10-1-2010

Joining up fo the Bounties

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol91/iss4/5

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A poignant expression of this high-minded attitude appears in letters exchanged by William F. Vermilion and his wife, Mary. A captain in the 36th Iowa Infantry, William mustered into service in August 1862 and less than a month later wrote to Mary that "my love for you all has increased since I left you, but I know that it is my duty to stay here and try to be one of the many that God has raised to put down this rebellion and blot out the institution of slavery."

In another letter William wrote about his sense of pride in place: "We live in Iowa, thank God. A state that has more than its quota of men in the field, and not [a] one, 3, or 9 month [enlistment] or drafted man among them. No traitor in Congress to disgrace our fair fame, by voting to cut off supplies. Whether the Government stands or falls, we will love Iowa."

In a letter just before Christmas, Mary echoed his pride—but also reflected her frustration with the inconsistent response of Northern states that she considered less patriotic. "I am proud of Iowa," she wrote William during a visit to relatives in Indiana. "I am glad that our home is there. No other state has acquitted herself so nobly as Iowa."

But was the sacrifice worth it? No doubt more than a few soldiers received letters from their families questioning the purpose and value of the war. Mary Vermilion was in such a mood in a letter to her husband in March 1863. "I want to know whether our government is really worth dying for or not," she wrote rhetorically. "Sometimes, my good love, I feel like I am willing to have the war end any way so that you can get home once more. If I lose you, my beloved, what will the country be to me? What will I care whether it is free and happy or not? Oh darling, I can hardly bear to think of it. You are worth more to me than 10,000 republics!" Mary Vermilion was no traitor but she was frustrated with the course of the war and the heartache of missing her husband.

Soldiers often faced competing claims on their sense of duty. In the fall of 1864, as the war bogged down into stalemate, Benjamin Stevens wrote to his mother, Elizabeth Stevens. A citizen of Oskaloosa, Benjamin had joined the 15th Iowa Infantry in 1861. In the years that followed, he saw action at Shiloh and Vicksburg, among other campaigns. After Vicksburg, he left the 15th Iowa to become an officer in the 48th U.S. Colored Infantry.

"The new ones cannot endure marches," Iowan Seneca Thrall wrote in November 1862, describing unseasoned soldiers: "The old ones called them 'Bountyites,' and we would see many of them lying by the road side, shoes and stockings off, footsore and completely exhausted....Then the old soldier would call out derisively: 'Halloa, Bounty, hard work to earn that $100, aint it? Aint you glad you jined the army? I say old boy, I will tell you how to keep your feet from getting sore.' The new one looks up, eye brightens, he thinks he is about to receive the benefit of the old one's experience, and asks how. [The old soldier replies,] 'Wrap that $100 around your feet.'"

Generally, however, soldiers' bounties were no laughing matter. Receiving military bounties (sometimes in land, sometimes in money) was a strong American tradition dating back to the Revolutionary War. Throughout the Civil War, Congress frequently adjusted the amount of federal monetary bounties, as well as when they would be paid to the soldier, and to whom they would be paid if the soldier died in battle. Localities and states paid additional bounties.

"The Undersigned is duly Licensed as PENSION & BOUNTY AGENT AND COMMERCIAL BROKER. Toledo July 2d 1863. T. A. GRAHAM."

Attorneys and agents advertised their skills in winning claims for what soldiers and their families were owed, including bounties. These two advertisements appeared in 1864 in the Iowa Transcript, a newspaper in Tama County.
He was a seasoned veteran by the time he sat down to write his mother. She had asked him to return home to help her with the family farm. Her husband, Sime-on, also a soldier, had died, and her second son was a prisoner of war. She needed Ben and wrote as much in a letter on August 24. In his response, he wrote that he had applied for a 20-day leave of absence.

That would be the extent of the time he could give to his mother. He would not, or could not, turn his back on his country. "Well, Mother," he wrote, "as far as resigning is concerned—I will tell you—I feel that my country needs my services for at least six [more] months. She will then be out of danger." It is not known how his mother reacted to her son's rejection of her plea; no response has survived.

As far as Benjamin Stevens was concerned, his god and his country needed him more than his mother: "Every man that feels that he is accountable to a just God for the deeds done in the body should give himself as a willing sacrifice to his country in this, her hour of need. I would never live in America if our cause is not successful." It was a clear and forthright statement of personal patriotism.

Iowans were fighting for union and, to a degree, emancipation—as noble as these causes were to the nation—but also for their very sense of self-worth. The

NOTE ON SOURCES
500 Thousand Men WANTED!

THE LAST CALL.
Jasper county is required to furnish about 100 men within 20 days or a Draft will inevitably be made. Drafting List is already prepared.

$402 to veterans and $302 to new recruits is yet offered as a BOUNTY.

The undersigned, Recruiting Agent, ships to get Volunteers; let all Evening Meetings will be held as follows:

Thursday, 18th, at Slagle school house.
Friday 19th at Rock Gr. school house.
Saturday 20th in Newton
Monday 22d in Eau Claire
Tuesday 23d, in Galesburg
Wednesday 24th, Wild Cat school house.
Thursday 25th, in Monroe
Friday 26th, in Vandalia
Saturday 27, in Greencastle
Monday 28; Clyde

On Tuesday 29, a Grand Rally in Newton, for the whole county.

J. M. IRWIN

Feb. 10 1864