

The aking of ilwaukee Stories

Historical Time Period : 1860's

Milwaukee Men and Women After the Civil War



*Civil War Soldiers
in Milwaukee
Courthouse Square*



*National Asylum for
Disabled Soldiers at Wood*



Soldiers' Home Fair in 1865

Connecting to "The Making of Milwaukee"

Video Chapters: #5 - Neighbors and Strangers

Curriculum Chapter: Gr. 5-12 - Coming to Milwaukee

This story is historical fiction. The setting, events and Milwaukee citizens are real but the soldiers' names (only) have been fictionalized. Pictures available in the Image Library @ www.themakingofmilwaukee.com

Milwaukee Men and Women and the Civil War

Some people believe that Wisconsin was so far away from the Civil War battlefields that our state was not involved. But men and women in Wisconsin participated in the Civil War to save our Union and to free the slaves. More than 11,000 Wisconsin soldiers were casualties in the Civil War. Some died in battle, many were wounded, and others died from diseases caused by deplorable living conditions. No fighting occurred in Milwaukee but the city was a hotbed of activity during the war.

There were three Civil War Camps located in Milwaukee that supplied and trained Union troops: Camp Reno, Camp Scott and Camp Washburn. Soldiers were not the only Milwaukee citizens involved in the war. Many women worked to support Union troops. They sent much needed supplies to soldiers who were fighting, made clothing, and stepped in to do any work necessary that the soldiers would have done if they had not gone to war.

It was April 9, 1865, when the Civil War ended. All across America thousands of soldiers returned home. The sad fact, however, is that many soldiers never returned. As many as 700,000 died in the bloodiest war the United States ever experienced. Those who were lucky to survive were eager to go home and begin their lives all over again. But many of the soldiers who came back to Milwaukee were injured, penniless or homeless. Some had no friends or families here to offer them aid. Milwaukee's women were ready to help. Even before the war was over, Milwaukee women banded together and formed a plan to help the returning wounded. Some of those women were: Martha Mitchell, the wife of a well-known business man Alexander Mitchell; Caroline Walker, the wife of George Walker, one of Milwaukee's first settlers; and Henrietta Kilbourn, wife of Byron Kilbourn, another famous early settler and land-owner. Lydia Hewitt became the leader of the plan to help the many injured and homeless soldiers that wandered Milwaukee streets.

At first the women worked to open some vacant stores on Plankinton Avenue and make those stores into a home for the soldiers. However, they soon needed more space. So the women organized a week-long fair to showcase Wisconsin art and farm machinery. The money raised would go to build an even bigger and better place for the soldiers. The people of Milwaukee attended this "Great Fair" in June of 1865 on Broadway Street and raised over \$100,000. This amount would equal about \$1,340,000 today! \$100,000 was a lot of money but it was still not enough to build the kind of home needed. So the women and other Milwaukee citizens like George Walker petitioned the United States government for additional funds. It just so happened that the U.S. Government was looking for four locations across the country to build shelters for injured soldiers. The government was very impressed with the efforts of the Milwaukee citizens and agreed to provide additional money for a National Soldiers Home in Milwaukee.

John Anderson was a wounded soldier who came back to Milwaukee after the Civil War. He was a soldier in the famous Union group known as the Iron Brigade. The Brigade was led by Milwaukee's Rufus King, who later became the editor of the Milwaukee Sentinel newspaper. Before the war, John worked as a mechanic. But he was shot in a battle and lost his right arm. After that, he could no longer do the work of a mechanic. Even worse, while John was fighting in the war, both parents died and he had no home to go to. So John was taken into the National Soldiers Home and lived there with 500 other wounded soldiers. The soldier's home was built on 400 acres of land and had its own U. S. Post Office and theater. With his lifelong friend, Thomas Johnson, who had also been wounded, John walked along wooded paths and rested at serene ponds filled with beautiful white swans. In this peaceful, caring atmosphere the wounded soldiers slowly began to heal. The buildings of the National Soldiers Home still stand on National Avenue, just south of the Miller Park baseball stadium.**

John and Thomas recalled an incident that happened before the war, in 1854. Wisconsin was a free state where no one was a slave. So when slaves escaped from slave-owning states they came to states like Wisconsin. John and Thomas remembered that they were together at Milwaukee's courthouse square when a slave from Missouri, who had run away from his owner, was captured and jailed. The slave was named Joshua Glover.

Because of a law passed in 1850 called the Fugitive Slave Act, people from the North were required to return escaped southern slaves to their owners. Some Milwaukee citizens did not agree with the law, especially since Wisconsin had no slaves. Sherman Booth was such a person. He was an abolitionist, someone who opposed slavery. Sherman Booth helped organize a protest of Milwaukee citizens against Glover's imprisonment. John and Thomas remembered how they helped Booth and other Milwaukeeans free Joshua Glover from jail. Abolitionists arranged Glover's escape to Canada through the Underground Railroad. Joshua Glover could never be returned to slavery.

Even though they had suffered greatly during the war, John and Thomas were glad they had been able to fight for their country to ensure that slavery was abolished. They were especially happy to be part of the Fourth of July celebrations at the National Home where a large parade was staged in the morning and fireworks were displayed in the evening. Thousands of Milwaukee citizens came out to the National Home to celebrate this holiday with the soldiers.

But not every returning soldier had the same positive experiences as John and Thomas. Daniel McLeary was a wounded soldier who had come to America from Ireland in 1855 for a chance to work and have a better life. Daniel's family settled in Milwaukee's Third Ward located just south of downtown. The McLeary family faced many challenges upon arriving in Milwaukee. They were very poor and like other Irish immigrants, experienced discrimination from non-Irish settlers at the time. During this same period before the Civil War, Milwaukee's Irish people experienced a tragic shipwreck. A ship called the *Lady Elgin* was carrying a large number of Irish people from Chicago to Milwaukee when it crashed into another ship and sank. Nearly 300 people on board perished. Daniel lost his brother and some very close friends in that shipwreck.

Then when the Civil War began, Daniel, along with other poor immigrants, was required to fight in the Civil War. Daniel did not agree with slavery, but he had a job and a family to support. Daniel questioned if fighting in the war was worth losing his life or a limb. He did not want to become incapable of providing for his family. He was angry that wealthy people could pay money to get out of fighting in the Civil War. Daniel, like some of his other Irish friends, was also afraid that free African Americans might move North to places like Milwaukee and take jobs they so desperately needed.

John, Thomas and Daniel spent many a sleepless night thinking about the devastating losses they had experienced in life and in war. Despite those losses, the three men were happy that generous people in Milwaukee helped them begin life anew. They were grateful for the women and other citizens in Milwaukee who worked tirelessly to create a welcoming, caring place for wounded soldiers. And they were proud that slavery had been outlawed in the United States. All three of them hoped that future generations of Americans would remember the sacrifices they and other Civil War soldiers made.

*** Milwaukee citizens and organizations are currently trying to raise money to restore the buildings at the National Soldiers Home.*