

Rush County Bicentennial/Article #7

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This Rush County Bicentennial article addresses how public opinion has affected our county's history.

Over the years Rush County has dealt with circumstances that polarized public opinion in an extreme way. Other than the events of 2020, the last time there was a vast difference of public opinion was the Vietnam War.

One other period of our history when we were polarized was during the Civil War. The presidential results of 1864 were an eye opener. Abraham Lincoln was up for re-election. Of Rush County's twelve townships, five of them voted for the Democrat ticket of McClellan and Pendleton over the Republican ticket of Lincoln and Johnson. Those townships were on a diagonal pattern across the county from the northeast to the southwest: Washington, Center, Jackson, Posey, and Walker Townships did not vote for Lincoln/Johnson. County wide Lincoln/Johnson won with 1,881 votes to 1,680. In Rushville Township Lincoln/Johnson won by a slim margin of only 18 votes, 294 to 276.

To understand why there was a vast difference in local public opinion we have to examine the times. In February of 1861 there was a Peace Conference in Washington, D.C. to avert a civil war. Rush County's delegate to the conference was Pleasant A. Hackleman (the only general from Indiana killed during the Civil War). When the Peace Conference failed, both local newspapers, the Republican and the Jacksonian favored allowing the south to exist as a separate slave holding nation!

But when the south bombarded Ft. Sumpter the tone of feelings changed. Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers. From April 15, 1861, to December 19, 1864, there were nine calls by President Lincoln to quell the rebellion. According to historian John H. Hughes, Rush County furnished 2,305 soldiers for the Union. Of course some were re-enlisters. The percentage of men from Rush County serving the Union during the war from Indiana was exceeded only by Delaware County.

Needing more manpower, on October 6, 1862, Lincoln instituted conscription (the draft). The draft quota for Rush County was 150 men with the apportionment as follows: Posey 18, Walker 24, Anderson 2, Rushville 3, Jackson 26, Center 30, Washington 19, and Union 34. The townships with the low draft quotas had supplied more volunteers. Note that five of the eight townships are the ones that voted against Lincoln/Johnson two years later.

By 1864, Rush County citizens from all corners were tired of the death, destruction, and failure to close out the war. According to historian Dr. John Arnold, "It is probable that few portions of the north were more deeply agitated than Rush County. Soldiers at home on furlough wearing their uniforms were the universal object of attention. It was not infrequent that they overstepped their bounds of reason and duty in maintaining their principles. They often became insolent and intolerant, and imagined their coats of blue were sufficient excuses for whatever excesses they saw fit to indulge."

Abolitionist efforts before and during the war were admirably aided by the efforts of the Quakers and African American freedmen in Ripley Township. Carthage was a station on the Underground Railroad. Presbyterians and Methodists in the southern part of the county also aided the underground effort. On the other side, Southern sympathizers in Rush County formed lodges of the Knights of the Golden Circle. These "Copperheads" were a thorn in the side of local war efforts.

Politically the Lincoln Republicans wanted to preserve the Union and abolish slavery. The Radical Republicans wanted to do the same, but they also wanted retribution for the war. They wanted to punish the South. Most Democrats were in favor of preserving the Union but were opposed to the abolition of slavery. Another group called the Union Party resolved they were against slavery but they were also in favor of the

absurd idea of creating a separate territory for African Americans! We were searching for answers for racial equality, and we are still searching for answers for racial equality in 2020.

One incident of note occurred in 1863 in Walker Township. Several locals had refused to sign up for the draft. Officials visited the home of the widow Hilligoss on June 10. She reported her three sons were not at home, and she refused to give any information. Two officials from Greensburg, Richard M. Craycraft and John S. Stevens, left the home and were going along the road when someone rose up out of a wheat field and shot and killed them. According to former Rush County Historian Jim Scott, Governor Oliver Morton sent a troupe of cavalry and a company of infantry to Manilla. They camped in the schoolyard for a week and later arrested two men, Isaac Hilligoss and James V. Sylvester. The two were taken to Ft. Harrison but were released to the Rush County Sheriff because it was deemed a civil matter, not a military one. They were not charged!



On one occasion early in the war, Rushville citizens awoke to see what was said to be a Confederate flag flying from the Rush County Courthouse. But which flag? The Confederate states were represented by a variety of flags. Initially their flag was the Bonnie Blue Flag, a rectangular blue flag with a single white star in the middle. At the battle of First Bull Run, the Stars and Bars led the South into battle. Then came the Battle Flag we are familiar with today. Recently some southern states have removed the Confederate emblem from their state flags. NASCAR has followed suit and banned the Battle Flag from their races.

During the Civil War, death from disease was 250,157 for the Union armies and 164,000 for the Confederate troops. So total death by disease was estimated at 414, 152 for the armies over a four year period. In 2020 during only an eight month period the U.S. sadly had over 225,000 civilian deaths in the war against COVID-19. Doing further math, COVID-19 has killed more Americans than those that died on the field of battle during the Civil War (204,070).

So once again during an election year Americans are divided about what to do. How do we end this pandemic, how can we solve racial inequities, how can we pay for our health care, how can we improve our economy, and most importantly how soon will we return to a sense of normal. Hopefully the future holds the answers.