

Captain Christian Riebsame (1839-1913) was a German-born citizen who came to the United States in 1853. During the Civil War he served in the 116th Illinois Volunteer Infantry. He was a co-founder the Civil War veterans' organization, the Grand Army of the Republic, and was a charter member of GAR Post #1 in Decatur, Illinois.¹ Riebsame became a well-known businessman in Bloomington and throughout McLean County because of his community involvement. He was a prominent member of several organizations such as, the National Liquor Dealers Association, and was deeply involved with the Turnverein, a German-American gymnastics, literary, musical, and social society.

Christian Riebsame was born on June 1, 1839 in Mütterstadt, Pfalz, Germany. He attended school in Speyer, Germany until immigrating to America with his parents in 1853 at the age of 14. Two of Riebsame's friends joined him on this journey. Sadly, his friends were both victims of a cholera outbreak along with 26 other passengers on the ship.² His family settled in Philadelphia where Christian 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, Chicago, and finally settling down in Decatur, Illinois in 1858.³

On August 11, 1862 Riebsame decided to enlist as a member of Company B of the 116th Illinois Volunteer Infantry.⁴ Riebsame's unit left Decatur for the front on November 8, 1862 and arrived at the Yazoo River area on December 26. They immediately engaged in battle and received their "baptism by fire."⁵ 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."⁶ His bravery and victory in these and other battles led to his promotion to a sergeant at the Battle of Chickasaw Bayou in 1862 and to Lieutenant at Arkansas Post in 1863, and then Captain in 1864.⁷ He participated in all of the campaigns of the Army of Tennessee from Vicksburg until Sherman's March to the Sea through Georgia.⁸ Later in life, Riebsame revealed that the proudest moment of his military career was when he led his company of the 116th 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 and returned to Decatur.⁹

However, during his time in the service he developed rheumatism and pneumonia which became chronic diseases that plagued him the rest of his life.¹⁰ So in 1891, Riebsame applied for a government pension because of his poor health and was approved to receive \$20 a month. With this pension, Riebsame attempted to improve his health by consistently visiting health spas and baths with his wife throughout the United States and Europe.¹¹

¹Julius Dietrich and Else E. Schmidt. *Bloomington's German Population in Word and Picture* (Normal, IL: McLean County Genealogical Society, 1993) 130.

²Madam Annette, "Birth of the Grand Army, Capt. Riebsame tells Annette of the 1st Post," *The Daily Bulletin*, May 30, 1889

³Howard Siglag, "Captain Christian Riebsame: The Last Charter Member of Decatur Post #1." p. 5

⁴Ibid

⁵John H. Burnham, George P. Davis and Ezra M. Prince. *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume 1*. (Bloomington, Illinois: Pantagraph Printing and Stationary Co., 1899) p. 124

⁶Ibid

⁷Siglag, "Captain Christian Riebsame: The Last Charter Member of Decatur Post #1." p. 5

⁸Dietrich and Schmidt, p. 130.

⁹Siglag, "Captain Christian Riebsame: The Last Charter Member of Decatur Post #1." p. 6

¹⁰Ibid

¹¹Ibid

While in Decatur, Riebsame was involved in the founding of what would become a national organization for veterans of the Union Army. On April 6, 1866, the one year anniversary of the Battle of Shiloh, Major Benjamin Franklin Stephenson created the charter that established the Grand Army of the Republic Post #1.¹² Riebsame and 11 other Union veterans were the first members of the post and signed the charter.¹³ 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 in pension legislation. This group was extremely influential in presidential elections. For a time, it was almost impossible to be nominated on the Republican ticket without being endorsed by the G.A.R.¹⁴ In an interview with a reporter from the Bloomington newspaper *The Daily Bulletin* in 1899, Riebsame explained the motivation for the establishment of this organization,

“At the close of the war there existed a strong feeling among the surviving soldiers all over the Union for a bond of comradeship that could only be carried out by some sort of organization. They wanted to occasionally enjoy the privilege of meeting in private life, to fight their battles over again, in words of reminiscence, and if need be to again touch elbows on the march through the peaceful pursuits of a full haversack and canteen. I think all soldiers shared these feelings. Yet for nearly a year we were dilatory in affecting any organization. None of the legions of returned patriots seemed to be able to give shape and form to the cravings of their hearts. The idea of [creating an order where] all honorable discharged soldiers and sailors of the United States could commune and share its honors...”¹⁵

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.”¹⁶ 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.”¹⁷

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 Trimter. They married on September 21, 1869 in Bloomington.¹⁸ Unfortunately, Riebsame and Trimter could not have been more different. It is said that “Bertha worked and saved while Christian enjoyed life and spent.”¹⁹

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 whether or not Riebsame ever worked in

¹² "Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War." Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, <http://www.suvcw.org>. Accessed July 16, 2015.

¹³ Siglag, "Captain Christian Riebsame: The Last Charter Member of Decatur Post #1."

¹⁴ "Grand Army of the Republic History." Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, Accessed June 24, 2015.

¹⁵ Madam Annette

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ "Memorial Day in United States." Memorial Day in United States, Accessed July 1, 2015. <http://www.timeanddate.com/holidays/us/memorial-day>

¹⁸ Siglag, "Captain Christian Riebsame: The Last Charter Member of Decatur Post #1."

¹⁹ Ibid

the bakery; however, it is possible that he made deliveries.²⁰ In 1877, Riebsame left the bakery and his father-in-law, Charles Trimter took over the business again.²¹ 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. Christian and Bertha had 5 children: Carl, Emma, Bertha, Eduard, and Selma.²² Unfortunately, Carl committed suicide at the age of 36 and Selma died of scarlet fever when she was only a year old.²³

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.²⁴ 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."²⁵ Riebsame also sold "Old Crow and Hermitage whiskies" for medicinal purposes.²⁶ In an attempt to draw in the public, 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."²⁷

There was also some friendly competition between Riebsame's bartender Mr. Mittler and Mr. Coury who tended at the Gem saloon. The idea behind this competition was to turn the nasty tasting liquor into a delicious, "seductive drink." According to *The Pantagraph*, "It is universally admitted that to properly mix American drinks is an art that borders on the exact sciences; that combines good judgment, chemistry, keen taste, discrimination, lemon peel, banana juice, muscle, fusil-oil, and other moral, physical and material requisites. To cover up the acidity and latent cussedness of whiskey; the aromatic and kidney-searching odors of gin; the horrors of rum; and the general meanness and inherent devilment of bad booze and red liquor of all varieties, in one bewitching and seductive dram..." Each of the bartenders would present how quickly and diligently they could make a drink for chemist, Mr. Ed Kegler. He would then drink each bartender's drink and judge whose drink was better.²⁸

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.²⁹ 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.³⁰

In addition to having a troublesome monkey, Riebsame stirred up trouble himself by selling liquor to minors. During this time there was no established drinking age, but the drinker

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ *Bloomington-Normal City Directory, 1876-1877*

²² Dietrich and Schmidt, 130.

²³ Siglag, "Captain Christian Riebsame: The Last Charter Member of Decatur Post #1."

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ "Good Pure Liquors." *The Pantagraph*, June 10, 1882.

²⁶ "For Medicinal Purposes" *The Pantagraph*, October 15, 1879

²⁷ "The City: About the Town." *The Pantagraph*, May 20, 1881

²⁸ "A Spirited Contest" *The Pantagraph*, January 27, 1880

²⁹ "January Jottings." *The Pantagraph*, January 1, 1879.

³⁰ Ibid

needed to have permission from a parent, guardian, or family physician to be intoxicated.³¹ Riebsame pleaded guilty twice to breaking the law and paid a fine of \$20 in September and again in November of 1879.³²

Along with being a bar owner, Riebsame was a wholesale liquor salesman who sold large amounts of alcohol to other saloon owners in Bloomington. He worked for the Pabst Brewing Company of Milwaukee, WI. He also held many positions as a member of the Illinois Liquor Dealers Association, the industry's first statewide lobby, and was a delegate for the Liquor Dealers Protective Union. These organizations were created to help insure the continuation of liquor sales throughout Illinois. Riebsame attended numerous conventions throughout the Midwest.

After 17 years in the business, Riebsame sold his saloon in June, 1893 to Mr. John J. Feicht. The saloon was renamed Feicht & Rouff and remained open until 1914 when Bloomington was voted dry for the third time.³³

Riebsame was a lifelong and prominent member of the Turnverein society, an association he joined in 1858 while living in Decatur. The Turnverein was a national gymnastics organization that was founded in Berlin by Ludwig Jahn in 1811. The American Turnverein had also evolved into a gymnastics and social society which American citizens of German descent could join as well.³⁴ 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."³⁵ To become a member of the Turners, one had to have been German-born or be the child of a German immigrant.

During his time as president of the Turners, Riebsame had the opportunity to plan the 100th anniversary of Turnvater Jahn, the celebration of the father of the Turnverein society, which was held in Bloomington in 1878.³⁶ It was reported that during the planning stages everyone got along and there was no arguing between different socioeconomic classes.³⁷ It was suggested that because of their commonalities such as language and culture, the members were able to set aside their differences and plan the event.

Just a few years before his death, Riebsame's son Carl died after swallowing a bottle of carbolic acid on January 20, 1908. He was a gifted pianist who studied at the Wesleyan College of Music, (known as Illinois Wesleyan University today). Carl was then accepted into the Royal Conservatory in Berlin. He attended school in Germany until 1894 when he became overwhelmed with work and study. According to *The Pantagraph*, his parents stayed with him through the winter months and when returning home, brought Carl with them.³⁸ Upon his return to Bloomington, Carl became a piano tuner. He eventually had to give this up because of health issues. He was physically and mentally distraught for several years and hospitalized multiple times prior to his suicide.

³¹ "Liquors." In *Ordinances of the City of Bloomington*, 51-52. (Bloomington: Authority of the City Council, 1876).

³² "McLean Circuit Court: Criminal Calendar" *The Pantagraph*, September 29, 1879

³³ "Many Buildings are Being Remodeled" *The Pantagraph*, August 1, 1914

³⁴ Howard Siglag, "Captain Christian Riebsame: The Last Charter Member of Decatur Post #1." *The Veteran*.

³⁵ William Adams "Turners Host Huge Events." In *The Turners in Bloomington: Bloomington, Illinois Turnverein, 1855-1948*. Normal, IL: W. Adams, 1998. Pg. 1

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Howard Siglag, "Captain Christian Riebsame: The Last Charter Member of Decatur Post #1."

³⁸ "Tragic Death of Carl H. Riebsame" *The Pantagraph*, January 21, 1908

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. This 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.”³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ He had also been suffering from dropsy, presently known as edema, “which is a normal response of the body to inflammation or injury.”⁴¹ At the age of 74, he was the last surviving member of G.A.R. Post #1. He had also been a member of numerous societies and organizations such as “the Society of the Army of Tennessee, a Mason, an original companion of the first class of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States (MOLLUS), and was an active member of the William T. Sherman Bloomington G.A.R. Post #146.”⁴² Riebsame’s funeral was, “one of the largest gatherings of old soldiers witnessed in Bloomington in recent years.”⁴³ He was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.

By: Chloe Harkins, 2015

³⁹ “Only Survivor of the First Post Organized” *Los Angeles Sunday Times*, September 2, 1912

⁴⁰ “Death Comes to Captain C. Riebsame.” *The Pantagraph*, July 8, 1913.

⁴¹ “Edema: Types, Causes, Symptoms, and Treatment.” WebMD. Accessed July 13, 2015.
<http://www.webmd.com/heart-disease/heart-failure/edema-overview>.

⁴² Siglag, “Captain Christian Riebsame: The Last Charter Member of Decatur Post #1.”

⁴³ “Last of Earth, Final Tributes Paid to Capt. Riebsame” *The Pantagraph*, July 8, 1913