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# Get Ready for the Civil War

BY DAN MILNER

The United States Civil War began on April 12, 1861, with the bombardment of Fort Sumter. Those of us who remember the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “War Between the States” find it shocking to realize nearly a half century has passed since news media and classrooms alike were filled with rich, detailed accounts of what endures as the most devastating and ultimately uplifting event in our nation’s history. The war lasted four years, nearly to the day, and took the lives of 620,000 Americans. Its greatest triumphs proved elusive: the Union, although preserved, is still beset by deep sectional divides, and African Americans, although emancipated, have since fought many hard battles to achieve meaningful equality.

The upcoming 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary provides an incentive for those of us who sing, teach, or write to conduct some research into Civil War songs. Because the Civil War years coincide with the rise of the American song publishing industry, there is a large vault through which to sort. Song artifacts relating to New York are particularly easy to find, in large part because the national broadside ballad press was centered close to New York’s City Hall and was at its zenith between 1861 and 1865. These text-only song sheets were sold on downtown street corners, typically to customers born into the working class. A hearty mail order business distributed far and wide sheet music, song sheets, and booklet-sized songsters published in New York.

Nowadays, Civil War material is easily accessible on the Internet. The American Memory online collection at the Library of Congress is a great place to look not only for songs, but also for images and narratives. A simple search for “Civil War” among American Memory’s nineteenth-century song sheets returned 970 songs. One of them is “Our German Volunteers,” which salutes the New York teacher, musician, journalist, politician, and Civil War major general Franz Sigel:

There is a general in the west whose  
deeds have come to fame  
He is a gallant soldier and in move-  
ments he is game;

Then let us raise our voices high and  
give three hearty cheers  
For Sigel (sic) hero of the West and  
his German volunteers.

Nineteenth-century song sheets, though never profane, were frequently written in colorful language that would be viewed as scandalous today. Ethnic humor was very much in vogue and Germans, who provided more combatants than any other non-native group, were jokingly characterized in print as well as on the variety hall stage. John F. Poole, the Irish-born author of “Tim Finigan’s Wake” and “No Irish Need Apply,” wrote “I’m Going to Fight mit Sigel,” which became wildly popular when sung by Tony Pastor, an Italian American raised in Greenwich Village:

Dem Deutshen mens, mit Sigel’s band,  
At fighting have no rival;  
Un ven Cheff Davis’ mens we meet,  
Ve SCHLAUCH ’em like de tuyvil;  
Dere’s only von ting vot I fear,  
Ven pattling for de Eagle:  
I vont get not no lager bier,  
Ven I goes to fight mit Sigel.

It goes without saying that camaraderie was highly valued in the military. In rural places, village men sometimes enlisted en masse. Ethnic solidarity was common in urban centers, where immigrants composed significant segments of the population. New York (Manhattan) was the third largest city in the world in 1860, with a population of 813,669, of whom 383,717 were foreign born. Of those, 203,740—or very nearly a quarter—were from Ireland. There are many songs celebrating Irish units, including the famous 69<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the New York State Militia, Meagher’s Irish Brigade, and Corcoran’s Irish Legion. The 69<sup>th</sup> was one of very few Union units to comport itself admirably at the Battle of Bull Run. In the 1940s, Anne and Frank Warner collected this fragment from John Galusha of Minerva, New York:

This day will be remembered by Amer-  
ica’s noble sons!

If it hadn’t been for Irishmen, what  
would our Union done?  
It was hand-to-hand we fought ’em, all  
in the broiling sun.  
Stripped to the pants we did advance in  
the Battle of Bull Run.

At the same time, a broadside published in New York City upbraided the “silk stocking” 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment for their lackluster showing: “Foolish Seventh, foolish Seventh, your deeds cannot be praised, / By those who have homes in the land of the Brave.”

Broadsides were equivalent to singles, while songsters of twenty-four to forty pages were the albums of their day. They were typically personality-based, with titles such as *Watty Morgan’s Don’t Keep the Working Man Down Song Book*. *Tony Pastor’s Union Songster* contains titles such as “The Monitor and Merrimac” and “The Union Volunteers.” *Joe English’s Irish and Comic Songster* is another good source for Civil War songs.

Here are a few more resources. Frank Moore’s book, *The Civil War in Song and Story* (1865), contains a treasure trove of lyrics and intriguing anecdotes. It can now be viewed free online using the Google Book Search tool. The Donald G. Butcher Library at Morrisville State College maintains a worthwhile “New York State and the Civil War” web page. *The Civil War and New York City* (1990), a 313-page history by Ernest A. McKay, is a fine aid for understanding the complicated issues affecting life in the country’s foremost metropolis during the Civil War years. ▼

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