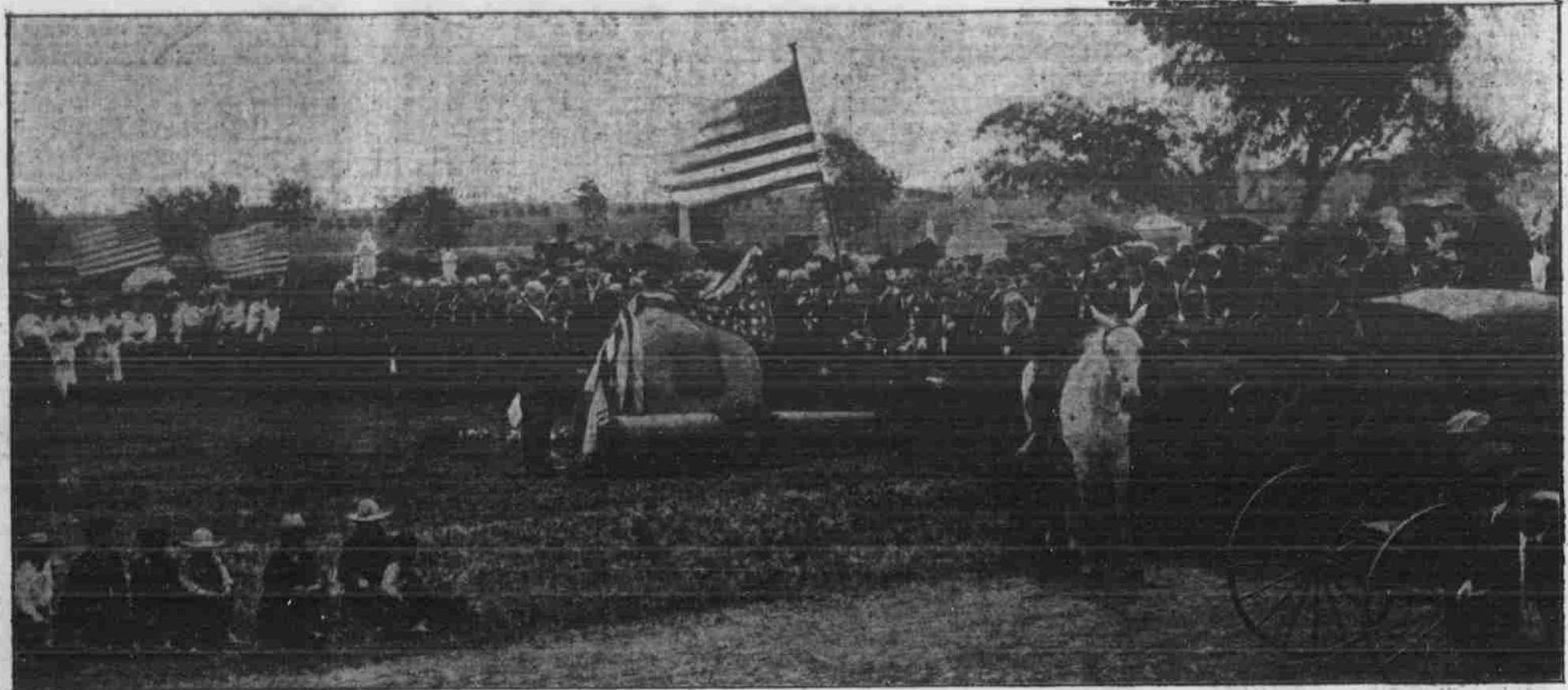


Monument to James Laird Unveiled



SCENE AT THE DEDICATION OF THE MONUMENT TO JAMES LAIRD AT HASTINGS, Neb., ON MEMORIAL DAY, MAY 30, 1904.

MEMORIAL day at Hastings, Neb., was made memorable this year by the dedication of a monument to the memory of James Laird, one of the most distinguished men of Adams county in the affairs of Nebraska and the nation. James Laird was a soldier, a citizen, a lawyer and a member of congress, and in all these capacities he had the support and confidence of his fellow citizens. His monument is a huge boulder, brought from the mountains, and a cannon. The ceremony of the dedication was participated in by the Grand Army and its affiliated bodies and the citizens generally. Addresses were made by Senator Dietrich and other residents of Hastings and by Charles F. Greene of Omaha, who delivered the principal oration of the day. Mr. Greene said:

James Laird was born in Livingston county, in the state of New York, on the 20th day of June, 1849. He died in this city on the 17th of August, 1899. He lived just 49 years, 1 month and 14 days, and because he was what he was his neighbors and comrades have erected this monument to mark the place where he sleeps.

It would have been a fine thing to bestow this tribute to his worth at the time he died, but it is a finer thing to bestow it now. No rarer praise than this—that after a lapse of fifteen years constituents and companions still linger under the matchless spell of his brave and generous deeds. It is surely a double tribute. It blesses them that give and him that takes.

There are few churchyards that hold the ashes of a truer and braver man than James Laird, and the spot that contains his treasured dust is worthy to be a classic shrine at which to rekindle our devotion to our country and our love for liberty and justice.

Do we idealize our dead? Do we remember only the good men have done? If it be so, thank God for it. What matters the faults of those we loved, admired and followed after they have passed, if in the stern conflicts of time, they gave heroically their best in the pursuit of lofty ideals? Let me in my dreams sit at the board with the glorious company of spirits made perfect, regardful only that each in his earthly task poured all his powers and attained the life he lived.

The metal is cast into the melting pot and the dross vanishes and only the pure gold is left. One may do as one may. Only that, which he does worthily shall survive the crucible death and continue to move men to higher things.

Surely the marshaling of our armies was the apotheosis of the American youth.

These youth were the flower and chivalry of our land. They obeyed the call to duty and took their places in the ranks of war inspired with the sublime faith and heroic spirit of a great cause. They did not deliberate as to whether their country was right or wrong, nor were they conscious of an act of renunciation. They were youth in whose veins the hot blood ran quick and strong. They had been nourished in an age and grounded in a faith in which liberty and union were cardinal truths and loyalty to country the supreme test of manhood.

These youth were wise in their day and generation. Their knowledge and impressions had been distilled into their veins. They were wise with the wisdom of little children. Their faith was anchored in the instinctive feeling of the soul. Men reason only when in doubt and impressions once filtered into the blood are seldom dis-trusted. The anti-slavery crusade with its philosophy of human rights and its passionate appeals for just laws had wrought its spell and every young heart that beat in the

breasts of the multitude flamed into passion at the call of an imperiled country. The tragic muse had swept the chords of passion and they gave forth the wild music of war. It was the flood time of loyalty and in its resistless sweep these glorious youth, with the hearts of their mothers, wives and sisters, were carried down into the bloody vortex which held the fate of the nation.

James Laird was one of these youth. He was one of the 300. Indeed he was the youngest of the 300, for on the day he enlisted he was just 12 years, 1 month and 4 days old. He was enrolled with Company K, Sixteenth regiment, Michigan Infantry, on the 24th day of August, 1861. He re-enlisted as a veteran on the 21st day of December, 1863. On the day he re-enlisted as a veteran he was just 14 years, 6 months and 1 day old. He was mustered out at the conclusion of the war on the 15th day of May, 1865. On the day he was mustered out he was just 15 years, 10 months and 25 days old. A veteran of four years' service in the mighty war of the rebellion and only past 15 years of age.

The world is enamored of its youth and it cherishes with peculiar tenderness the memory of its young heroes. Had James Laird done nothing else he would have deserved richly the monument you have placed above his heroic dust. But the story of his career is perhaps unmatched in the annals of warfare. "No boy sitting in the twilight and peopling the shadows with the creations of fancy ever conceived for himself a more stirring romance or one half so heroic."

What boy could have dreamed of such a war, perhaps the most extraordinary of any age? Four millions of men marshaled along lines between 1,000 and 2,000 miles, and guarding coast lines of equal extent for four years, fighting more than 2,000 battles—2,361 of record, counting every conflict a battle in which more than 600,000 union soldiers were engaged. Great battles that for numbers fighting and losses will rank with the great battles of the world. The government records show that in 1862 the losses by death, wounded and missing on both sides, in seven battles alone, exceeded 174,301. In 1863 these losses in four battles exceeded 131,093. In 1864 these losses in five battles exceeded 196,844. Half a million men in sixteen battles.

Into this sulphurous storm our young hero marched resolute and daring. He was the type of boy of the northern home in which the virtues of loyalty, courage and honor had been instilled as the essentials of manhood. The spirit and qualities of the American youth were intensified in him, for the gods had been generous in bestowing their rarer gifts. He was original, indomitable, spirited, courageous, chivalrous and wayward. He knew the heroes of the world and could recite their vital by the genius of the poets and the deeds made deathless in heroic verse. For him the past held great memories made orators. He lived in glorious dreams and communed with his ideals which neither the temptations nor the riot of the camp could subdue. He loved his flag with passionate ardor. It was more than a symbol. It was a living, sentient being, co-existent with immortal memories and radiant with glorious prophecies. In its folds the past and the future blended in sublime vision from which issued voices that made music in his soul.

And so he stood shoulder to shoulder with his comrades and with them calmly faced the desperate task that lay before them.

At the beginning of its career the Sixteenth regiment, with which young Laird was identified, was united with the Fifth army corps, the integrity of which was

maintained until the close of the war. This corps was conspicuous for its bravery and endurance, even among that valiant host which constituted the Army of the Potomac. In the Peninsula campaign, at Fredericksburg, Antietam, Manassas, Gettysburg, and in the hideous slaughter through the Wilderness up to the final surrender at Appomattox, the Army of the Potomac fought with desperate valor and endurance, sometimes with a leader and sometimes without one, against the flower of the confederate armies, led by their knightly chieftain and his most brilliant and daring lieutenants.

Its bloody footprints—Seven Pines and Fair Oaks, Malvern Hill, Bull Run, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, Wilderness, Spottsylvania, Cold Harbor and Petersburg. How precious the soil of the Old Dominion, to have drunk up all this heroic blood—enough to make every league of it sacred ground.

In May, 1862, young Laird received his baptism of fire on the bloody field of Hanover Court House. At the battle of Gaines' Mill he was struck with a musket ball in his breast, which pierced him through and through. He was left for dead upon the field, was taken prisoner and confined in Libby prison during the month of July. His extreme youth and severe wounds secured his parole and he was removed to the hospital at Annapolis, and rejoined his command in November, 1862, even before he was fully recovered.

He was conspicuous for his bravery in a score of battles. He fought at Manassas, at Fredericksburg, at Chancellorsville, and was one of the bravest of the brave who resisted the confederate onslaught on the field of Gettysburg, where the nation's fate hung wavering in the balance. He was smote in battle five times, four times by bullets and once by sabre.

He was five times promoted and once breveted for meritorious services and for gallantry in battle. July, 1863, he was appointed corporal; September 1, 1863, he was appointed sergeant; January 14, 1864, he was appointed first sergeant; October 8, 1864, he was mustered as second lieutenant; October 21, 1864, he was mustered as first lieutenant; May 15, 1865, he was mustered as captain; June 30, 1865, he was mustered out with the rank of brevet major.

The triumph of our arms at Appomattox decreed the fate of the rebellion. The most solemn and momentous issues affecting the fate of liberty and free government ever submitted to the arbitration of war was there decided. Thereafter the battleflags were furled and the battling hosts dissolved. Peace came with the bloom of the spring-time, bringing in her radiant hands the choicest gifts ever bestowed upon a people purified by suffering and sacrifice. The lad who in 1861 entered the army at 12 years of age in 1865 returned home, less than 16 years of age, a scarred and battered veteran, wearing the title of brevet major of United States volunteers.

James Laird was a heroic spirit cast in heroic mold; both were ancestral gifts, and the tragic scenes in which we recast our government and institutions were their native element. It was as natural for him to lead men and storm citadels as it was for other boys to play at mimic war.

A regular army officer of high rank and a major general of volunteers during the war has said of him: "He was a brave, generous, chivalrous, truthful, tender-hearted, brilliant man, one who never turned his back to a foe or deserted a friend or a cause."

In an eloquent tribute to Laird delivered by Senator Manderson in the United States

senate he tells of his conspicuous bravery at Dabney Mills. He was acting as regimental adjutant and at a critical moment the enemy turned the federal flank. The regiment began to retreat and before a new alignment could be made a stampede was imminent. The conduct of Laird is described in a letter by a captain of the regiment received and read by Senator Manderson as a part of his tribute: "Under a galling fire Laird rode along the line, encouraging the wavering and cursing the cowardly. His long hair fluttering and eye lit with enthusiasm he appeared the personification of war's fiery madness. The enthusiasm of the boy awoke a steady determination in the men. The impending stampede stopped and under his inspiring leadership the regiment took a new position with unbroken ranks."

In the same tribute the eulogist says: "I could read by the hour letters from the associates of Laird in the army who loved him for his open manliness, pure patriotism and heroic endeavor, and who, after a separation of a quarter of a century, had not forgotten the youthful hero who won their hearts and have sent me their tributes to his memory. One says: 'Laird's military career was an epitome of young heroism seldom equaled and never excelled. He never allowed the most daring to outdo him. He had a magnetic patriotism so exalted that it kept the wavering steady and lent enthusiasm to the strong. He was the peer of the bravest.'"

The qualities which made James Laird conspicuous among his army comrades and upon the battlefields of his country also marked his subsequent career as a man, a citizen, a lawyer and a legislator. They were elemental. His strength was the strength there is in the oak, and in the storm, and his gentleness was the fragrance there is in the flower. Both his strength and his gentleness were natural and spontaneous. It is not easy for one richly endowed with native energy and lofty ambitions to always measure his words and to rule his conduct by purely conventional standards. Such men sense keenly and resent even violently, whatever seems to transgress the principles of justice and honor. They are generous and give freely of their means and of their sympathy where distress calls for help or consolation. They are quick to anger and swift to forgive where the offense is unmixt with meanness.

Loyalty to a cause means to fight for it even unto the bitter end—it means the whirlwind charge—the relentless defense against overwhelming odds—the desperate struggle in the last ditch—the death, but not the defeat.

After his return home Laird devoted himself to the pursuits of peace with the spirit, energy and inflexible purpose that had made his career as a soldier.

At Adrain and later at Ann Arbor he equipped himself for the contest in which he was to achieve distinction and honor in his chosen profession.

He tried his law suits as he had fought his battles. He threw his whole soul into his client's cause and, having mastered it, he met his adversary in the open, scorning the arts of diplomacy and all the devices of ambush and cunning. He was indeed a warrior, bold, aggressive, indomitable and chivalrous. There was about him a martial air—the waving of plumes, the flashing of sabres and the whirlwind.

He was not the sword of Saladin, but the battle axe of Coeur de Leon.

He was a powerful advocate, and when the lion in him was aroused his eloquence was the turbulence of the mountain torrents