

# The Story of Old Abe The War Eagle

Compiled by

J. Stanley Dietz (1946)



Majestic monarch of the clouds,  
To thee it was given,  
To hover in the sulphur smoke,  
To ward away the battle stroke,  
And see Old Glory shine afar,  
Like rainbows on the clouds of  
war.

## Explanatory

Many requests come to me for literature on Old Abe, The War Eagle, and since all stories of this famous bird are now out of print I am unable to comply with the requests. Feeling that there is a need for an authentic story of Old Abe, I have compiled the following story.

The story of Old Abe is told here by Henry McCann, son of the McCanns who purchased the eagle from the Indians. ([Grandfather of Memorials' own ex. custodian; Bill McCann](#)), Mr. McCann gave this story in a talk at the Centennial exercises held in Chippewa Falls in 1937. Note that this story is notarized, and we believe it to be a true story of Old Abe, The War Eagle.

In selecting the articles used in this story, I have taken only the ones that are authentic and can be substantiated.

## OLD ABE, THE WAR EAGLE

by Henry McCann

Being the son of Dan and Margaret (LaPont) McCann, who were the original purchasers of the old War Eagle from the Chippewa tribe of Indians, though it would be of interest at this time to give an authentic history of Old Abe.

In the spring of '61 a band of Flambeau Indians (Chippewa Tribe), under the leadership of Chief Sky, were making their annual spring trip down the river in birch bark canoe with a quantity of maple sugar to trade for supplies. One night while camped at the mouth of Jump River, which was known as Surveyors' point, they saw an old Eagle hovering around a tall tree. One of the young bucks climbed the tree to the nest and while up there the old eagle charged on him and had to be shot. The young lad found two young eagles in the nest and brought them down.

On their way down the river they stopped at the Brunets to try to sell the little eagles, but they didn't want them. Then they came down to old Dan McCanns whose home was on the flat about 12 rods above the west end of the present dam. The home sight is now under water.

The Indians wanted something to eat (an Indian is always hungry); Mother gave them some food which she had on hand. We had just finished planting corn and had about half a bushel left in a sack and the Indians wanted to trade maple sugar for the corn, but as we made our own maple sugar we had no use for theirs. Still persisting, the Indians wanted to trade one of the young eagles for the corn but Mother when seeing them said they were crows, but to convince her they went to the canoe and brought up the old eagle, She finally traded for one of the young eagles. We never heard what became of the other young bird.

The eagle became quite a pet during the time we had it which was a little more than a year. Father was a cripple. He used to play the fiddle for our amusement and the eagle seemed to like it. I recall one time that he played Bonapartes March, and the eagle would walk around when he played the slow part, but when he played the fast part he would flutter his wings and hop and dance as if he knew what it was all about.

In order to keep the eagle home, we clipped his wings while young and tied him with a fish line. As time went on we neglected to clip the wings again. One day he broke the line and flew to the river, where he managed to escape. He again flew north as far as Bruney Falls and was gone four days before he returned home. Old Abe was recognized by some people who knew him by the blue ribbon we kept tied around his neck. After this escapade we kept him securely tied. It became quite a task to feed him; my brother and sister would go hunting every day for rabbits and partridge of which he would get his share, He could eat a rabbit or partridge in a day, and a mouse was like a pill; he would swallow it whole.

Sam and Porter Poppel were at our home talking about the regiment of soldiers that was about to leave Eau Claire, and suggested to "Dad" that he take the eagle to Eau Claire and present it to the soldiers for a mascot. He took the eagle, but Captain Perkins turned down his offer. In talking to the soldiers, "Dad" said that the bird was gentle and easy to train and knew many tricks, and if they would get him a fiddle he would show them what he could do. This they did and "Dad" played Bonaparts March and the bird performed and then they decided to take the bird as a mascot. Thus the company was changed from the Badger Company to the Eagle Company. "Dad" was pleased to think they were going to take the bird in his place because he was crippled and unable to serve.

A few years later Mr. and Mrs. Rutledge were visiting at the home of Jackson Phillips at the South end of Jim Falls. When they were ready to leave they asked "Dad" if I could help pull the boat up to Deer Trail just below Flambeau Farm on the south side of the river. We stopped for lunch, and during the conversation Mr. Rutledge said, "No doubt the tree is in sight where Old Abe was caught, if we but knew which one."

From the time the bird left for war, he became famous day by day and was the pride and joy of the soldiers of the Eagle Regiment. I would advise you to read of his history on the battle fields during the Civil War and see what moral courage he instilled in his Company.

Later on I may give you a story of the river drives. HENRY McCANN, Chippewa Falls, R. No.2.

Subscribed and sworn to before me this 25th day of Sept. 1937. A.J.LIBHE, Notary Public. My Commission expires April 7, 1940

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The eagle was sworn into the United States service as Old Abe, the Mascot, and decorated with red, white and blue ribbons and a rosette of the same colors. A stand was made on which he could be carried, and Company C in September 1861, marched to the Chippewa river on their way to Madison where they were mustered in as the Eau Claire Eagle Regiment. The next day they landed at La Crosse, and the news was soon carried through the city that the soldiers from Chippewa valley had come with a live eagle at their head. Thousands of people greeted the boys as they landed at La Crosse. While here, Captain Perkins was offered \$200.00 for the eagle but he replied, "The eagle belongs to the company and no money can buy him."

Arriving in Madison, at Camp Randall, an immense crowd of people gathered, and as the regiment marched into camp, the eagle expanded his wings and seized a corner of the American flag that was floating over him, and carried it in his beak all through the march.

In all of the marches or parades, the eagle always rode on the left of the color bearer and was carried in the same manner as the flag. On the 12th of October 1861, the regiment started for the front. Stopping in Chicago, the regiment marched through the city with the eagle carried aloft at the head of Company C and he attracted as much attention as the soldiers themselves. From there the next stop was at St. Louis, Missouri. During the time they were in St. Louis the eagle was the center of attraction. One man offered \$500 for the eagle, which Captain Perkins refused saying, "I would just as soon sell one of my men."

During a battle the appearance of Old Abe was perfectly magnificent; to be seen in all of his glory was when the battle commenced, he would spring up, spread his wings, uttering a startling scream, heard and felt, and gloried in by all of the soldiers. The fiercer and louder the storm, the fiercer and louder were his screams.

The Confederates called him the "Yankee Buzzard". General Price ordered his men to capture or shoot him. Price said he would sooner capture Old Abe than a whole regiment of men.

In one of his books, Hosea M. Food says; "I saw him myself but once during the war. One day early in December 1862, my regiment, the twelfth Wisconsin, was marching toward the front in a skirmish near Waterford, Mississippi. The Eighth was in line along the road. As we came near, one of our boys said, "This is the Eighth Wisconsin, and there is their eagle close by the flag." As we approached, Old Abe was standing quietly on his perch, but when our flag came in front of him he arose to his full height, spread his broad wings and flapped them three or four times, after which he settled down and watched us go by. It is a real pleasure to me now, fifty-eight years later, to have seen Old Abe thus salute Old Glory that day down in Mississippi. No schoolgirl in Wisconsin could salute the flag in a more graceful manner than did Old Abe. Both the eagle and the flag came to be cherished relics in our state capitol."

Old Abe remembered his friends; on one occasion a few years after the war, a reunion was being held in Madison. Old Abe was on his perch in the capitol park where he was kept on nice days in the summer time. A group of veterans was talking, one of them said, "Let's go and see Old Abe, I served with him the war." When they came near to where he was, one of the men sounded a peculiar whistle; Old Abe raised up, looked all around and finally settled down. The man whistled again; Old Abe was all excited. The man walked up to Old Abe and he put his head against the man's face. This token of affection touched the soldier's heart, tears came to his eyes as he put his arms around Old Abe. "Boys," said he. "I wouldn't have missed this for a hundred dollars."

The regiment and eagle fought in forty-two battles and skirmished. The only harm to Old Abe was the loss of a few feathers.

The Eighth Wisconsin, after three years of war decided to present Old Abe to the State of Wisconsin, so on the twenty-sixth day of September 1864, Captain Victor Wolf of Co. C, of the Eighth Wisconsin (Captain Perkins had died of wounds) formally presented to the State of Wisconsin its famous war eagle, Old Abe.

A large room was fitted up for him in the basement of the capitol and a man was assigned to take care of him.

His last public appearance was at the National Encampment of the G. A. R. in Milwaukee in 1880. General Grant and Old Abe were the honored guests. When the band played, he uttered his battle scream, consisting of five or six wild trilling notes in quick succession.

He was sleek and majestic, a complacent creature of the forest. It was a great day for Old Abe.

In February of the cold winter of 1881, some paints and oils kept in a room near him in the Capitol caught on fire in the night. The people in the building heard Old Abe scream, they went to the basement, dense clouds of smoke and bad smelling gasses filled the corridors and the cage room. They went through the dense smoke and opened the cage door, when Old Abe flew out along the corridor. Hew was not only frightened by the smoke but suffocated because of the gas fumes in his lungs. He was not well after that. He lived about a month longer, and on the 28th day of March 1881, with a few of his old friends around him, died in the arms of George Gillis, his keeper.

His body was mounted and kept in Memorial Hall in the capitol ; when the capitol burned in 1904, Old Abe burned with the capitol.

In Memorial Hall in the capitol is a replica of Old Abe presented to the Hall by the American Legion Post of Mellen, Wisconsin. One will find in the Hall, the original painting of Old Abe by James A. Stewart to Robert M. la Follette Sr., who presented it to Memorial Hall.