

Civil War panorama

By William Huggins
Written for The State Journal

It was a typical April day in Madison. Trees were in bud, wildflowers were painting their pictures on the rolling landscape, home gardens were in bloom and there was enough nip in the air to remind one that winter was not far behind. Life in Madison was like that in other midwestern communities in 1862.

Like them, yes, except for one thing.

Madison was the site of Camp Randall, a Civil War garrison which was about to take on an entirely new role of Yankee military hospital and prison for captured Confederate soldiers. But this is getting ahead of the story which is about one special day in April.

For several days, news had been coming to Madison about fighting between Northern and Southern forces in an area around the abutting states of Missouri, Kentucky and Tennessee. The North had stationed large land forces along both sides of the Mississippi River and also a number of river gunboats in an attempt to dislodge Confederate installations which were assigned to stop movement of Yankee men and supplies to points further South.

Northern victories

Then came news of Northern victories with places like New Madrid, Tip-tonville and Island No. 10 banded about. More than 7,000 prisoners were taken in the final days of the battle of Island No. 10, reports said. It was a crushing blow to the South and opened the Mississippi to uninterrupted use by the North.

Madison's part in this great drama was revealed the day word came that about 800 prisoners were coming to Camp Randall, their arrival date to be known shortly. The several thousand other prisoners from the recent battles were being sent to other military establishments where they would be detained or exchanged for Northern captives in Confederate camps.

When the word came that the train-load of Confederate prisoners would arrive later that day, word spread quickly and the crowd began to gather at the railroad station. Some came in wagons or buggies, some walked. As the crowd grew larger more talk arose about how to greet these "Rebels." Some hotheads called for



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boos and catcalls. Others, more considerate, admonished restraint. Feelings were mixed.

Behind the station were a number of horse-drawn Army wagons and three ambulances. The drivers, in uniform, joined the detachment of men from Camp Randall and they all milled about idly. Now it was only a matter of waiting.

Then came news over the telegraph line that the train had cleared the last station before Madison and would be arriving in a few minutes.

There was a scurry and the plank floors of the station platform resounded with the tread of impatient feet as everyone tried to find the best viewing point.

Prisoners arrived

As the train came to a stop, soldiers formed a line to keep the crowd back to permit unloading. There was a brief conference between the commanding officer on the train and his counterpart from Camp Randall. A signal was given and the prisoners started de-training.

The more able-bodied men came down the steps first, each carrying his few belongings in sacks or tied in bundles. Their Confederate gray uniforms were wrinkled and showed the ravages of war. Each man held his head high and it seemed that word had been passed for all to make a brave appearance. None knew what reception they would receive from their new Northern contacts, but not a sound came from the gathered onlookers.

Then came a lull and the crowd wondered, but not for long.

Slowly and haltingly a line of gaunt and hollow-eyed men began to make their way off the train. Some moved with-halting steps, leaning on makeshift canes. Some managed to make their way in almost a crawl. A few luckier ones had comrades on whom they were depending. Here and there one would raise his head and manage a smile, weak as it was.

But the drama had not yet ended.

In a few minutes, the first litter appeared. On it was a tiny figure, apparently only a boy, unable to raise his head, but he did manage a feeble wave with one hand.

Another litter, then more and more, each carrying its stark evidence of war's brutality, and each having greater and greater impact on the on-looking crowd.

Concern for sick

Suddenly, there was a stir and people began talking in low tones. They made gestures toward the litters, not hostile gestures but gestures of sincere concern for these sick strangers in their midst. Today, these men were not enemies, but men and boys caught in a war which they thought was being fought for the right cause.

Voices were being raised and one man exclaimed: "My God! Now I believe the stories that these men fought for hours up to their knees in water on Island No. 10. War certainly is hell."

"I don't think any of them have any warm clothes," a woman said, turning to a man standing beside her. "George, you go home and pick up everything you think they can use. I will find out other things they need. We can't just stand here when we see something



Confederate Rest, located in Madison's Forest Hill Cemetery, is devoted to Civil War victims.

— State Journal photos

like this."

The crowd disbursed quickly and word of the conditions found at the depot spread like wildfire. A church was made available for an assembly point and within a short time the job of mercy was under way.

From all corners of the city came loads of clothing and food. Volunteers spent hours at the church or at Camp Randall. Extra food supplies, not available as army rations were provided. A group of young girls carried fresh milk each day to those who needed it. Madison's heart was touched deeply; there might be fighting elsewhere with men battling face to face, but in Madison there was another type of conflict going on and people were meeting it head-on.

But despite all the good professional care and the outpouring of kindness, death was taking its vicious toll. Far too frequently citizens looked up to see Army wagons, bearing wooden coffins, heading for Forest Hill cemetery.

All in all, 140 graves were filled within a span of three months.

The area picked at Forest Hill for the burials was an ideal one, off a main roadway and surrounded by tall trees. It was given the name of Confederate Rest and during the years has had excellent care by cemetery officials and crews. Many interested people have given freely of their support, outstanding among them was Alice Whiting Waterman, a native of Baton Rouge, La., who devoted 30 years of her life to caring for the graves of her boys.

In 1930, the United Daughters of the Confederacy gave a monument with all the names of the men listed. They also gave 140 Crosses of Honor at that time. Fifty of these crosses were lost or wore out during the years and were replaced last year.

It's 119 years later now and another April and another spring has come. Some of the big trees at Confederate Rest are gone, but others have grown to shed their protection over this last resting place of men and boys who left homes in Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana and Tennessee to join the First Alabama Infantry Regiment, the unit that played the major part in

the battle of Island No. 10.

A number of the headstones are a little out of line, but that doesn't matter too much. The spirit of the men beneath them still remains upright and undaunted.

Memorial Day is Monday and plans are under way for a short, simple observance. There will be the laying of a wreath sent to Madison by Dr. James M. Edwards of Decatur, Ga., and former Commander-in-Chief of the Sons of Confederate Veterans.

Each grave will be flanked by a new Confederate flag provided by the national organization of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and each Cross of Honor will bear a new coat or gold paint put on by willing

hands of the cemetery crew.

A squad of members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post in Fitchburg will conduct a short memorial service beginning at 11 a.m., followed by volleys from their firing squad and blowing of taps by their bugler.

A bronze plaque, mounted on a

block of Georgia granite, will be unveiled as part of the program.


For the first time, visitors to Confederate Rest will learn from the wording on the plaque who the men were who are buried there, where they came from and the reason for their being here.

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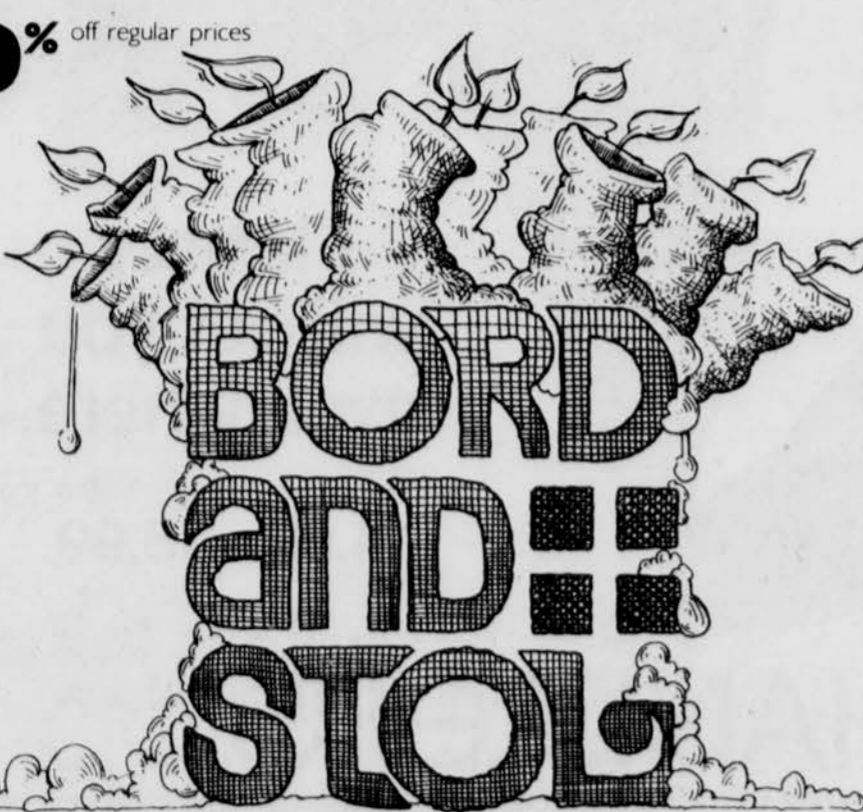
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