

"The Grand Army of the Republic Founded in 1880"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

Shortly after the end of the Civil War, a group of Union veterans formed the Grand Army of the Republic, a national organization dedicated to preserving the memory and interests of the Union veteran. A national call for decorating veteran's graves on April 30, 1868, originally known as Decoration Day, later became Memorial Day. Although local people heeded the 1868 call, Westminster area veterans did not form a local post until 1880. An article in the June 26 issue of the Westminster American Sentinel newspaper described the founding of the Westminster organization:

#### "THE GRAND ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC

There has been established in Westminster, a Post of the Grand Army of the Republic, named after Lt. Wm. H. Burns, of this city, who was killed while gallantly bearing the flag of the 6th Md. Regt., in the battle of Winchester, 1864, when it had fallen to the ground by the death of the color sergeant.

We are informed that an impression is sought to be made by hostile parties, who had no sympathy for Union soldiers during the war; that this post, like any other throughout the country, is but an adjunct to and supporter of one political party (the Republican) to the exclusion of all other parties. We say that an attempt is being made to deter and dissuade soldiers in this county who faithfully served their country that it might be saved from rebellion and its consequences, from joining the G. A. R., because, as is alleged, it is a political organization, and inimical to what is now called democracy in this State. The G. A. R. needs no defence or even explanation at our hands, it need not reply to the politicians of either party, for its broad principle is "loyalty" to the Union our fathers formed, and which they propose, having saved it through fire, shall not be destroyed in any event, so long as they live and are able to defend it.

When those who sympathized with the South and wanted rebellion to succeed, but who did not have the courage to join their army and risk their lives in battle to destroy that Union, should at this late day assail and impugn the motives of Union soldiers, and thereby prevent them from joining the post, is so patent, so self-evident, that the way-faring man though a fool may read and understand it, be he ever so stupid.

To show that the G. A. R. is non-political, it is only necessary to cite, such Democrats as Gen. McClellan, Hancock, Slocum, Porter, Palmer, Schofield, Franklin, and in Maryland Gen'ls Phelps and Horn, and Col's Webster, Wallace and others. They are men who know and appreciate the feeling of comradeship, which comes from duty well performed, through trials of danger, and we apprehend they are men, that the associations of a soldier's life bind with a tie so tight that all the ingenuity of stay-at-home rebels cannot loose or break. The G. A. R. is no more political than Masonry, Odd Fellowship, Knights of Pythias, order of mechanics, or any other order formed, as we believe, for good and benevolent purposes.

It seeks to foster and preserve the memories of deeds gloriously done in a battle for the right, and it does not withhold need of praise from any man, it matters not to which party he belongs, so he only gave battle on the side of the right, fought for the preservation of the Union and against a rebellion which sought to overthrow and destroy the Union.

We have though it best to write frankly on this subject and to say to all Ex soldiers of the Union, that in our opinion it is to your interest to connect yourselves with some Post, that in doing so you violate no

religious or political conviction and that it is not in any way allied to or the creature of any political party; when we find the same old political hacks, who talked treason in 1861, decrying against our organization, we feel it to be our duty to stand up for the right now, as we did against rebellion and treason then. In a word that soldiers who, without regard to party, fought to save that Union then, are entitled, as it is their duty to cherish the memories of the contest and meet when and as they please to celebrate a victory so magnificently won."

As the article indicates, the founding of the local G.A.R. post was not without controversy, evidence that the issues that divided local citizens during the war had not been fully resolved. To the member's credit, the early Burns Post Decoration Day observances included honoring the grave of a Confederate officer killed during the June 29, 1863 cavalry skirmish in Westminster. The records of the Burns Post are preserved at the Historical Society and show that the organization recruited 136 members between 1880 and 1913. The members took an active roll in local community events especially the annual Decoration Day observances until a younger generation of World War I veterans assumed the responsibility. By the mid-1930s the local Civil War veteran had passed into history.

Photo caption: Members of Burns Post No. 13, Grand Army of the Republic posed in 1897 wearing the blue wool G.A.R. uniform and star-shaped membership badges. The future editor of this paper, John H. Mitten, appears second from the right. J. Leland Jordan Collection, Historical Society of Carroll County.