

“Boys in Blue’ Helped Write County’s History”
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Gettysburg. Bull Run. Antietam. Shiloh.

Those are just a few of the places in American history that bring to mid grisly scenes of death and destruction. All were sites of some of the bloodiest battles of the American Civil War, a four-year nightmare that ended 120 years ago last month.

The history of Franklin County was written in part by people and events of that war. John Brown’s “Pottawatomie Massacre” near Lane was part of the bloody overture to that struggle, as were other local incidents of terrorism between the pro and anti-slavery forces.

But perhaps the Civil War’s greatest influence on Franklin County came after Lee’s surrender to Grant in April of 1865. Suddenly thousands of soldiers were free to rebuild their lives, and many did so by moving west in search of new opportunities.

As a result, many soldiers, especially from the Union Army, poured into Franklin County, so many that between 1860 and 1870 the population of the county more than tripled.

They also brought their brides and began raising families, causing population to shoot still higher, from 10,000 to nearly 17,000 between 1870 and 1880.

The names of those former “Boys in Blue” read like a list of Who’s Who of early Franklin County business and civic leaders. These prominent citizens founded towns, opened stores, established farms, built churches and schools and formed various social and cultural organizations.

One of the most prestigious and honored organizations founded in the county was part of a national federation called “The Grand Army of the Republic.” The GAR was open to all former Union soldiers, and for decades its members were honored with a “hero” status.

Five hundred GAR posts were established in Kansas, with No. 18 being the George H. Thomas Post at Ottawa. This chapter was the largest in the county and 30 years after the war had a roster of 184 living members.

Other GAR groups formed at Wellsville, Williamsburg, Princeton, Pomona, Homewood and Peoria, with a total membership of over 120 in 1894.

In keeping with the military focus, the officers of the Grand Army of the Republic were given such titles as the Commander-in-Chief, Surgeon General, and Aide-de-Camp. Their annual state and national reunions were called “encampments.”

The members of the GAR swapped stories of their experiences, gloried in their victories, revered the names of Lincoln and Grant, and honored their fallen comrades. To add spirit to their meetings, old Civil War songs were sung, such as “Marching Through Georgia” and “The Year of Jubilo.”

Some of the stories they could recount were fascinating, such as that of Pvt. DeWitt Warner, of the Warner Fence family. He lied about his age to enlist in the army as a drummer boy, was captured by the Rebels, and sent to the infamous Andersonville Prison in Georgia.

Because he was believed to be dead, his name was never called in the lists for prisoner exchanges. Warner escaped by using the exchange pass of a prison buddy who had died. He returned home as a frail, emaciated “human skeleton” to the stunned family who had been told he was dead.

The passing decades of course took their toll on the “Boys in Blue,” and their ranks, as they marched in local parades, gradually dwindled. The death in 1940 of Judge Peter Kaiser, at age 96, removed the county’s last survivor of the Civil War.