

Boy in BLUE

Mankato's Historic Lincoln Park and Civil War Veterans' Memorial

The American Civil War began on April 12, 1861 with the firing on Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina.

In four years of bloody fighting, more than 629,000 American lives were lost on both sides, (recent statistics suggest the number was closer to 750,000) the Union of states was preserved, and slavery was abolished. Out of a total U.S. population of approximately 31,000,000 citizens in 1860, two percent of it perished in the war (the equivalent of 6 million Americans dying today), leaving countless widows, orphans, sisters and sweethearts behind to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives, and begin life anew.

After the fiery passions of the war itself had cooled, there emerged an earnest desire, coupled by a concerted effort by individuals throughout the nation to memorialize their Civil War dead by convincing their communities to build war memorials to the fallen heroes. In this way, the wartime sacrifices of the dead would never be forgotten, the living could commune with the dead and lessons of the past could be passed on to a new generation.

Mankato's Boy in Blue was just such a memorial.

In 1885, 20 years after the guns fell silent at Appomattox, Women's

Relief Corps members of Alexander Wilkin Post 19, Grand Army of the Republic, persuaded the City of Mankato to buy the triangular block of land, owned by W.H. Shepard, at the intersection of Broad, Grove and Lincoln Streets in Mankato, for the express purpose of erecting a Civil War veterans' memorial.

The parcel was not completely vacant at the time of the purchase. A large elm tree that had been a sapling when the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776 spread its green, leafy canopy of branches majestically over the site. In 1892, the memorial was built, and the following year, it was dedicated on Decoration Day, May 30, 1893.

The Boy in Blue, representing a Union infantry soldier stood 7 to 8 feet atop a cast iron basin, which in turn stood 6 feet above an octagonal pool. The basin or fountain portion of the monument, as well as the cornices at each corner of the pool beneath it, were decorated with images of ram heads, symbolizing war, and goat heads, symbolizing determination. From the beginning, the park was named in honor of President Abraham Lincoln, but his likeness was not chosen to grace the apex of the monument. Rather, it depicted an ordinary soldier — the common man — who had given his "last, full measure of devotion" to

preserving the American Union and its ideal of "all men are created equal."

The Boy in Blue did not remain on active duty guarding his park very long. In 1894, vandals broke off the musket he was holding. This happened again in 1911, when the musket was destroyed and the soldier's fingers were pried off the statue — making it vulnerable to damage from corrosion caused by moisture. A windstorm toppled the figure and it was not repaired. Exposure to the elements and neglect continued to take their toll. By 1922, citizens were asking for the fountain's removal. The soldier statue was sold as scrap metal, along with the cannon that once graced Lincoln Park. In 1927, the final vestiges of the fountain pool disappeared. A granite monument (a recycled column from the demolished Mankato State Bank in the Spelbrink Building) was installed in 1935 to replace the statue/fountain. Mankato's once-proud Civil War veterans' memorial had passed into history, as well as the Lincoln Elm tree that shaded it (it died of Dutch Elm disease and was removed in 1980. Tree ring dating revealed it to be 315 years old).

In 2011 (the sesquicentennial of the start of the American Civil War), a dedicated citizens' group, The Boy in Blue Civil War Veterans' Memorial Committee, was organized for the purpose of rebuilding the monument as authentically as possible.

Extensive historical research revealed the name of the original company (Mott Ironworks of Trenton, New Jersey) that had constructed the cast-iron basin or "bottom bowl" portion of the fountain, as well as its modern successor (Robinson Iron of Alexander City, Alabama). Robinson Iron was hired to recast the pedestal, using the original blueprints.

Further investigation revealed that statues similar to the "Boy in Blue" had been erected in other American cities, including Forest City, Iowa, Lancaster, Wisc., and Cape Girardeau, MO. Local contractor Ron Goodrich was

hired to replicate the fountain pool and oversee the entire reconstruction process. Local sculptor, Thomas Miller was hired to inscribe the names of Blue Earth County's 682 documented Civil War veterans into slabs of black granite that would be placed around the lip of the fountain pool on each one of the rim's eight beveled panels. An experienced artist, Alan Gibson of Dallas, (formally Cape Girardeau) was contacted, based on his work in restoring similar monuments; he was hired to re-create the soldier statue.

Ground-breaking for the memorial began on May 6, 2013, and the work continued to progress steadily, as funds were raised. A significant portion of those funds came in the form of grants from the Carl & Verna Schmidt Foundation and the Prairie Lakes Regional Arts Council. On Sept. 17, 2012, the anniversary of the Civil War's bloodiest day (Antietam), Robinson Iron delivered the replicated cast-iron "bottom bowl," to Goodrich's warehouse for storage until it would be installed in Lincoln Park in the spring of 2015.

Throughout the winter of 2014-15, Gibson worked on fabricating the soldier statue at his Dallas studio. Mr. Gibson drove to Mankato to personally deliver the statue and supervise its final installation on May 29, 2015. It arrived one day prior to the re-dedication ceremony planned for the morning of May 30.

As the statue lightly touched down on the re-created pedestal, the heavy rain that had been falling all day on the 29th stopped, and the sun suddenly broke through the thick clouds, casting down its golden beams for several minutes. Several hundred people were in attendance at the memorial's re-dedication the next day, which featured period music, a parade of Civil War era re-enactors that marched in review, unveiling of the statue by Ron Goodrich and Tom Miller, turning over of the memorial by Boy in Blue Committee Chair, Bryce Stenzel to Mankato Mayor, Eric Anderson, and speeches from local dignitaries: First District Congressman, Tim Walz, State Representatives, Clark Johnson

and Jack Considine.

The final success of the re-created Boy in Blue Memorial Project came in the form of a generous financial donation by Mankato resident, Anne Chesley Hurlihy, whose sense of community pride and civic responsibility enabled the project to be largely completed on time.

In all, \$190,000 was raised to make the dream of rebuilding the Boy in Blue a reality. Much of the money came in the form of private donations from individuals and organizations. There is still work to do. Fundraising efforts continue in the form of selling memorial pavers or "Adopting a Veteran," which will raise the additional money needed to complete the process of inscribing the 682 Blue Earth County veterans' names on the memorial. When finished, the Boy in Blue will stand for generations as a symbol of the heroism and sacrifice of local citizen-soldiers who answered their nation's call in its darkest hour.

*Bryce Stenzel, M.A.,
is the Chair of the
Boy in Blue Civil War Veterans'
Memorial Committee*

