

"Old Abe," the War Eagle, in Battle

By J. SEYMOUR CURREY, NORTH SHORE HISTORIAN

Alfred L. Sewell's name will always be associated with the history of the war eagle, "Old Abe," for notwithstanding the great fame the eagle had acquired during the war, it was through Mr. Sewell's efforts that the eagle's name became a household word in thousands of homes throughout the land. The great "sanitary fairs" were held under the auspices and direction of the sanitary commission, which carried on a work similar to that of the American Red Cross of later years. Fairs were held in many cities which were remarkably effective in raising funds for its purpose, namely, to afford relief to "soldiers in actual service, whether on the march, in camp or in hospitals." Many aid societies were formed tributary to the commission joined by the Sisters of Mercy and societies of the various churches. The chief promoters of the work were women.

Realized \$240,000

At the first sanitary fair held in Chicago in October, 1863, the amount raised was \$86,000. Another fair was projected for the spring of 1865, but as the time approached for its opening in May the war was practically ended and it was thought by many that no further efforts were necessary. However, it was finally determined to go on with the fair as there were urgent calls for relief and aid to the returning veterans. This second fair was opened May 30, 1865, and continued until late in June, showing net receipts of \$240,000. A special building was constructed for its use which stood on the block now occupied by the Chicago public library. So great was the enthusiasm and joy of the people at the final ending of the four years' war that there seemed no limit to their generosity. It was at this second fair that "Old Abe" shone as one of the principal attractions.

The managers had obtained permission from the state authorities of Wisconsin to bring the eagle to the fair, where a specially constructed booth had been prepared for his accommodation. This booth was thronged throughout the three weeks that the fair was held and during that time the receipts were largely increased by the admittance fees to the booth and by the sale of cards with the eagle's picture. This part of the work was managed by Mr. Sewell and through his energy and generosity it produced the handsome sum of \$16,000, the largest single source from which funds were derived. Every purchaser of a card with the eagle's picture became a private in the "army of the American eagle" and those who bought a certain number were given a higher rank. Children and young people bought them by the thousands and few persons lost the opportunity of contributing to the cause in this way. Whenever the eagle lost a feather it was sold, the average price being \$5 each. The historical society has one of these feathers in its collection as well as a specimen of the cards showing the eagle's picture.

Resided in Evanston Thirty Years

Alfred L. Sewell was a resident of Evanston for thirty years and had lived in Chicago many years before he came to Evanston. He was born March 30, 1832, and died in October, 1913, in the eighty-second year of his age. He founded the "Little Corporal" in July, 1865, just after the close of the fair mentioned above, of which Emily Huntington Miller was the editor and Frances Willard one of the contributors. The magazine reached an enormous circulation for a periodical in that period and within the first year or two of its beginning was credited with a circulation of 100,000 copies. The magazine was a monthly, filled with secular and juvenile literature of the best quality. He was also the founder of the Evanston Index in 1872.

During the time that the eagle was in attendance at the Chicago fair the noted showman, P. T. Barnum, offered \$20,000 for him but the offer was refused. He was returned to his quarters in the statehouse at Madison after the fair, but he was frequently lent to various fairs, reunions and monument celebrations. His most important journey in these years was to Philadelphia, in 1876, in attendance on the Centennial in that city. Many visitors to the Centennial remember to have seen him there, and as usual, he became one of the most popular attractions of that great fair. In due time "Old Abe" again reached his home in Wisconsin and lived in comfort for the few remaining years of his life.

On March 26, 1881, a fire occurred in the statehouse at Madison, and although the flames did not reach the quarters occupied by the eagle, his cage was filled with smoke. The keeper rescued him from the place and brought him out into the open air but the suffocating fumes had been inhaled and the precious bird did not rally. He died in spite of all efforts to save his life after having attained the age of about twenty years. A taxidermist was employed, who "set up" the body, which was

preserved among the war relics in the statehouse. Here it remained for nearly a quarter of a century until in February, 1904, another fire broke out in the same building which consumed the remains of "Old Abe" utterly. This fire occurred in the memorial room of the Grand Army of the Republic and at the same time it consumed many other relics of the war: among them the priceless battle flags and other cherished memorials gathered there.

There is quite an abundant literature extant concerning this famous eagle, consisting of a "life" and numerous articles and poems written in his honor. His memory is a proud possession of the people of his state, as well as of the nation, of which he was for so long the living emblem.

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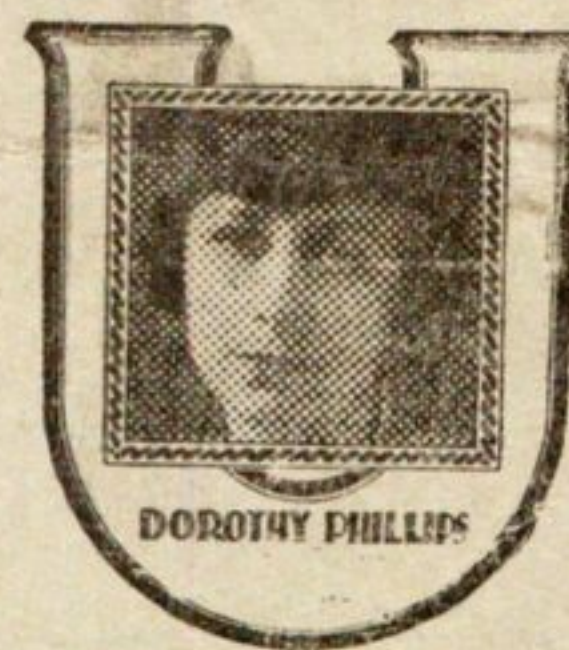
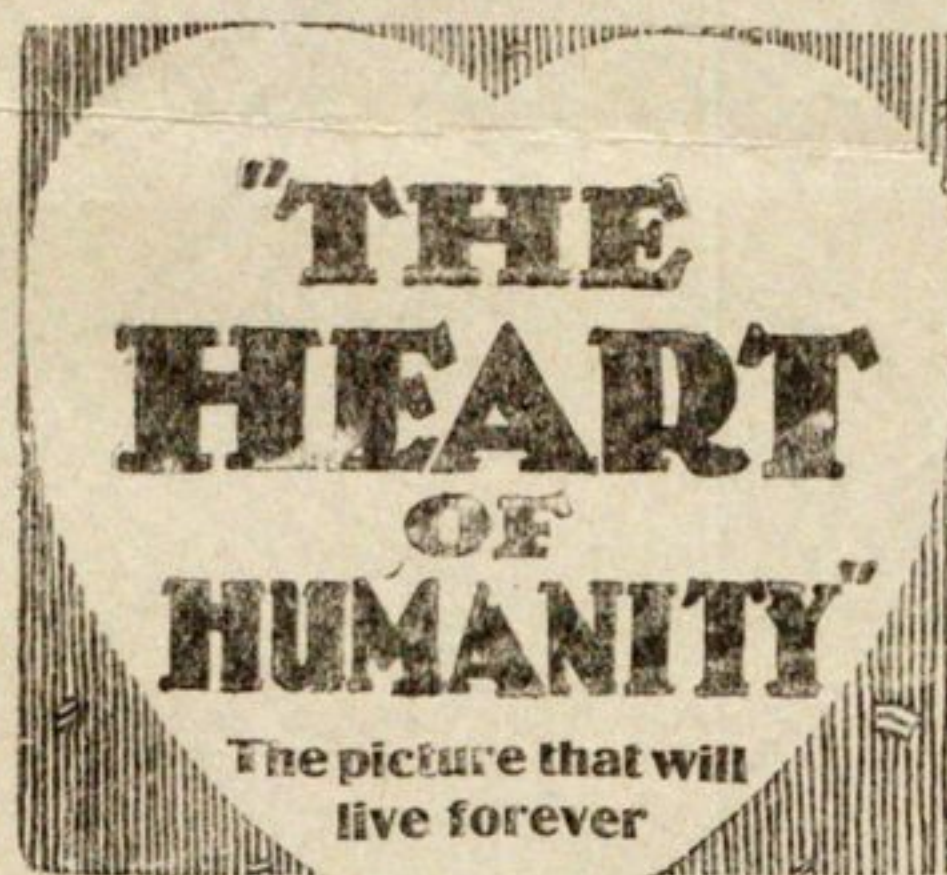
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