

## HISTORY

# The Civil War veterans' group was destined to fade away, but its influence lives on

Clay County once boasted two posts of the Grand Army of the Republic, a fraternal organization of Civil War veterans. Their glory days were in the 1880s and 1890s, when they hosted a convention in Moorhead.

Written By: Patrick Springer, Nov 29th 2020 - 7am.



More than 300 veterans set up camp south of Main Avenue in Moorhead between Sixth and Eighth Streets. The view is to the southeast from Sixth Street, just north of Main. The building in the middle distance with the tower is the old Moorhead High School, located where Townsite Centre is today on Eighth Street. The flag to the left has 33 stars, just as the national emblem did when the Civil War broke out in 1861. Special to The Forum / Clay County Historical and Cultural Society

**MOORHEAD** — George Lamphere's service in the Civil War started with a lie. He fibbed about his age when he enlisted in the Union Army so he could fight against the Confederacy at the age of 17.

Before long, young Lamphere was in the heat of the bloody conflict, fighting in some of the biggest battles of the war, including Antietam and Fredericksburg. He was shot in the left arm, captured and held as a prisoner of war in a notorious Confederate prison at Andersonville, Ga., described as the deadliest landscape of the war. Of its 45,000 prisoners, confined in filthy and overcrowded conditions, 13,000 died.

Lamphere's gunshot wound went untreated in the prison, and his arm had to be amputated at the shoulder after he was released in a prisoner exchange. Although he lost an arm, Lamphere was one of Andersonville's lucky survivors.

After the war, Lamphere moved with his wife and 11 children to Moorhead. He became publisher of the Moorhead Daily News, which a century later was acquired by The Forum. Lamphere became active in civic affairs, joining a group of Civil War veterans called the Grand Army of the Republic.



The Grand Army of the Republic convention featured a parade through Moorhead and Fargo that included bands, fraternal organizations, assembled veterans and a float carrying 44 young women dressed in white, each representing one of the 44 states in 1891. The view is to the east on Center Avenue from Fourth Street. Special to The Forum / Historical and Cultural Society of Clay County

Clay County boasted two chapters of the Grand Army of the Republic, a post in Moorhead with 42 members and another in Barnesville with 30 members, that were especially active in the 1880s and 1890s. That period is commemorated in an exhibit at the Clay County Historical and Cultural Society in the Hjemkomst Center, now closed until at least Dec. 15 by executive order due to the pandemic.

The Grand Army of the Republic, established in Illinois in 1866, the year after the Civil War ended, was aligned with the Republican Party and helped to elect several GOP presidential candidates, including former Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, the top commander of the Union Army who prosecuted the war to a victorious end.

“They were politically active,” said Mark Piehl, an archivist at the historical society who helped assemble the interpretive exhibit. “They were basically a very successful special interest group. Looking out for the veterans and their widows and orphans was a big part of what they did.”

The veterans met regularly but lacked a dedicated meeting place in Clay County. Instead, they met inside meeting halls also used by other fraternal organizations, which then were common in every town of any size.

Members shared a soldier’s bond of having served in war and witnessed the horrors of combat, an experience that really couldn’t be shared with noncombatants.

“They were able to share stories and commiserate and feel comradeship,” Piehl said. The group’s symbol was a canteen, and their motto was “We drank from the same canteen.”

## **Felix Battles**

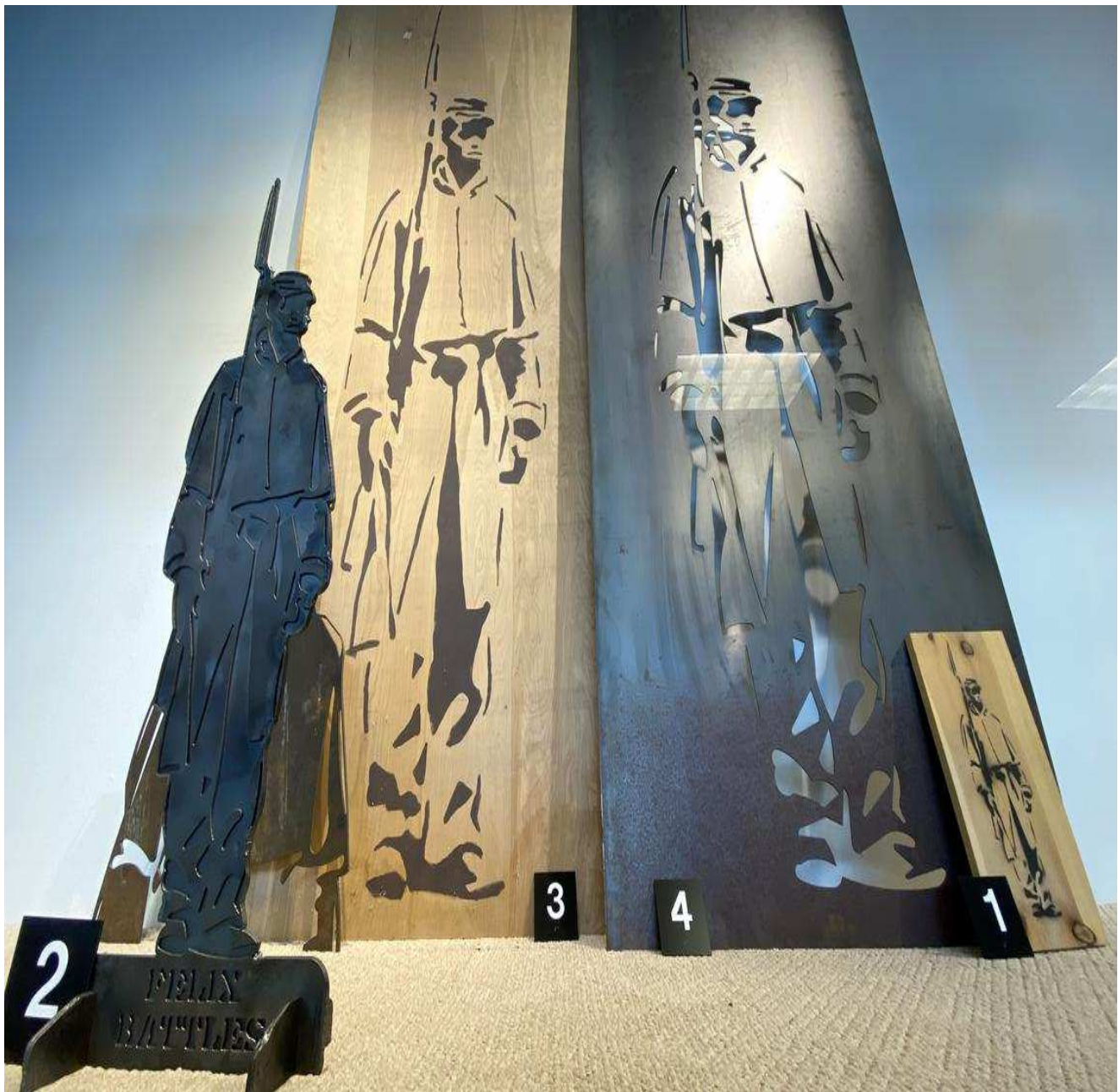
One local Civil War veteran who did not join the Grand Army of the Republic, [Felix Battles](#), was an escaped slave who served in a Minnesota unit of the United States Colored Troops, comprised of black soldiers who fought for the Union.

After the war, Battles settled in Moorhead, where he later was joined by members of his wife’s extended family. The Battles clan helped establish Fargo-Moorhead’s African American community.

Battles was a pioneering barber of the Red River Valley. He kept his shop in the Columbia Hotel in downtown Moorhead, which was located at the corner of Center Avenue and Eighth Street. Barbering was a way for Black people to enter the middle class.



Although not a member of the Grand Old Army, “all the old soldiers in the city will attend the services tomorrow, as will many old residents of the city,” the Moorhead Daily News reported when Battles died in 1907.



Iterations of a statue honoring Civil War soldier Felix Battles are displayed Wednesday, July 1, in the Hjemkomst Center in Moorhead. Michael Vosburg / Forum Photo Editor

### **Jacob Smyser**

A West Point graduate, Jacob Smyser was an artillery officer in the Civil War who earned distinction at the Battle of Shiloh. A battle report described him as having “behaved with great gallantry, and

fought his piece with desperation, amid the hail of missiles of every description” until his cannon was destroyed by an enemy shell.

After ending the war with a rank of captain of ordinance, Smyser and his wife moved to Clay County in 1878, drawn to Minnesota by the cold, dry air that was believed to be therapeutic for tuberculosis.

Smyser’s family made a fortune in the steel industry, allowing the couple to buy 1,300 acres of virgin prairie. They inhabited an estate along the Buffalo River near Glyndon, where they built a 21-room mansion, complete with a ballroom and cupola said to offer a view of Moorhead, 20 miles to the west.

Tuberculosis ended Smyser’s life at the age of 46 in 1885. Although largely forgotten today, the artillery officer left a lasting mark: The Smyser land later became the core of Buffalo River State Park.

### **Adam Stein**

Adam Stein, who enlisted from Georgetown, was one of the few local Civil War veterans who already lived in Clay County before the war. Stein, in fact, was already a war veteran when he enlisted at the age of 41, having served in the 1848 revolution in Germany.

That rebellion was crushed, causing Stein to immigrate to the United States. He joined a German-speaking unit of the Minnesota infantry. His battle service ended with a leg wound; he finished the war guarding Confederate soldiers in Illinois.

After the war, Stein returned to Georgetown in 1868 with his wife and infant child. The Steins ran a ferry crossing on the Red River, and their home served as a stagecoach stop. Later, Stein turned to agriculture, farming 400 acres. He and his wife, Wilhelmina, had eight children and were one of Clay County’s pioneering families.

### **Park Region Associates Encampment**

At its peak in 1890, the Grand Army of the Republic had 410,000 members, mostly in northern and western states, with a few posts in the South. They met regularly in conventions at the state and regional levels.

The Clay County posts hosted a gathering called the Park Region Associates Encampment in June of 1891 in Moorhead. More than 300 veterans gathered for four days of speeches, band performances, meals and camaraderie.

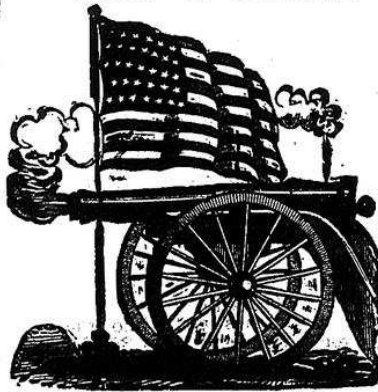
# G. A. R. ENCAMPMENT

**Park Region Association.**

At Moorhead, Minn.,

**JUNE 23-26, 1891.**

Posts in Northern Minnesota and North Dakota will Participate.



Ex-Gov. McGill, Att'y Gen'l Clapp, Ex-Gov Barto, Ex-Commander-in-Chief Rea, Capt' E Compton and Castle, Gen. Mullen, Gov. Burke, and others will speak.

**THE LAKESIDE BAND OF DETROIT ENGAGED.**

Citizens cordially invited to go and see the Boys in Blue enjoy themselves.

**Moorhead has made bountiful preparations.**

**One and one-third fare in Minnesota and one and one-fifth in North Dakota on Railroads.**



An advertisement promoting the Grand Army of the Republic's encampment in Moorhead in June 1891. Special to The Forum / Historical and Cultural Society of Clay County

Nearby posts in Minnesota, including Ada, Fertile, Pelican Rapids, Crookston and Detroit Lakes, sent delegates, as did eastern North Dakota towns including Fargo and Wahpeton.

The encampment was perhaps the Grand Army of the Republic's high point in Clay County. It's believed both county's posts dissolved around 1920 as the aging Civil War veterans faded away.

Nationally, the Grand Army of the Republic ceased to exist after the last known Civil War Veteran, Albert Woolson, died in Duluth at what was believed to be the age of 109 in 1956.

"They were destined to die out," Piehl said.

Although the Grand Army literally died off, it continues to have an influence today, he said. It inspired other veterans groups, including the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars. Because those groups aren't tied to a single war, they have endured.