see the department organization die on his hands. At any rate, no reports or payments were made to national headquarters in 1879. Furthermore, Bennett failed to call the annual encampment which should have convened in January or February, 1880. Throughout these months, however, Muller post number 14 of Stillwater remained active. Finally, in the spring of 1880, its commander, Adam Marty, took the steps which resulted in the reorganization of the defunct department, with Muller post as number 1 and Marty himself as provisional department commander.²⁰

During the years between the first organization of the department in 1866 and the establishment of the provisional organization in 1880 the Grand Army in Minnesota elected eleven men as department commanders. With the exception of the first, General John B. Sanborn, and the fourth, General J. W. Sprague of Winona, none had achieved high military rank during the Civil War, although most, if not all, had been commissioned officers. Most of them were young men in their thirties when they were elected to head the department.

The department made a rather poor beginning under General Sanborn. After being chosen temporary commander at the initial meeting of August 1, 1866, he was elected on a more permanent basis at the first department encampment on October 16. Shortly thereafter he was appointed one of the federal commissioners to negotiate with the Indians of the plains, an appointment that necessitated

²⁰ Department of Minnesota, Minutes, p. 130; *Proceedings*, 1866-79, p. 151-160, 175; *Stillwater Messenger*, May 31, 1879; July 10, 1880; Grand Army of the Republic, *Journal of the Fifteenth Annual Session of the National Encampment*, 1881, p. 743; *Proceedings of the National Encampment*, 1893, p. 270, 276.

his absence from Minnesota, and as no officers had been elected with the right or duty of succession, his administration can hardly be considered effective. As a result of Sanborn's failure to report to the national headquarters of the infant order, Frank E. Daggett of Wabasha was authorized by the commander in chief to call a convention for August 14, 1867, to organize more effectively. Following the advice of Colonel B. F. Stephenson, founder and adjutant general of the Grand Army, to select "young, ardent, intelligent men, whom you are assured are endowed with energy and zeal," the convention elected Daggett, then only twenty-eight years of age, as department commander.²¹

Daggett's successor, chosen at an encampment held at Minneapolis in January, 1868, was Henry G. Hicks, sheriff of Hennepin County. Hicks was later admitted to the bar, and was judge of the district court from 1887 to 1895. From 1867 until the end of his life he was an active worker in the Grand Army of the Republic and a more or less active member of the Republican party. Other department commanders who held public office at the time of their election were D. W. Albaugh, clerk of the Hennepin County district court, and C. A. Bennett, clerk of the court in Washington County.²²

General J. W. Sprague, a man of middle age who was elected commander at the Winona encampment of 1869, was general manager of the Winona and St. Peter Railroad. In the same year he reported the second largest taxable income in Winona County. General Sprague's administration of Grand Army affairs was not particularly significant, though during the year a lobbying committee appointed at the encampment persuaded the legislature to

²¹ *Proceedings*, 1866-79, p. 6-14; Henry W. Childs, "The Life and Work of General Sanborn," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 10: 850; *St. Paul Daily Pioneer*, July 9, 1867; January 9, 1869; *Wabasha Herald*, July 25, August 8, 1867.

²² *Proceedings*, 1866-79, p. 16, 135, 159; *Minneapolis City Directory*, 1875, p. 52 (Minneapolis, 1875).

establish a home for orphans of Minnesota soldiers who had lost their lives during the Civil War, or who had since died from disease or wounds contracted in service. Shortly after the election of his successor, Major John C. Hamilton, in January, 1870, Sprague removed to Tacoma, Washington.²³

The most vigorous of the department commanders during the period here under consideration was no doubt Captain Henry A. Castle, who joined the Grand Army of the Republic at Quincy, Illinois, soon after its organization. He transferred his membership to Minnesota when he removed to St. Cloud in 1867. In 1870 he founded Acker post at St. Paul. At the Rochester encampment of January, 1871, he was elected senior vice-commander of the department. He held the office of commander, to which he was promoted a year later, for three full years, a record, certainly, for Minnesota. Castle may be remembered for a long list of activities and interests. He was editor of the *Anoka Union* and the *St. Paul Dispatch*, a hardware merchant and lawyer, secretary and chairman of the Republican state central committee at various times during the eighties, postmaster of St. Paul in the nineties, a responsible federal official in Washington for several years before and after 1900, and the compiler of a fat three-volume history of Minnesota. It is not at all impossible, however, that he would prefer to be remembered as an aggressive leader of the Grand Army of the Republic, not only during the years when he served as department commander, but almost steadily thereafter until his death in 1916.²⁴

The more important department encampments, held ordinarily in January, were usually two-day affairs. In addition to attending business sessions, the delegates and other

²³ *Proceedings*, 1866-79, p. 23, 180-185; *St. Paul Daily Pioneer*, January 19, May 11, 1869; May 8, 1870.

²⁴ *Proceedings*, 1866-79, p. 53-136; Gideon S. Ives, "Captain Henry Castle," *ante*, 2: 3-6.

guests were usually entertained at a banquet or "camp fire," or both. On such occasions, they sang war songs, made speeches, presented dramatic readings, and drank toasts. The program sometimes was followed by dancing. The semiannual encampments, which occurred commonly in July, partook more of the character of outings than did the mid-winter meetings. In 1873 the summer sessions were held at Duluth. The meeting of July, 1874, which was held at Shakopee, furnished an opportunity for a steamboat excursion by the St. Paul comrades. In 1876 and 1877 the delegates had a chance to enjoy the water sports at White Bear Lake, and on July 4, 1878, they met at Lake Minnetonka.²⁵

During its early stages the Grand Army of the Republic encountered considerable opposition. Democratic editors declared that it was simply a tool of the radical Republicans, and attacked it accordingly. Horace Greeley, who claimed that it would tend to preserve wartime and postwar hatreds and exercise the power of nominating candidates for office, joined in the attack. Greeley's warning was heard in Minnesota, as elsewhere. The vigorous reply made by Frank E. Daggett of the *Wabasha Herald* in his issue of July 18, 1867, may have been one of the reasons for his selection as department commander in the following month. In February, 1868, the *St. Paul Pioneer*, leading Democratic sheet of Minnesota, gave much attention to the probability that General John A. Logan might make military use of the Grand Army to back Congress in driving President Johnson from office. In the presidential campaign of the same year, Democratic veterans were urged to withdraw from an organization whose purpose was no doubt fundamentally that of promoting the fortunes of the hated "radicals."²⁶

²⁵ *Proceedings*, 1866-79, p. 55, 77, 125, 130, 135, 146-150, 154-157; Acker post, Minutes, 2: 157, 238.

²⁶ *St. Paul Daily Pioneer*, November 24, 1866; March 24, 1867; February 25, 27, 29, May 15, 1868; April 24, 1870.

That there was truth in the charges of political activity is shown by a revealing and critical report, dated May 10, 1871, and signed by Dr. William T. Collins, national adjutant general and ex-senior vice-commander of the department of Minnesota. His remarks about Minnesota follow:

The Department of Minnesota was organized in December [*sic*] 1866, and in a few months thereafter embraced some 25 Posts. As in others, the organization in this Department has been injured by efforts to use its strength for political purposes. A reorganization of the Department was effected in 1867. The Department is now small but effective and loyal to the noble objects of the order.²⁷

Collins apparently meant to say that by 1871 the Grand Army in Minnesota had been purged of political racketeers. As early as 1869 the leaders of the department were sensitive to the charge that the Grand Army was a political organization. At that time the department, after some debate, adopted and published the following resolution:

WHEREAS, There exists in the minds of many worthy soldiers and sailors an impression that the Grand Army of the Republic is a political organization, therefore, be it

Resolved, That in the opinion of this Encampment the purposes of the organization would be entirely defeated by the introduction of political controversies, and that we are unequivocally opposed to allowing any consideration of party politics in the deliberations of our Order, and our delegates to the National Grand Encampment are hereby instructed to exert themselves to establish non-interference with politics as the settled and permanent policy of the Grand Army of the Republic.

Apparently it was for the purpose of demonstrating their political neutrality in unmistakable terms that the Taylor's Falls and Stillwater posts omitted their meetings during the political campaign of 1872.²⁸

It is certainly true that prominent members of both political parties were active in Grand Army affairs and that Grand Army leaders as individuals were active in politics.

²⁷ *Proceedings of the National Encampment, 1866-76*, p. 118.

²⁸ *Proceedings, 1866-79*, p. 22, 97.

The charter roll of Acker post included such Republican politicians as Castle, Mark D. Flower, and a future governor, Andrew R. McGill. On the other hand, a prominent Democratic leader, James George of Rochester, one-time colonel of the Second Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, served as adjutant general of the department in 1871. In responding to a toast at a banquet given during the summer encampment of 1871, Colonel George proclaimed himself a Democrat of the strictest school and an equally loyal member of the Grand Army. He denounced as an ignorant knave anyone who claimed that the Grand Army had political bias.²⁹

As a matter of fact, the organization in Minnesota prior to 1883 was hardly strong enough to exert much political influence, nor was it vigorous enough to be used profitably by the leaders of either party. Of course department encampments now and again memorialized the legislature or Congress regarding pensions, bounties, relief of soldiers' orphans, and other matters of special interest to veterans of the period. With the exception, however, of the legislation relating to soldiers' orphans secured by a bit of clever maneuvering in 1869, and of some later appropriations for the same object, it would be difficult to show any striking results of political activity.³⁰

The Grand Army of the Republic did not wield much influence in Minnesota prior to 1880. It failed to attract into its ranks more than a fraction of the veterans of the Civil War who resided in the state. Serious difficulties were encountered in maintaining permanent local branches of the organization, even in the larger cities—St. Paul, Minneapolis, Winona, and Stillwater. Posts were estab-

²⁹ See Castle's address at the January, 1871, encampment, in *Proceedings*, 1866-79, p. 58, 67. It is no doubt true that a majority of the individual members of the Grand Army were Republicans.

³⁰ *Proceedings*, 1866-79, p. 16, 23, 46, 54, 72, 81, 104, 125, 139, 153, 180.

lished, however, in communities of all types and sizes, and in some cases special local conditions gave posts situated in frontier villages strength quite out of proportion to the size of the communities. Locally, no doubt, the posts filled a certain social need, and they ceased to exist when the need seemed less pressing to the men eligible for participation. At the department encampments veterans from various parts of the state learned to know one another, and they established personal associations that in some cases served as a basis for later political co-operation.³¹

FRANK H. HECK

PERU STATE TEACHERS' COLLEGE
PERU, NEBRASKA

³¹ Evidence to substantiate this statement is to be found in almost every one of the numerous boxes of Castle Papers.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).