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Loren Tyler

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Most Civil War soldiers did not achieve glory on the battlefield but instead performed routine duties, fought bravely for country when needed, and then went home and resumed their civilian lives. Most of their stories are now lost to history. The story of Loren Tyler is one of a youth whose main narrative began at the end of the war and continued through the remainder of his life due to his efforts to preserve a story that went far beyond him.

During the half century that followed the end of the war, Tyler worked incessantly to preserve records of his regiment, the 15th Iowa Infantry, the Crocker's Iowa Brigade of which his regiment was part, and a photographic record of virtually all officers of all of Iowa's volunteer regiments. His donations to the State Historical Society of Iowa have been invaluable, not only for the vast photo archive he assembled and contemporary historical documents, but also for another vast collection of artifacts that form part of the general collection. He was also an enthusiastic supporter and tireless worker for the Iowa Department of the Grand Army of the Republic, the veterans' organization founded in 1866 for all those who had defended the Union cause in uniform.

Loren S. Tyler was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on April 21, 1845, and came to Keokuk, Iowa, with his family in 1856 at the age of 11.

In the fall of 1861, the 15th Iowa Infantry started to organize and was mustered into service in March, 1862. About forty men from Keokuk joined Company H and nearly half of them were over the age of 30. Young Loren was only 16 but joined the company as a drummer boy. Very little is known of Loren's service except that he was with the regiment in every battle that it participated in starting with Shiloh on April 6-7, 1862, until Bentonville, North Carolina, in March, 1865.

He was accidentally wounded by a comrade at Big Lynch, South Carolina, on January 29, 1865, but it was apparently a minor injury.

There were 14 musicians in the regiment plus two drum majors and a fife major. Most of them were either older men in their 30's and 40's or in their teens, with Tyler being the youngest. Apparently young Loren was around an interesting group of fellows. It was later commented on in the very history of the regiment that Tyler compiled that Nathan Leonard, the first drum major of the regiment, *"had the early instruction of the Musicians of the Regiment and did very well, considering the insubordinate characters of the young devils over whom he had control."*

According to official records, Tyler was mustered out with the regiment at Louisville, Kentucky on July 24, 1865, but late in life Tyler, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, claimed that he was never properly discharged and was therefore in continual service to the regiment. He related in his version of events that in May, 1865, with the war over but the brigade still awaiting discharge, fifteen men including himself were detailed for clerical duty where they *"worked on reports and returns, fifteen to twenty hours a day, to complete the rolls and books, many hours under guard to prevent us from stealing away to obtain some long-needed rest."* The 15th Iowa Infantry was the last regiment in the brigade to be mustered out, and Company H was the last company to leave for Davenport, making Tyler one of the last two clerks in the Adjutant's office.

According to Tyler:

"Shortly a boy came and said our company was being paid off and the Captain had sent for me. So I scooted for the Company and the greenbacks. Of course a strict compliance with the regulations would have required the Adjutant to have relieved us two clerks, but he was busy

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packing up. So was every one else, and rushing away to catch the next train or boat for home, so we did not stand a minute waiting to be relieved, we just skipped."

Thus according to Tyler he was not properly discharged but remained continuously in service. Perhaps to prove his point, he noted that within weeks of returning home to Keokuk he was called back to report to General George Pomutz who had been given the task of complying with a resolution of the Iowa General Assembly to prepare a history of the regiment. For the next several months Tyler worked with General Pomutz, who had apparently saved every order, circular, report, and return of any importance required of the State of Iowa, the War Department, or of army regulations and had made copies of all of them. From this experience "...the collection germ stung me, and the sting is still at work..." In the years that followed, Tyler collected everything he could find that related to his company, regiment, brigade, division, corps, and army. He became an instrumental member of Crocker's Iowa Brigade Association (the Crocker Brigade had been composed of the 11th, 13th, 15th, and 16th Iowa Infantry regiments during the war) when it was formed in 1881 and at the third brigade reunion in 1885 he made a motion to organize the Fifteenth Iowa Veteran Association. He was elected company historian for Company H and the regiment elected Generals W.W. Belknap and J.M. Hedrick, the second and third colonels of the regiment, respectively, to be the regimental historians. Referring to Belknap and Hedrick, Tyler claimed that the generals: *...knowing I had not been relieved from duty away back in 1865, commanded me still, and ordered me to compile the regimental history. Orders were orders, especially when issued by two generals, even for extra and continuous duty.*

The result of Tyler's new labor was the monumental History of the Fifteenth Regiment, Iowa Veteran Volunteer Infantry from October, 1861, to August, 1865, When Disbanded at the End of the War. General Belknap is credited as the author of this comprehensive regimental history (General Hedrick had died before its completion), but even Belknap knew where credit was due, as he stated in the Preface to the book:

The labor of the work has been done by Mr. Loren S. Tyler, formerly of Company H, who was selected as compiler, and all will admit that it has been well done. The rolls and lists of casualties, and all the records involving great and anxious care, have been examined, and the History prepared by General Pomutz, re-examined, corrected and copied by Mr. Tyler. He deserves and will have the thanks of the Regiment.

In its 630 pages, the History contained brief biographical summaries of every officer in the regiment, including colonels, lieutenant colonels, majors surgeons, assistant surgeons, adjutants, quartermasters, sergeant majors, commissary sergeant, hospital stewards, drum majors, and fife majors; a separate history of each company from its own company historian; troop rosters from each company; a general history of the entire regiment from its organization until its mustering out; and (in an age before photos could be reproduced in books or other publications), sketches of many of the officers.

Another activity of Tyler's was in the Iowa Department of the Grand Army of the Republic. Known nationally as the G.A.R., this organization was founded in Decatur, Illinois, in April, 1866, and the Iowa Department was established in July. By early 1867, there were already 95 posts established in Iowa alone. The Iowa Department was dissolved in 1870 but was revived starting in 1872 and remained a powerful organization of Union Civil War veterans in Iowa for many decades. The national G.A.R. was also a powerful association affecting politics at the national level well into the twentieth century. Membership crested in 1890 both nationally and in Iowa. The national membership at that time stood at 400,000 and gradually diminished over the years due almost exclusively to aging and death of its members. In 1914, membership still stood at 180,000 and in 1935 was at 6,000.

The first post of the Iowa Department was established in Tyler's hometown of Keokuk, and Tyler himself was mustered into the Torrence Post No. 2 in Keokuk in May, 1872. The Iowa Department peaked in 1890 with 435 posts and 20,324 members. A new state commander was elected annually, and between 1874 and 1936,

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29 commanders were elected who had served in one of Iowa's volunteer regiments (the others being veterans who had served in other state regiments or the regular army and then moved to Iowa after the war.) Also, three national commanders were from Iowa: Colonel David J. Palmer in 1914, Judge James W. Willett in 1922, and Oley Nelson in 1935. Membership in Iowa declined very gradually to 11,412 in 1905, to 4,000 in 1923 and to about 200 in 1935. The last Iowa Civil War veteran died in 1949, and in 1953 the state legislature voted to close the G.A.R. office in the State Capitol Building and transfer all of its records and regalia to the State Historical Department in the old State Historical Building north across Grand Avenue from the Capitol.

Tyler did not live to see all these developments but he was intensely active with the G.A.R. during its heyday in the 1880's, 1890's, and early 1900's. At the Torrence Post in Keokuk, he served as Post Adjutant and Post Commander. At the state level, he served as Assistant Adjutant General of the Department of Iowa. These activities were mostly in the 1870's. He kept a voluminous correspondence with posts across the state and kept diary entries of these activities up until 1910. With his many activities including service in the Iowa National Guard, he kept moving up in rank finally attaining the rank of major. With all these activities, it is a wonder that he also actually ran several businesses in Keokuk, first with his father in the furniture business under the firm name of A.S. Tyler & Son starting in 1870 and in later years formed his own partnership, Brown & Tyler, auction and commission merchants.

Over the years, Tyler became more and more involved in collecting. By 1912, he had collected photographs of 297 Iowans who had served anywhere in the Union forces

and had attained the rank of lieutenant colonel or higher. These were donated to the State Historical Society of Iowa at about that time. He collected 167 autograph letters from generals, colonels, and other distinguished leaders. Also, he collected and donated an immense treasure of Civil War artifacts including flags, bayonets, sashes, sabers, swords, rifles, muskets, pouches, insignias, prints, canes, ink blotters, cap, belts, buckles, hats, plumes, canteens, whips, horseshoes, shoes, epaulettes, blankets, and tableware. The entire was donation became known as "The Loren S. Tyler Collection." Over the years, the collection has been gradually dispersed through the State Historical Society's general collection, but these items still form a vast and treasured part of Iowa's past.

During the last few years of his life, Tyler and his wife wintered in Los Angeles, California. It was there on October 13, 1914, that he died. In a memorial obituary, the Keokuk Daily Gate City said of Major Tyler: *...his honorable war record, his fine social qualities, his devotion to the interest in the welfare of his veteran comrades, his honor and integrity as a business man and his generous and courteous demeanor in all the walks of life. All these he possessed in a marked degree. His friendships were true and lasting. Kind and obliging on all occasions he won friends easily and unconsciously and when once won they remained with him.*

His wife was seriously ill at the time of his death and when she died the following year, they were both brought back to Keokuk for final interment. Notables who attended these final honors included Colonel David J. Palmer, an Iowan who was currently serving as commander-in-chief of the Grand Army of the Republic, and Major Henry Clay McArthur, 1st lieutenant of Company H, 15th Iowa Infantry and aide-de-camp for General William W. Belknap of the 17th U.S. Army Corps.