

State Historical Society of Iowa

Preserve the Memories of our Veterans

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DES MOINES, Iowa—This Veteran's Day, Nov. 11, the State Historical Society of Iowa would like to remind those who have served in our military, or their families, to preserve their memories of service. Flags, uniforms, and medals can all withstand the test of time if they are properly cared for.

Sheila Hanke, collections manager with State Historical Society of Iowa's Civil War Battle Flag Project, has several tips for making sure these memories last long into the future. Service uniforms should be wrapped in acid-free paper and placed in a special preservation storage box, available for purchase at the State Historical Building Museum Store. Special elongated boxes are available so the uniform may lay flat. Prior to storing a uniform, it should be taken to an environmentally friendly dry cleaner that uses natural chemicals. Certain regular dry cleaning solutions may weaken the cotton thread holding the buttons and patches in place.

It is important, Hanke said, that once these uniforms are placed in a storage box, that they do not be put in a basement or closet where there is no circulation or where moisture can seep in.

"The worst thing that can happen to the natural cotton fiber is exposure to the elements, especially light," Hanke said. "By following some simple steps now to preserve military uniforms, you can ensure that they are stabilized to be passed on to the next generation."

Care for old flags should be handled similarly. When preparing to store a flag, gently clean it with a handheld vacuum. Using the lowest power setting, through a nylon screen, run the vacuum nozzle lightly over surface so as not to abraid the fabric, Hanke said. It should then be rolled in tissue paper and/or muslin and placed into storage where air can reach it. Flags should not be wrapped in plastic or put in a wooden drawer, as the wood is acidic and can transfer onto the fabric, causing it to become discolored and weakened.

"I had a woman bring an old flag to me wrapped in a plastic bag," Hanke said. "There was mildew growing on the inside because she had placed it in the freezer, thinking this was the best method of preservation. The rapid temperature change when it was removed from the freezer caused the mildew to develop. Sadly, it did more harm than good."

For veterans who have earned medals, Hanke said they can be cleaned with a dry, soft camel hair brush before storing and should not have rubber bands wrapped around them, as these may result in black lines that are sometimes impossible to remove.

Medals should be laid on a padded, polyester batting, cotton or linen fabric after being washed and rinsed three times to remove potentially harmful finishing products applied to the fabric. Wool is not a good fabric to use for display because it contains sulfur, which eventually attacks the medal, Hanke said. It is also important to remember to not place medals under spotlights or high intensity lights because the metal portion conducts heat.

Finally, when placing military items into storage, why not add photographs and any special memories of that person, or conduct an oral history with them if they are still living, and pack that with the uniform, creating a special memory box, Hanke said.

"It's the best way to ensure that the military history of Iowans is not forgotten," she said.

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