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# The Community Gift

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## The Community Gift

By means of handbills, hurriedly printed by George D. and H. A. Perkins at the *Gazette* office, prominent business men called a Citizens' Mass Meeting for Monday night, May 27th. Throughout Cedar Falls these bills were distributed by boys and carried by men on horseback to the countryside. The object of the meeting was two-fold: to consider plans for giving financial assistance to families of soldiers who would otherwise be left without support, and to honor the Pioneer Greys on their departure with a tangible gift in token of community esteem.

Not until the war had dragged far into its second year and both money and provisions were running low did the pioneer settlers of Iowa seriously consider the idea of requesting county or State aid in providing for destitute families of soldiers. Even then the proposal met bitter opposition in some quarters. In meeting such emergencies the people of Cedar Falls displayed characteristic self-reliance. In preparation for the departure of the first contingent of troops, citizens were urged to attend the community meeting and help plan for the adequate support of wives and

children of the men who were going to the front.

The handbills and the imminence of entrainment brought over 600 persons to the Citizens' Mass Meeting on Monday night, a record attendance at patriotic demonstrations of this nature. Colonel W. H. Sessions, a veteran of the Mexican War, presided. Acting upon a motion, he appointed a committee of five men — J. M. Overman, G. M. Harris, Thomas Walkup, T. B. Carpenter, and B. V. White — to withdraw to the Horticultural Society rooms on the floor below with specific directions to prepare a suitable plan to be submitted later in the evening to the whole meeting for action.

Considerably more than two hours passed before the committee felt ready to report. Instead of growing restless, the 600 who crowded Overman Hall displayed the resourcefulness of the pioneers, for among their own members they found entertainment which one of the participants said "made their hearts vibrate and pulsate." The early settlers, believing in the power of the individual and in the gospel of progress, were wholly convinced that both ideas sprang from democratic principles. In 1861 the citizens of Cedar Falls stood ready to maintain those ideals by demonstrating both their independence and patriotism. Oratory had not yet yielded its place in American

life to metropolitan dailies or to the radio. The speaker who could sway an audience with eloquence could secure listeners.

That night in Cedar Falls, while their committee wrestled with resolutions and plans, the friends of the Pioneer Greys, soberly serious at first, listened to impromptu speeches of legislators, lawyers, and farmers until the excitement of the occasion swept them into volleys of applause. They heard praise of the courage of Greys, one of the first thirty companies summoned by Governor Kirkwood for service; and, emotionally filled with patriotic fervor, they responded to passionate appeals for the defense of the Constitution and the Union.

Zimri Streeter, "Old Black Hawk" to the Iowa legislators, and State Senator J. B. Powers gave the keynote speeches. Both vigorously proclaimed the grave peril which threatened to impair the Constitution. Both declared secession to be the greatest danger to national unity which the United States of America had ever faced. They were emphatic in stating that the time for negotiation had passed and the time for action had arrived. The word appeasement had not then found a place in the vocabulary of war. Unanimously they declared, "The Nation, the whole Nation, must be preserved!"

Six other men were called upon to speak extemporaneously. In the excitement of war hysteria no one seemed to note that the speakers reiterated the same points. R. B. Fifield, the Congregational pastor, regretted that the state of his health forbade his shouldering arms. William Porterfield, the Presbyterian minister, declared his willingness to enlist whenever the government needed him. He had, he said, five sons whom, if they were old enough, he would gladly see march against the South. A merchant was singled out for an impromptu speech. Somewhat disturbed, he rose hesitatingly to say that he had no gift for words, but made his patriotism dramatic by pointing a trembling finger at the great flag on the platform and saying quietly, "There's Old Glory! That's my flag!"

By the time the committee of five had returned to Overman Hall, the reiteration of democratic ideals and the approaching departure of the Pioneer Greys had so welded the temper of the audience that all were in a receptive mood for the plan submitted. Colonel Sessions beckoned the chairman of the committee, J. M. Overman, to the platform. First of all, Overman explained the urgent need of a constructive plan whereby support could be assured to families dependent upon the earning power of the enlisted men. As an immediate step

he urged that the community should supply all deficiencies in the clothing of any needy volunteer, such as underclothing, shoes, or socks. Moreover, he proposed that a generous fund should be subscribed by the citizens before the meeting adjourned. He paused a long moment before presenting the last point on which his committee had agreed. They recommended that every man in the company be presented with a fatigue uniform as a free gift from the community. As Overman hoped, his last suggestion prompted a burst of prolonged applause from the audience.

By the time that Overman had presented the usual formal resolutions and had answered questions from the floor, the Mass Meeting had been in session for three hours. Undaunted by the length of the meeting, Colonel Sessions began to call for volunteer donations and so completely had the occasion and the speeches unified the citizens that responses from all over the hall came rapidly. In fifteen minutes Secretary George D. Perkins had listed over six hundred dollars in pledges for a soldiers' relief fund. Among those contributing, the J. M. Overman Milling Company subscribed the largest amount, \$150; two merchants, Joseph Rosenbaum and T. B. Carpenter each gave fifty; the Perkins brothers, who for a year had been offering to accept stovewood, hens, or garden truck

in lieu of subscriptions to the Cedar Falls *Gazette*, gave twenty-five; and the Congregational pastor contributed fifteen.

This was not all. Another committee working on the streets of Cedar Falls succeeded the next day in raising \$350 in addition to the relief funds subscribed at the Monday Mass Meeting. The whole amount was definitely earmarked for the purchasing of fatigue uniforms, the gift of the community to the Pioneer Greys.

From Wednesday afternoon, May 29, 1861, until Saturday night of that week sixty sewing machines at work upon bolts of gray wool and blue cotton cloth made the exhibition rooms of the Horticultural Society hum with activity. As soon as the local tailors, J. J. Ball, Rob Roy, and Samuel Berry, were informed of the community gift they volunteered their services to the committee in charge of the fatigue uniforms; offered their apprentices, their sadirons, their pressing boards, and six or seven sewing machines of the latest model; and in addition supervised the installation of the apparatus.

At one o'clock that afternoon, in hooped skirts and pelisses, the other "fifty-three or four" sewing machines arrived. "These", Editor George D. Perkins of the *Gazette* facetiously declared, "belonged to the common, though ingenious and com-

plicated variety, known as 'Woman' and were inferior" to the mechanical type, operated by foot treddles, only "in respect to speed".

Like many other towns in the North, Cedar Falls outfitted her first volunteers in gray. Not until the government became aware that the Southerners were on the march in gray was blue substituted. The three tailors of Cedar Falls cut the woolen cloth into trousers, belts, and caps. They also measured the boys and fitted the garments and, if the words of the reporter may be trusted, they boldly assumed the prerogative of "bossing the ladies". Until Saturday night the sewing machines clattered and thimbles wore blisters on second fingers of the fifty-three feminine seamstresses. The gray wool and blue cotton goods were folded, cut, and stitched; ravellings littered the floor; and steam hissed as the heavy sadirons pressed down the edges of the seams.

Above the noise of the sewing machines and the coming and going of citizens and soldiers, the women raised their voices to speak of the war and more particularly of the special cases of need in Cedar Falls where widows and mothers of little children would be left partially or wholly dependent upon the community. Of the dangers confronting the boys of the company, they said very little aloud. They would have been far more dis-



tressed if they could have looked ahead, not to a brief campaign as they anticipated, but to a titanic struggle that was destined to lengthen into four long years.

On Saturday night the fifty-three women and their "tailor bosses" looked with weary satisfaction upon their accumulated handiwork: a hundred completed fatigue uniforms — gray trousers, caps, and belts, and blue shirts. Later they would be publicly thanked, but that night, as they snuffed the candles on the working tables in the Horticultural Society rooms, their reward lay in realizing that they had turned a potential gift to the departing Greys into an actuality.

LUELLA M. WRIGHT