

Old Abe

Excerpts From Diz Kronenburgs Book "Honor and Remember"

The Military Heritage of the Chippewa Valley

Perhaps the most celebrated recruit from the Chippewa Valley, though, was not a person at all but Old Abe, the Union War Eagle, mascot of Wisconsin's Eighth Infantry division. His own troops called him the Monarch of the Skies. The Confederates, on the other hand, preferred Old Crow, Wild Goose or Turkey Buzzard. Old Abe's life in the military began when a farmer from Jim Falls named Daniel McCann¹ convinced Captain Perkins of the Eau Claire Badgers regiment of the Eighth Wisconsin (the first unit recruited from the Chippewa Valley area) to take the bird as a mascot. The men were delighted and eventually had the name of their regiment changed to the Eau Claire Eagles in his honor. In September of 1861 the regiment left Eau Claire aboard the paddleboat Stella Whipple to rendezvous with other Wisconsin units. At La Crosse they marched overland to Camp Randall at Madison, where Old Abe was mustered into the army like any other raw recruit. Soon after, the Eighth Wisconsin headed south into battle, where Old Abe became a living legend. The following account², published in 1865, tells the story of Old Abe's enlistment and his adventures in battle:



Ah-ha-mah-we-ge-zhig
or Chief Sky

One day in the spring of 1861, Chief Sky, a Chippewa Indian, living in the north wilds of Wisconsin, captured an eagle's nest. To make sure of his prize he cut the tree down and caught the eaglets as they were sliding from their nest to run and hide in the grass. One died. He took the other home, and built it a nest in a tree close to his wigwam. The eaglet was as big as a hen, covered with soft brown down. The red children (sic) were delighted with their new pet; and as soon as it got acquainted, it liked to sit down in the grass and see them play with the dogs. But Chief Sky was poor, and he had to sell it to a white man for a bushel of corn. The white man (Daniel McCann) brought it to Eau Claire, a little village alive with white men going off to war. "Here's a recruit," said the man. "An eagle, an eagle" shouted the soldiers, "let him enlist;" and sure enough, he was sworn into service with ribbons round his neck, red, white, and blue.

On a perch surmounted by stars and stripes, the company took him to Madison, the capital of the state. As they marched into Camp Randall with colors flying, drums beating, and the people cheering, the eagle seized the flag in his beak and spread his wings, his bright eyes kindling the spirit of the scene. Shouts rent the air; "the bird of Columbia 'the eagle of freedom forever.'" The state made him a perch, the boys named him "Old Abe" and the regiment was henceforth called "the eagle regiment" On the march it was carried at the head of the company, and everywhere it was greeted with delight. A St. Louis gentleman offered five hundred dollars for it, and another his farm. No, no, the boys had no notion of departing with the bird. It was above all price, an emblem of battle and victory. Besides, it interested their minds, and made them think less of hardships and of home.

I cannot tell you of all the droll adventures of the bird through its three years of service, its flights in the air, its fights with guinea hens, and its race with the "colored" folks (sic). When the regiment was in summer quarters at Clear Creek in Dixie, it was allowed to run at large, and every morning went to the river half a mile off, where it

splashed to its heart's content, faithfully returning to camp when it had enough. Old Abe's favorite place of resort was the sutler's tent, where a live chicken found no quarter in his presence. But rations got low and for two days Abe had nothing to eat. Hard-tack he objected to, fasting was disagreeable, and Tom, his bearer, could not get beyond the pickets to a farmyard. At last pushing his way to the Colonel's tent, he pleaded for poor Abe. The Colonel gave him a pass, and Tom got him an excellent dinner.

One day a rebel farmer asked Tom to come and show the eagle to his children. Satisfying the curiosity of the family, Tom sat down in the barnyard. Oh, what a screeching and scattering among the fowls; for what should Abe do but pounce upon one and gobble up another, to the great disgust of the farmer, who declared that was not in the bargain.

Abe, however, thought there was no harm in confiscating, nor did Tom.

Abe was in twenty-two battles, besides many skirmishes. He was in the siege of Vicksburg, the storming of Corinth, and marched with Sherman up the Red River. The whiz of bullets and the scream of shells were his delight. As the battle grew hot and hotter, he would flap his wings and mingle his widest notes with the noise around him. He was very fond of music, especially "Yankee Doodle Dandy," "John Brown's Ballad," and "Bonaparte's Retreat." Upon parade he always gave heed to "Attention." With his eyes on the commander, he would listen and obey orders, noting time accurately. After parade he would put off his soldierly air, flap his wings and make himself at home. The rebels often referred to him as the "Yankee Buzzard" and other hard names, but his eagle nature was quite above noticing it.

The rebel General Price gave orders to his men to be sure to capture the eagle of the Eighth Wisconsin; he would rather have it than a dozen battle flags. But for all that he scarcely lost a feather; only one from his right wing. His tail feathers were once cropped by a bullet.

At last the great rebellion came to an end, and the brave Wisconsin Eighth, with their live eagle and torn and riddled flags, were welcomed back to Madison. They went a thousand strong, and returned a little band, scarred and toil worn, having fought and won.

And what of the soldier bird? In the name of his gallant veterans, Captain Wolf presented him to the state. Governor Lewis accepted the illustrious gift, and ample quarters are provided for him in the beautiful Statehouse grounds, where may he long live to tell us:

"What heroes from the woodland sprang, When through the fresh awakened land, The thrilling cry of freedom rang."

Nor is the end yet. At the great fair in Chicago an enterprising gentleman invited Abe to attend. He had colored photographs of the old hero struck off, and sold \$16,700 worth for the benefit of poor and sick soldiers. Has not the American eagle done its

part?

Many stories were told about Old Abe, embellished by the men in his company who practically worshipped him. According to one tale he saved his own life and that of his bearer in a battle near Corinth, Mississippi. Abe was tethered to his perch near the back of the troops when suddenly he took off, and with the power of an eight foot wingspan dragged his bearer with him for some distance. The very spot where they had been standing was struck by a cannon ball. After that Old Abe was considered a good luck charm, and the soldiers fought and sometimes played cards for the right to carry the eagle into battle with them. Eight men had this privilege at various times in Old Abe's military career.

After the War, it seemed that everyone wanted to see Old Abe. He was in great demand for parades, Grand Army of the Republic reunions and other military functions. P.T. Barnum once tried to buy him for his circus, offering \$25,000. In a Philadelphia parade Abe rode on a perch in a carriage drawn by four white horses. He was apparently the most popular military figure at the event and seemed to relish the ovations he received. After the parade, General Grant and other officers paid a visit to the famous war bird. When one general got too close Abe promptly pecked him on the nose, much to the delight of the enlisted men, one of whom commented, "He didn't cotton much to officers no-how."³

From the end of the War until 1881 Abe lived in the state capital in Madison. In that year a fire broke out in a room where old paints were stored. Before he was rescued Abe inhaled great quantities of smoke and died soon afterwards. According to his attendant, George Gilles of the Second Wisconsin Volunteer infantry, "At least Abe died happy. He must have thought he was in the smoke of battle once again."⁴

Old Abe lives on as a symbol in the Chippewa Valley; the eagle is a mascot for Memorial High School, and his image adorns the patrol cars of the Eau Claire Police Department. Two plaques tell portions of Abe's story: one, mounted on the Lake Street bridge in Eau Claire, marks the place where the steamboat Stella Whipple picked up Abe and his regiment headed for Camp Randall. Another, located below the dam at Jim Falls, signifies where Chief Sky traded the eaglet to Daniel McCann. The Chippewa Valley Museum in Eau Claire also honors Old Abe with periodic displays including a statue at the museum's entrance.

Incidentally, it is rumored that Old Abe, Monarch of the Skies, was a female bird, but his men never talked about that.



Dan McCann



Old Abe statue on Memorial High School, Eau Claire. The school mascot is Old Abe



City of Eau Claire Police emblem, artist Lieutenant Bob Yule III.



Old Abe and the 8th Wisconsin Regiment's color guard. Edward Hamaston of Eau Claire holds Abe. The original photograph of this scene was taken by an unidentified southern photographer after the surrender of Vicksburg, Mississippi, in July, 1863. This picture is a photocopy of a painting owned by Mr. Shedd of Marshall Field & Co., Chicago. Note that Old Abe does not yet have the white head of a mature bald eagle.

Footnotes

¹ An interview in August, 1991, Juanita Cutsforth, Daniel McCann's closest living relative (his granddaughter) recalled the eagle's early days as a family pet. Its sharp claws eventually became a problem for the children and some adult relatives, causing Daniel to find a new home for the eagle.

² *The Civil War in Story and Song* by Frank Moore, 1868, P 193-4.

³ *The Civil War in Story and Song*.

⁴ *The Wisconsin Story; The Building of a Vanguard State* by H. Russell Austin, 1948, published by the Milwaukee Journal. P. 389.