

Memories of the 1876 Centennial in Spencer County

BY DON STEEN

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Rockport celebrated a very special Fourth of July in 1876, hosting a fair fraction of the county population for a grand celebration of the nation's centennial. Thousands assembled in the pre-dawn hours that Tuesday to ensure they wouldn't miss a minute of the fun. In fact, the community of Centerville was essentially deserted as all but one man left for the county seat, "to guard the town", as he told reporters of the time.

No redcoats were coming that day, in Centerville or anywhere else for that matter. In Rockport, it was a decidedly colonial affair.

A grand procession was formed in front of the Courthouse by the Colonial Guards, all in uniforms of the Revolutionary War era. The parade of colonial soldiers was a popular attraction, as the War for Independence had passed beyond living memory. The last verified veteran of that

war died shortly after the Civil War, and children and adults alike of the late 19th Century found their manner of dress quite the novelty. It wasn't just men getting in on the fun either.

"Miss Rosa Richardson represented the costume of a hundred years ago in a veritable "cotton" dress, which has been an heirloom in her mother's family for many years," recorded *The Rockport Democrat*. "And the little maiden was as merry and gay as if she had been attired in a fashionable pullback, and never looked any prettier in her life."

Other young ladies of Spencer County were dressed in pure white, representing several states of the union.

Indeed, the newspapermen of the day mused that perhaps the styles of 1776 might come back in vogue. Spencer Countians found those costumed on the Fourth of July to be "exceedingly becoming."

Fashion was not the only Revolutionary activity on the itinerary that day. The pleasure boat, "Juanetta", was mounted on

wheels and paraded through Rockport with masts and sails hoisted, to represent the British ships involved in a certain Tea Party in Boston.

While colonial troops marched in parade formation, other patriots threw several boxes of tea "overboard" in much the same way a modern parade might throw candy. The grand procession continued from the Courthouse to Young's Grove, west of town. There were upwards of 3,000 onlookers present for the parade, and apparently thousands more waiting at the grove.

The morning festivities concluded with a reading of the Declaration of Independence by Judge C.H. Mason and an address by prominent local citizen, Robert True Kercheval. With the speaking engagements concluded, the enormous crowd broke for lunch.

It was just in time too, as a torrential downpour began around noon. While it certainly helped beat the summer heat, it proved a conundrum for the many in-

tricately costumed citizens in attendance.

"It was entertaining to see the people go to the grove, July Fourth, but it was far more delightful, and delectably entertaining to see them returning after the heavy rain," observed *The Rockport Democrat*. "Ah! Then and there was hurrying to and fro, and white stockings which but an hour ago, were so pure and nice, so beautifully white, are now sadly mused, and a very sad sight."

While it quite literally rained on Spencer County's Centennial Parade, it was well worth the trip to Rockport that day. George V. Davis provided apples regarded as very fine by those in attendance. The traditional barbecue was also quite popular, with sheep meat available in abundance.

All in all, Spencer Countians in Rockport had quite a celebration to remember the nation's Centennial by. It was a chance to remember historical events that since passed into legend, and live it up as they had in "ye olden time."



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