

IOWA HISTORY

by Cheryl Mullenbach



Photo Courtesy Library of Congress
Memorial to Civil War Soldiers

Rats Victorious Over Has Beens

Decoration Day (Memorial Day) in Iowa in the past was celebrated much as it was in other parts of the country—parades, picnics, speeches and church services. The holiday was established just three years after the end of the Civil War. It was a day for the nation to honor the veterans of the war by decorating graves with flowers. The tradition started in 1868 and continues today. Every year Iowans participate in the holiday in a variety of ways.

In Denison in 1911 Decoration Day was celebrated with a couple of baseball games between city teams. The Court House Rats defeated the Has Beens, 6-5. It was a hotly contested event throughout—with first one team leading and then the other. But in the end the Rats won and the boys were “much elated.” One of the star players was a young man named Leo Collins, and the team had great hopes for him in the future. The Rats went on to defeat the employees of the post office in a second game that day. The captain of the Court House Rats was proud of his team.

“I’d rather be the captain of the Rats than president of the United States,” he boasted.

In a private celebration Mr. and Mrs. H.W. Faul held a dinner party for six old comrades in arms of Mrs. Faul’s father. It was an elegant four-course meal and the home was decorated in red, white and blue. Each guest was presented a souvenir in remembrance of the occasion. The “old boys” spent part of the evening reciting old war stories from their days in the war of rebellion (Civil War).

The community gathered at the opera house for a day of entertainment. Music was provided by a male quartet and a speaker reminded the citizens of Denison why they were celebrating. He recalled issues that led to the war of rebellion and declared that there existed no lingering bitterness between the two sides in the conflict. He also congratulated the country for restoring “harmony and good will” between all sections of the country.

The area churches also celebrated the day with special services. Veterans of the Civil War were represented at all the churches. Patriotic songs were sung and ministers talked about the war too. At the First Methodist Episcopal Church the preacher commended the veterans in the congregation for their “valorous conduct during the rebellion.” He recalled that the war was fought for the principles of humanity. And he recounted what had been gained as a result of the conflict—an end to slavery, “No section of the country will ever again be found guilty of practicing human slavery.” He also reminded the congregation that because of the sacrifices of the veterans it was confirmed once and for all that the US government was not a “mere compact of states” but a “union of people of various states of the union.” And he reiterated, “no state is at liberty to secede or withdraw from the union.”

At many of the speeches given that day in 1911 Iowans were reminded that the ranks of the Civil War veterans was thinning with each passing day. “Soon the roll call will be history,” one speaker warned. But he also promised that the memories of the men who gave their best years and even their lives for their country “will be enshrined in the hearts of the people for generations.”