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LAKELAND, FLORIDA

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SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR: 100 YEARS LATER



Provided to The Ledger

The 2nd Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry conducts an evening parade in Lakeland on May 30, 1898.

Forever Changed by War

Lakeland Found Itself at Center of Army's Preparation for Landmark Battle

By **BILL RUFTY**

The Ledger

When the train pulled into Lakeland on May 14, 1898, soldiers disembarked on the north side of Munn Park. The scene was repeated countless times during the next three days as Army regiments arrived, then unloaded tents and supplies.

At the end of the three days, Lakeland — population 1,000 — had become host to almost 9,000 soldiers headed to Cuba to fight the Spanish. Residents who remembered the Civil War were now making friends with troops from New York, Massachusetts and Ohio.

Writers of the time described the atmosphere as exciting and full of adventure. The war that was coming was a short one.

In the words of Theodore Roosevelt, who commanded the volunteer cavalry known as the Rough Riders, "It wasn't much of a war, but it was the only war we had."

And it forever changed the United States and Lakeland.



CALVIN KNIGHT/The Ledger

A Cuba Libre cigar box label from 1896 is part of the University of South Florida Library's Special Collections Department.

It was the beginning of modern warfare, when tactics played a more important role than previous wars. Because soldiers no longer used muskets or single-loaded shots, they no longer marched and charged in standing battle formations. They crawled, fired from the prone position and used the landscape to protect themselves as they

advanced.

It was the beginning of the United States' involvement in world affairs after more than 100 years of following George Washington's advice of "no entangling alliances."

And it left the United States as a colonial power with Puerto Rico and the Philippines as its possessions.

PLEASE SEE WAR, A12

Based Here

Units stationed in Lakeland:

■ The 10th U.S. Cavalry, which camped on the eastern side of Lake Wire, where Lakeland Middle Academy now stands.

■ The 71st New York Volunteer Infantry, which camped on the northwest side of Lake Morton on the site of the present-day Lane Trohn law firm.

■ The 2nd Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, which camped on the north side of Lake Morton, where the Park Trammell Building and the Ruthven Building are located.

■ The 1st U.S. Cavalry, which camped between Lake Morton and Lake Hollingsworth.

■ The 1st Ohio Volunteer Cavalry, which camped on the southeast side of Lake Morton. Arriving late, July 15, the group did not see action beyond training.

Members of the 3rd U.S. Cavalry who were wounded or ill also spent time in Lakeland, according to a research paper by Hal Hubener, head of special collections at Lakeland Public Library and author of a soon-to-be-published article on Spanish-American War troops stationed in Lakeland.

SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR: 100 Years Later

War

CONTINUED FROM A1

In Lakeland, townspeople waved from plank sidewalks as the soldiers marched south from the station, past Munn Park and down the sandy road to Lake Morton. Boys ran in the streets behind the mule trains, pretending to drill while watching the soldiers in camp.

The summer encounter lifted the town out of the depression that followed massive citrus freezes in 1895 and 1896.

In the spring and summer of 1898, five regiments — 64,000 Army men and volunteers — trained in Lakeland. They were squeezed out of Tampa, headquarters of the Army's V Corps operations against the Spanish in Cuba.

The regiments trained for three or four weeks, then moved to Port Tampa to board ships bound for Cuba. They left behind their supply depots and hospital units.

The wounded returned to Lakeland to be treated either at post hospitals or residents' homes. The last ones didn't leave until the end of August.

ECONOMIC BOOST

Florida's economy benefited from the war. Its impact: \$6 million in 1898 dollars, according to historians at the Henry B. Plant Museum in Tampa. About \$4 million was spent in Tampa; about \$400,000 in Lakeland.

Units in Lakeland bought much of their fresh meat and produce from Lakeland-area farmers and butchers. They bought lemonade from kids who set up stands. And they ate at the homes of residents. One volunteer recalled eating the most delicate hot cakes at the

home of an African-American woman. Cost: 20 cents for a full breakfast that included sugar cane syrup and hot coffee.

But not all was positive. Some tried to make money off misery.

Charles Johnson Post, a private in the 71st New York Volunteer Infantry, wrote of a station master in Waycross, Ga., who was selling Army-issued coffee to the troops. The man was forced to

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Unscrupulous meat packers sold the Army canned meat that was at least 5 years old. More American soldiers died of food poisoning and dysentery than bullets.

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come up with more coffee, and the soldiers got all the coffee they wanted on their train ride to Lakeland.

Others weren't so fortunate. Unscrupulous meat packers sold the Army canned meat that was at least 5 years old. More American soldiers died of food poisoning and dysentery than bullets.

WAR IN THE MAKING

When Cubans began rebelling against the Spanish government in the early 1890s, Ybor City became a hotbed of revolutionary activity among the Cuban exiles in the cigar business there. Jose Marti spoke there, and many Cuban insurgent commanders left

from Tampa.

In the meantime, William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer began a circulation war based on sensationalism about the Cuban rebellion.

When illustrator Frederic Remington told Hearst that nothing was happening in Havana in early 1898 and he wanted to return home, Hearst told him to stay.

"You furnish the pictures, Freddie, and I will furnish the war," Hearst said.

Not long after, on Feb. 15, 1898, the battleship Maine exploded in Havana Harbor. There was no turning back. The United States declared war on Spain, and Adm. George Dewey was dispatched to Manila Bay.

In the meantime, Henry B. Plant, who had just built his railroad across Florida — including a side station in Lakeland and terminus in Tampa — resolved that Tampa should be the embarkation point. An associate who lobbied Washington was successful, and the Army chose the Moorish-style Tampa Bay Hotel (now the Henry B. Plant Museum on the Tampa University campus) as its headquarters.

In Lakeland, like Tampa, residents waited for news of the war in all its exaggerated glory. And they prepared for life after August, when all the troops left.

When the war ended, tourism and commerce increased. Neither the port of Tampa nor the city of Lakeland returned to the sleepy towns they had been before that day in May when the first troop trains pulled onto a side railing and brought the nation to Florida.