

The Statue On The Square

Have you ever noticed, amidst the festivities of a Farmer's Market Saturday on Madison's Capital Square, the moment when visitors come upon the statue of that soldier on King Street – a young man in uniform, standing tall, eyes fixed on the horizon, somehow intent on moving forward on behalf of the flag fluttering in the distance over his left shoulder.

His presence prompts an interlude of silence and curiosity. Who is he; why is he here; what message does he wish to deliver to those who stop and ponder his eternal presence?



Hans Christian Heg

I am a soldier who gave up my life that our nation might live.

He could be many soldiers from many wars, but in this case he is Hans Christian Heg, proud son of Norway, and Colonel of the 15th Wisconsin brigade on August 19, 1863, the day he falls in battle at Chickamauga, along the “river of death,” down in Georgia.

He is 32 years old on that day, with a wife and three children praying for his safe return, up North in the small town of Waterford, county of Racine, Wisconsin.

As he leads his brigade across a small stream at the southern end of the battlefield, he is struck in the gut by a Confederate minie ball that sears his body and shocks his limbic brain. Perhaps his life flashes before him in that instant.

His joyful boyhood in Lier, Norway, three miles to the north of the port city of Drammen. At age eleven, in 1840, the journey across the Atlantic from Oslo to New York, then from Buffalo through the Great Lakes to Milwaukee and on to the Norwegian settlement near Lake Muskego, in Racine County, founded in 1825. There a lovely 350-acre farm.

A new language to be mastered, along with many lessons in community from his father, Ewen, whose famous “Heg Barn” becomes the gathering place for social and religious events, and whose journal, Nordlyset (Northern Lights), is the first Norwegian newspaper in America, and later an organ of the Free Soil and Republican parties.

At age twenty, a rite of passage. Hans and three pals bitten by the gold bug, navigating the perilous journey to California and spending two years as Forty-Niners. This lark ending when Ewen Heg dies, and Hans returns home to his roots in Muskego.

Next comes the love of his life, his beautiful bride, Gunhild Einong, and the joys of three offspring, little Hilda, James and Elmer.

Followed by recognition, for Hans, like his father, proves to be a natural-born leader. He becomes Major in the 4th Wisconsin State Militia. A public person, board of supervisors in the Town of Norway, delegate to the Republican Convention of 1857 in Madison, Wisconsin State Prison Commissioner at Waupun in 1859.

All is working out nicely for Hans Heg and his family. Fine prospects for a long and satisfying life and a happy ending. But, as Lincoln puts it, “then came the war.”

Governor Alexander Randall appoints the popular Heg, Colonel of the 15th Wisconsin Volunteers as of September 30, 1861. His first duty is recruiting, which brings this appeal:

“Scandinavians! Let us understand the situation, our duty and our responsibility.
Shall the future ask, where were the Scandinavians when the Fatherland was saved?”

After winter training at Camp Randall, Heg leads his 960-man contingent into the field. Indeed they are Norseman – Olsen, Hanson, Peterson, Johnson, Thompson, Erickson, and no fewer than 115 answering to the name of Ole. They march off in companies: the St. Olaf Rifles, Scandinavian Mountainers, Heg’s Rifles, Rock River Rangers, Clausen’s Guards.

What follows is what always follows in war. Drums beating the long roll, the crash of guns, the rattle of musketry, the strange mournful mutter of the battlefield. In October 1862, the Scandinavian Brigade skirmishes at Perryville, Kentucky, followed on December 31 by a terrible slaughter at Stones River, as Heg’s regiment, along with his entire Union corps, is overrun by the CSA left wing, under Braxton Bragg. A hellish day, bitter cold, running through the woods, firing, killing and dying. After a Union rally and stalemate, Heg writes:

“There is no denying that we were badly whipped the first day, as usual because of an infernal fool of a General allowing himself to be surprised. We lost a great many men.”

A total of 138 men, with 15 dead in his regiment alone. But Heg receives a commendation from General William Carlin, as “the bravest of the brave.”

The following September, the blue army snakes further South, eager to attack Bragg again, below Chattanooga. Heg now commands the entire Third Brigade, and he writes a final letter home on September 18, 1863:

“The Rebels are in our front and we may have to fight him...in a big battle. Do not feel uneasy for me. I am well and in good spirits and trusting to my usual good luck. I shall use all the caution and courage I am capable of. Good by my darling.”

Toward sundown the next day Heg’s luck runs out. He is leading a Union counter attack near the Viniard House when he feels the lead ball slice through his lower bowel. It is a grievous wound, and he suffers all night before succumbing mid-morning on the 20th.

Chickamauga has been the “big battle” Heg predicted, with 35,000 men lost between the two sides, a number topped only by the 58,000 casualties a month earlier at Gettysburg.

When the war ends 18 months later, the Scandinavian Brigade will number 320 survivors out of the 960 who marched out with Heg.

And so the story appears to end in despair. But not quite – for Heg’s Norwegian community assumes the duty of remembering him and the men he led.

On October 17, 1929, “St. Hans Day” in Norway, Heg is risen again in the magnificent statue on the Square, crafted by sculptor Paul Fjelde. Dignitaries such as the Governor and Mayor turn out, but the occasion belongs most to attendees from back home, the Colonel’s daughter, Hilda, and four octogenarian comrades from the old 15th.

In remembering him that day, they honored him: A soldier who gave up his life that his nation might live. Some 185 years later, it is only right and just that we, too, pause at the King Street corner, and do the same.