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The Departure

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The Departure

No occasion in the first decade of the history of Cedar Falls had brought to town such crowds of people as poured in on the morning of June 4, 1861. Many farmers from counties to the north and west must have driven their teams all night in order to be present. Five thousand people gathered to see the Pioneer Greys entrain. In comparison, the crowds, hitherto considered great, at the Cedar Valley Agricultural Fair and those which had assembled two months earlier to participate in the Grand Railroad Jubilees, when the first train on the Dubuque and Sioux City Railroad had puffed into town, seemed small.

The earliest arrivals, forming the nucleus of a greater crowd, congregated near the head of Main Street just south of the Millrace Bridge. From there they could look across the Cedar River to the railway station and see the troop train with its engine and five box-like passenger cars profusely decorated with evergreens and flags. With a grim sense of irony, men recalled that, under far different conditions, the first train had been welcomed only a few weeks before with band music, cedar arches, speeches, a banquet,

and a grand ball. One old pioneer, shaking his head sadly, said, "Seems like that train arrived just in time to take our boys away." Some one else commented plaintively in reply, "But today those cars face east not west."

From the windows of his editorial sanctum in the Overman Block, George D. Perkins watched that constantly increasing but quiet mass of people with a reportorial eye. Reared in a school that had not learned to scoff at sentiment or to cultivate sophistication, he etched the picture of this group in his mind so that he could portray it for readers of his *Gazette* on the coming Friday. "Mingling hither and thither among the mass could be seen the Greys bidding their friends farewell . . . Words were few but actions told the feelings of the heart more plainly than they. Stout men would grasp each other by the hand, and while they would not trust themselves to speak the thoughts that came rushing thick and fast, the eyes would suffuse with tears, tears that were no disgrace to manhood. Fathers were parting with children; husbands with wives and brothers with sisters. . . . At last came the order for the Greys to fall in; the father snatched the last kiss from his wife and little ones, whose love-grasp upon him had to be rudely severed; and parents had to speak the last words of counsel

and advice it might be their privilege to offer. But though love of kindred, friends and home were strong, yet duty was paramount to all these, and the Greys promptly obeyed its call."

At nine o'clock the bugler sounded the call for assembly. Almost instantly the crowd opened up passageways enabling the soldiers to make their way to the bugler and to Captain Smith, stationed at the approach to the Millrace Bridge. First in line, the Cedar Falls Band headed the procession with the June sunshine flashing on the polished brass of their instruments. Next the veterans of former wars took their places. These were followed by the remnant of the Pioneer Greys who for special reasons had found it impossible to entrain that morning. Last, marched Company K, nearly one hundred strong. The throng of citizens and visitors followed the procession over the Millrace and Cedar River bridges to the new, scarcely completed, railway depot, a quarter of a mile beyond. Before it stood the waiting flag-and-cedar decorated train, with a plume of smoke pouring from the squat smokestack of the engine.

At the station the Greys broke ranks. Relatives and friends crowded close for parting words. One hysterical woman with two little children clinging to her skirts entreated her husband with tears and sobs to remain. So intense was her

grief that three young men, stirred either by her suffering or the excitement of the occasion, offered to take his place. The man, however, it was reported, remained obdurate in his intention. "He was determined to go and go he did."

At nine-thirty Conductor Northup shouted, "All aboard!" According to the *Gazette*, Engineer Cawley backed the little train to insure a good start, and as it came rushing by the crowded station platform, "such an earnest heartfelt shout went up for the departing soldiers as must have carried conviction to the heart of each and every member of Company K that the hearts of the people were with them." Then in silence hundreds of men and women, facing east, watched the engine and its five cars move on toward the bend in the Cedar River and disappear among the oaks in the distance.

The story of the departure of the Pioneer Greys logically ends with the horizon toward which the train carrying Captain Smith, the Cedar Falls company, and forty local citizens, who accompanied the boys to Dubuque, was headed. At the point of embarkation, however, occurred an incident which, inasmuch as it graphically revealed the firm belief of Company K in one nation indivisible and united, may serve as an appropriate epilogue.

On Thursday evening, June 6th, as Company K was embarking on the *Key City* for the rendezvous of the Third Iowa Volunteer Infantry at Keokuk, a man on the wharf audaciously hurrahed for secession. One of the soldiers on the boat quickly flung a pail at the Copperhead who with equal celerity hurled it back to the deck of the boat. The missile struck Lieutenant Fitzroy Sessions of Cedar Falls squarely on his breast. This double insult to his nation's honor and his own caused the Lieutenant's Scotch-Irish temper to flare.

Even though the boat was actually leaving the wharf, Sessions placed his bowie knife between his teeth, grasped his new Colt revolver, and jumped ashore. With his free fist he gave the advocate of secession such a blow that he fell back about a rod. Then, although the boat had already swung away from the shore, the Lieutenant dexterously leaped several feet through the air and regained his place on the moving boat. Editor Perkins, who witnessed the feat and related it to *Gazette* readers, remarked laconically, "It seemed to be the prevalent idea that Secession had received a hard blow."

LUELLE M. WRIGHT