

## **Captain Christian Riebsame (1839-1913)**

Christian Riebsame was born on June 1, 1839 in Mütterstadt, Pfalz, Germany. He immigrated to the United States with his parents in 1853 when he was 14 years old. His family settled in Philadelphia where they lived for two years. Not much more is known about Riebsame's parents other than his father was shot and killed as a member of a sheriff's posse while living in Pennsylvania. Riebsame moved around, living in New York, Brooklyn, and Chicago, before finally settling down in Decatur, Illinois in 1858.

In August 1862, Riebsame decided to enlist in the Union Army during the United States Civil War. He joined Company B of the 116<sup>th</sup> Illinois Volunteer Infantry. Riebsame's unit left Decatur for the front in November of that year. Upon arriving at the Yazoo River area on December 26, they immediately engaged in battle. During the first two battles, which occurred over the course of five days, casualties were severe. Riebsame's company "came out of the battle with but 25 men." His bravery and victory in these and other battles led to his promotion to a sergeant, then lieutenant in 1863, and finally captain in 1864. He participated in all of the campaigns of the Army of Tennessee from Vicksburg until Sherman's March to the Sea through Georgia. Later in life, Riebsame revealed that the proudest moment of his military career was when he led his company of the 116<sup>th</sup> Volunteer Infantry in the Grand Review on May 24, 1865 before President Andrew Johnson in Washington, D.C. They marched down Pennsylvania Avenue in celebration of the end of the Civil War. Later that year, Riebsame was honorably discharged because he had developed chronic pneumonia and rheumatism.

While living in Decatur, Riebsame was involved in the founding of what would become a national organization for veterans of the Union Army called the Grand Army of the Republic in 1866. The G.A.R. was an organization created for honorably discharged Veterans of the Union Army who had served in the Civil War. This organization helped create homes for soldiers, was active in relief work, and helped lobby for pension legislation. This group was also extremely influential in presidential elections.

The G.A.R. was also responsible for the national adoption of Decoration Day in 1868, held annually on May 30 as a "day for remembering the sacrifices of fallen comrades." After World War II, Decoration Day became known as Memorial Day. In 1968 the Uniform Holidays Bill was passed, which stated that Memorial Day was to be "officially observed on the last Monday of May."

Sometime between 1866 and 1869 Riebsame moved to Bloomington. It was during this time that he met Bertha Trimter who was also a German immigrant. Her family had lost and regained their fortune and was ready to return to Germany when Riebsame proposed to her. They married on September 21, 1869 in Bloomington. Riebsame and Trimter could not have been more different. It was said that, "Bertha worked and saved while Christian enjoyed life and spent."

Trimter's parents had sold their bakery since they were planning to return to Germany. However, in 1873 they were able to buy it back and renamed it C. Riebsame's Bakery and Confectionary. The bakery was located at 411 N. Main Street. They did this to assist Christian and Bertha who lived on the second floor. It is unclear how much Riebsame worked in the bakery; however, it is possible that he made deliveries. In 1877, Riebsame left the bakery and his father-in-law, Charles Trimter, took over the business once again.

Christian and Bertha lived at 711 W. Mulberry until 1887 when they moved into a house at 513 E. Grove Street, where Riebsame lived for the remainder of his life. The couple had five

children: Carl, Emma, Bertha, Eduard, and Selma. Unfortunately, Carl committed suicide at the age of 36 and Selma died of scarlet fever when she was only a year old.

On September 2, 1876 Riebsame went into business with a man named Karl Hohmann. They opened a saloon together at 111 N. Main Street called The Milwaukee Beer Parlor, more commonly known as Riebsame & Hohmann's. Christian's wife, Bertha, was in charge of the cooking, while Riebsame made his career in socializing and drinking with patrons. However, Riebsame was always adding to and improving his saloon every chance he got. He made sure to only sell the "purest whiskies and best lagers at a great price" and refused to sell any sort of "cheap or compounded alcohol." In an attempt to draw in more customers, Riebsame and Hohmann began holding free concerts at their saloon on Saturdays, which then turned into nightly events. Soon after, Riebsame added billiard tables to the saloon and began to hold expositions and tournaments. He encouraged everyone to come watch the "most beautiful and scientific of all games."

An unusual addition to Riebsame's saloon came in December 1878. Riebsame received a monkey from a friend in Springfield. He named the monkey Count Shoveloff. The Count was a mischievous little monkey who would sit above the door outside the saloon and pull people's hair as they entered, sometimes taking a good chunk of it with him. While this may have amused patrons at first, less than a month later, after too many hair-pulling incidents, Riebsame got rid of Count Shoveloff. After 17 years in business, Riebsame sold his saloon in June 1893. The saloon was renamed Feicht & Rouff and remained open until 1914.

Riebsame was a lifelong and prominent member of the Turnverein society. The Turnverein was a national gymnastics organization that was founded in Berlin in 1811. The American Turnverein had also evolved into a gymnastics and social society, which American citizens of German descent could join as well. Members of this group were called Turners. In addition to gymnastics, the Turners also focused on "social clubrooms and family picnics that remained centered on German culture." To become a member of the Turners, one had to have been German-born or be the child of a German immigrant.

In 1912, a year before his death, Riebsame was given the opportunity to represent Illinois as a delegate at the Los Angeles G.A.R. encampment (which was a gathering of ex-Union soldiers). He was the "only survivor of the first post and hence longest-time living member of the organization." He received some media exposure as the oldest living member of the G.A.R. Riebsame had two articles published about him, one in the *Daily Bulletin* and the second in the *Los Angeles Sunday Times*.

On July 5, 1913 Riebsame passed away at his home at 513 E. Grove Street of congestive heart failure. At the age of 74, he was the last surviving member of G.A.R. Post #1. Riebsame's funeral was "one of the largest gatherings of old soldiers witnessed in Bloomington in recent years." He was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.