

Martin County in the Spanish-American War

The following is based on the book, Martin County In The Spanish-American War, written by Arthur M. Nelson in 1923. Nelson was a member of Co. D.

The patriotism of Martin County citizens became evident once again during the Spanish-American War. Martin County's National Guard infantry, Co. D, had an intense interest in becoming involved in the Spanish-American War and in turn began a rigorous recruiting campaign in April of 1898. At that time, Fairmont had no state armory, and a large barn like structure was erected for this purpose. The armory was cold and poorly suited for the needs of the soldiers, therefore, J. W. Daniels, owner of the Daniels Hall, permitted the use of his building for Company D's nightly drills.

Company D, made up of about 100 local citizens, received their call to duty in late April of 1898. There were approximately 3,500 people at the railway station to see the boys off. This included the entire population of Fairmont as well as many from other parts of the county as a large proportion of the men were from other communities in Martin County.

Their first stop was at Camp Ramsey at the State Fairgrounds. The stay there involved intensive training and was the first experience of this nature for most of the volunteers. Finally on May 8th, the company of raw recruits were mustered into federal service for the period of the war, and took their oath on May 9th.

Company D, then made up of 80 men, was sent to Camp Thomas at Chickamauga Park in Georgia. Camp Thomas was considered a good training ground and had the largest mobilization of troops the United States had seen since the Civil War, at one time numbering 60,000 soldiers. The soldiers of 1898 had the unique experience of serving with Civil War veterans that had served both under the north and south flags.

However, the conditions at Camp Thomas were less than adequate. Supplies were limited, and personal cleanliness was virtually impossible. A soldier could only wash his clothing when not wearing it. Consequently, clothing was frequently not washed for four months at a time. In one instance, an entire outfit was marched to the creek and everyone stripped and washed their clothing using the creek bed as washboards. The clothing was hung to dry, and of course did shrink to some extent. However, it wasn't of particular concern as the clothing was poorly fitted to begin with anyway.

Camp Thomas involved intensive training. Reveille was 4:40 a.m. It was intense and grueling. There was also a dress parade every evening in which time the uniforms had to be in tip top shape with brass buttons polished brightly.

The supply of tents available at Camp Thomas was also in short supply, and the men of Company D crowded seven to nine men in a tent measuring seven feet by nine feet. Obviously, these were extremely crowded conditions. The tents had no floors, there were no cots or beds, and the men had a single blanket each.

There were no regular cooks or well equipped kitchens or mess halls. Crude cooking was done over open fires and the soldiers themselves had to be self sufficient in finding and cooking their own meals. They then had to wash their own dishes, often without water which was quite scarce at that time.

Sanitary conditions at Camp Thomas were extremely unfavorable. A shallow open pit was dug a few feet back of each of the crude company kitchens. All the refuse and waste from the men was dumped in these unenclosed pits, which became literally open cess pools. Flies multiplied wildly and the stench could be smelled for miles away. In addition, the refuse from horses and mules also piled up in those areas.

The cootie, known to the men as the “grayback,” became quite prevalent in the camp. They were actually said to be in a greater number in the camp than the flies, and were of course very annoying to the soldiers.

Obviously, disease was a great concern under these unclean conditions. Company D suffered severely, but no more so than the rest of the members of the camp. Typhoid fever, dysentery, and malaria were the prevalent diseases. Typhoid was especially severe and caused the majority of deaths at Camp Thomas. There was an inadequate supply of hospitals, doctors, and nurses. Consequently, care and treatment was woefully scarce and little could be done for most of the sick. There was what was called an “incurable ward,” in which it was said that it was nearly impossible to distinguish the living from the dead.

In the final analysis, the war was won without any of the Company D soldiers seeing action. A Soldiers Relief Society was formed in Fairmont and was very active in forwarding supplies and other comforts to the sick. A public meeting was also held in Fairmont and resolutions adopted demanding the men be discharged, or at least be removed to a more sanitary camp.

Company D was moved in August to another area of the park that was considered uncontaminated. The men were there but a few days when orders came for them to move to Camp Hamilton in Lexington, Kentucky. Then, on September 15th, the men left for Minnesota to be mustered out. Upon reaching Fairmont on September 23, they were met with a resounding welcome home that included a band and a large crowd of well wishers. The public meeting and grand reception for the soldiers included a banquet held at Daniels Hall.

Following their discharge, the men quickly and quietly resumed civilian life as best as they could at that time. They came home with no money, jobs were scarce, and winter was soon upon them. However, many worked on farms, returned to school, or in some cases needed time to convalesce after their illness during their time at Camp Thomas. The record of the men of Company D was honorable and was remembered and respected by citizens of our county, state, and nation.

For more information on this topic, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.