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# General Nathaniel B. Baker and the grasshopper plagues in northwest Iowa, 1873-1875

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**General Nathaniel B. Baker and the grasshopper plagues in northwest Iowa, 1873-1875**

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 2. THE GRASSHOPPER INVASION .....	3
CHAPTER 3. ADJUTANT GENERAL NATHANIEL B. BAKER .....	11
CHAPTER 4. BAKER TAKES COMMAND .....	17
CHAPTER 5. THE LEGISLATURE AND THE SEED BILL .....	46
CHAPTER 6. RETURN OF THE GRASSHOPPERS .....	68
CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION .....	79
ABBREVIATIONS .....	84
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	85

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Northwest Iowa in the early 1870s witnessed an influx of settlers who came to start a new life. A majority of these settlers were former Union soldiers from as far away as New York and Pennsylvania; most, however, were from Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois and Wisconsin with the largest contingent being from Iowa. The settlers came to take advantage of the Homestead Act of 1862, and many chose to settle in the prairie frontier of northwest Iowa. However, the settlers' resolve was tested by winged insect marauders who destroyed their crops and left them destitute in their wake.

The story of the grasshopper plague that visited northwest Iowa in 1873 and 1874 is an account defined by crisis, civic duty, and charity on one of the last American frontiers and illuminated a forgotten warrior politician whose final act defined altruism. That man was the Adjutant General of the state of Iowa, Nathaniel B. Baker. Although not a native of Iowa, he gave much to the state beginning in the Civil War and ending only with his death. Twentieth and twenty-first century Civil War historians frequently forget him, but his last duty to his adopted state is worth description and a fair amount of praise. Baker's effort to aid the destitute homesteaders of northwest Iowa was an act of altruism that saved many lives.

Baker had also been a newspaperman in his home state of New Hampshire, and he was a member for many years of the State Press Association in Iowa. His experience allowed him to write columns on public affairs in major state papers, especially the *Iowa*

*State Register* for which he wrote numerous “powerful, stirring” articles.<sup>1</sup> Many of those articles were written during the grasshopper plagues, and he collected them along with several others from varying newspapers in the state. These make up the core of this thesis.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lorenzo F. Andrews, *Pioneer of Polk County*, Vol. 1. (Des Moines: Baker-Trisler Company, 1908), 385.

<sup>2</sup> All newspaper accounts are found in Baker’s scrapbooks in the Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northwest Iowa Volumes 1-4, Boxes 4-5, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines. Baker cut out all articles from different papers throughout the state from 1873 to 1875 that pertained to the relief effort for the homesteaders. Some of these articles did not have titles, or Baker wrote the names of the newspapers next to the article. The only way some articles can be placed chronologically is to see which articles that do have dates are before or after the article in question. Additionally since many articles were pasted somewhat poorly, some of the words have disappeared in the heavier glue. Please see the Abbreviations section for the *Iowa State Register* and the *Sioux City Daily Journal* abbreviations.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE GRASSHOPPER INVASION

The first written account of grasshoppers descending upon Iowa was written by Charles B. Richards of Fort Dodge in 1867, which provided the most useful account of grasshoppers in Iowa. These marauders arrived on September 8 at noon as locals noticed that these flying insects filled the sky. They came from the west and appeared as if they were snow-flakes, the kind that fall slowly in the absence of wind. As soon as the grasshoppers landed, they began the process of laying eggs. The type of land they preferred, according to Richards, was the sandy areas, as well as newly broken ground and the harder ground usually near roads. More and more came and made their way to the ground and covered everything, including buildings and fences. The grasshoppers also ate the bark off young fruit trees such as apple, cherry, pear and other trees. The damage to currants, gooseberries, and shrubs was even more severe as the grasshoppers feasted on the fruit buds. The grasshoppers did not leave the area until the frost, an action which led to their deaths.<sup>3</sup>

Even though the grasshoppers of the previous year had died, they left behind their eggs, which farmers found exceedingly difficult to destroy. Eventually the grasshoppers emerged from their eggs; it seemed that they covered everything on the ground. These young grasshoppers only measured an eighth of an inch in length, and their favorite sources of

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<sup>3</sup> Cyrus C. Carpenter, "The Grasshopper Invasion," *Annals of Iowa* Vol. 4., (July 1900)  
<http://iagenweb.org/history/annuals/jul1900.htm>.

nourishment were new and tender crops like barley, wheat, and garden vegetables. Some farmers attempted to halt the advance of the young grasshoppers by keeping their wheat trimmed. However, in 1868 the pests stripped a large portion of the wheat as well as the trimmed stalks, leaving no leaves on the plants. The grasshoppers then went up on the roads and ate everything near them. Inside the ten day period when wheat headed out, the grasshoppers moulted. During the next 5 to 6 days the grasshoppers drastically changed their appearance and mode of operation. They grew wings and could then fly thousands of miles. The moulting process of the grasshopper allowed them to shed their original skin right down to the bottom of their feet and over their eyes.<sup>4</sup> Richards examined one such grasshopper observing how its new fragile developing white wings were “neatly packaged” and that “the slightest touch destroys them.”<sup>5</sup>

Following their transformation, grasshoppers began to test their wings only two days after developing them; their first flights were short and took place where they were feeding. When they reached their tenth day after moulting, they rose high in the air and abandoned the place of their hatching. Ten days after gaining their wings, they left, heading wherever the wind took them, and as Richards related, they did not return again.<sup>6</sup>

Governor Cyrus C. Carpenter related how the grasshopper plague developed in northwest Iowa in the summer of 1873. This band of insect marauders arrived in the state on southwest winds and spread in great flocks ranging from Fort Dodge in the southeast, the Minnesota border to the north, and westward beyond the border of Iowa. Carpenter reported that the people of Webster County and the townships in the northern regions of the Des Moines River suffered the most from this infestation in 1873. Beyond those areas, Carpenter

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

feared that the counties of Buena Vista, Clay, and Dickinson might also become targets of the swarm.<sup>7</sup>

The grasshopper raid in 1873 was far worse than the one experienced only six years earlier when the grasshoppers came earlier in the summer and gained their wings earlier in the season as well. Carpenter related how this group of grasshoppers went through the same processes as those that Richards recorded. There was one difference and it had serious lasting effects on the population of the northwestern Iowa: they never received the strong north wind necessary to lift them off on their flight elsewhere.<sup>8</sup>

Carpenter further related that if eggs were deposited in the fall, there was a high probability that the grasshoppers would destroy the produce of the garden and small grains the following season. There was one bright spot: corn would not be destroyed as the gardens and small grains would. Only if the grasshoppers appeared in the fall would there be danger to corn, and if farmers were aware that the old swarm was appearing in September and October and eggs were deposited, they should scrap any plans they had for raising grains and only grow corn and potatoes.<sup>9</sup> Carpenter wrote that he felt that grasshoppers should not be seen only as a scourge but also as a helper, for they forced farmers to quit spending so much time, effort, and money on wheat and instead pursue a more diversified system of farming.

Simply knowing what and why something ails society does not completely remove the stress and fear these situations provide. Settlers throughout Iowa frequently looked in the clear sky to the west for tiny white winged grasshoppers, the herald of the great grasshopper

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



invasion which within a few days might arrive and destroy their crops. This was especially true if the wind came from the southwest.<sup>10</sup>

Understanding what happened in 1873 requires looking at the immediate post-Civil War period when northwestern Iowa was considered the great desert of the Midwest.<sup>11</sup> Myriad newspaper editors worked to change the perception of the region. Their efforts were helped by several entrepreneurs who tried to convince people to settle there using the Homestead Act and referring to the area as tomorrow's "Garden of the West."<sup>12</sup> As of 1870 the region was still fairly devoid of settlers which forced the state legislature to create a Board of Immigration. Such boards had shown promise in other Midwestern states like Kansas, Minnesota, and Nebraska. To help in this effort the Board sent twenty thousand pamphlets as well as several representatives to New England and the Middle Atlantic States, to illustrate the agricultural resources found both in northwest Iowa and the state as a whole.<sup>13</sup> The board also hoped it could snatch some of the settlers going through the region by railroad or wagon attempting to reach areas farther west.<sup>14</sup>

The Board of Immigration's toils were quickly rewarded as several new settlers arrived in northwest Iowa, most looking to take full advantage of the Homestead Act. The typical settler brought only a limited number of personal possessions along with beasts of burden and just enough seed to produce crops for only one season. Many settlers placed their trust in nature as only a good crop would ensure that they would be able to survive on Iowa's last frontier. As the spring of 1872 dawned, the settlers received what they prayed for as nature provided for them, and the harvest that fall allowed many of the homesteaders to

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>11</sup> Mary K. Fredericksen, "The Grasshopper Wars," *Palimpsest* 62 (September/October, 1981): 151.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Pamphlets were also sent to Europe but it is unlikely representatives were sent as well.

<sup>14</sup> Fredericksen, 151.

survive the winter of 1872-1873. The farmers were very pleased with the progress of the first year and believed that there would be even more bumper harvests in future years. Along with the promise of increased railroad service, which would offer more markets for their crops, the homesteaders spent much of their savings toward new farm implements. Unfortunately, the homesteaders went into debt purchasing this equipment. Merchants who freely allowed the homesteaders to purchase their wares on credit added to the risk.<sup>15</sup>

As spring began, the months of March and April experienced especially cold and rainy weather which significantly delayed planting and hindered the homesteaders' effort. When they were at last able to get their seed in the ground, it took longer than usual for the grain to sprout. Many saw a major turnaround as oats and wheat began to take shape and "waxed luxuriant" in the wind.<sup>16</sup> But their great crop was not to be. By June 5, both O'Brien and Osceola counties were filled with grasshoppers, and on the 13<sup>th</sup> of that month Emmet and Pocahontas counties were also infested. Within days, the insect marauders had also made their way to Dickinson, Clay, and Buena Vista counties. By July, Humboldt County was also infested.<sup>17</sup> Many homesteaders awoke at sunrise and saw their crops and the promise they held to pay their debt and support their families, but if the grasshoppers appeared by sunset, their crop would be cut to the ground.<sup>18</sup>

Lyon County exemplified what happened to the farmers when the grasshoppers made their first appearance in mid July 1873. Just as Richards had already reported, when the grasshoppers arrived they appeared to be similar to snowflakes. The local newspaper, the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 151-152.

<sup>16</sup> John E. Briggs, "The Grasshopper Plagues in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, 13 (July 1915): 364.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 359.

<sup>18</sup> "The Grasshopper Plague," *Lyon County Genealogy*, <http://iagenweb.org/lyon/bookhist/compendi/chaptera/grhopper.htm>.

*Review*, warned that corn and oats would most likely be destroyed but wheat was most likely out of reach. As local farmers attempted to curb the situation, they found that grasshoppers had crawled down the backs of their shirts and up their pants, and their sting was almost as sharp as that of a bee. One of the pioneers in Lyon County reported that when the pests appeared, they congregated on tall thin trees. Their combined weight was so great that most of the branches touched the earth and they left willow hedges completely devoid of leaves. This happened in June, the month before the larger invasion of July.<sup>19</sup>

The railroads were also affected. Their trains' wheels smashed so many grasshoppers as they sat on the tracks that the oil from their crushed carapaces made the railroad so slick that they could not get enough traction and were forced to shut down.<sup>20</sup> When the grasshoppers finally left, the noon day sun was darkened.<sup>21</sup> This darkening had been compared to a solar eclipse, a somber sight to all who viewed it.<sup>22</sup>

Iowa was far from the permanent breeding grounds of the Rocky Mountain Locusts which in the United States were located in Montana, southern Idaho, northwestern Utah, eastern Wyoming, central Colorado, northwestern Nebraska, and the western half of the Dakotas. In Canada the breeding grounds took up a large area in the province of Saskatchewan. Geographically these breeding grounds were in river valleys, grass lands, and sunny slopes.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Briggs, 353.

<sup>21</sup> "The Grasshopper Plagues"

<sup>22</sup> Briggs, 353.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 351.

In comparison with grasshoppers in Europe which flew hundreds of miles to return to their native breeding grounds, most Northern American grasshoppers had a much larger area to travel and could fly between one and two thousand miles.<sup>24</sup>

An example of the aftermath of the grasshoppers' work comes from Osceola County where in August of 1873 seventy-five percent of the homesteaders had barely enough wheat for both seed and bread, ten percent only had enough to produce bread, and fifteen percent were projected to be without both.<sup>25</sup> As autumn loomed, there would be nothing to harvest. This was especially true in Dickinson, Emmet, and Kossuth counties where the greatest amount of damage of had occurred. Other counties only sustained partial damage in limited areas as in Humboldt, Palo Alto, and Pocahontas. Additionally, the family gardens were total failures.<sup>26</sup>

Without question, the sufferers of northwestern Iowa needed some kind of aid if they hoped to survive through the winter, and the Grange stepped in to help. The Grange was founded in Minnesota by Oliver Hudson Kelley a few years after the Civil War. The majority of members were farmers, and the organization worked against railroads and elevators who were forcing their members to pay more for the services they controlled.<sup>27</sup> The organization was well known throughout northwestern Iowa, had a very strong foothold in the region and no doubt had the easiest route to effectively see to the pressing needs of the sufferers. Almost immediately, homesteaders sent letters describing their conditions and asking for supplies to all levels of the Grange including National Grange, the state Grange, and the smaller local Granges of Iowa. Local commissions were created also to help enlist

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<sup>24</sup> Briggs, 350-351.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 367.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 369.

<sup>27</sup> Leland L. Sage, *A History of Iowa* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1974): 188-189.

aid. In Osceola County the residents created the Homesteader's Protective Association whose goal was to identify the sufferers and what they needed.<sup>28</sup>

If matters seemed grim in August, they worsened during the middle of September when a financial panic took hold of the country. Cash payments were suspended in the large cities, resulting in money becoming extremely scarce. Loans were also out of the question as bankers refused to negotiate no matter what the terms were. For the farmers of northwest Iowa who needed crops to provide security, any notion of gaining a loan became complete folly. Compounding these issues, many of the homesteaders were dealing with what they coined as "biting grasshoppers" in the form of collection agents with whom they had made deals in spring and now came looking for their money.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 372.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 365.

## CHAPTER 3

### ADJUTANT GENERAL NATHANIEL B. BAKER

The man who would do the most to help the destitute settlers of northwest Iowa was General Nathaniel Bradley Baker. Baker was born on September 29, 1818 in Hillsborough, Merrimack County in New Hampshire. As a young man he received a liberal education at Phillips Exeter Academy, and following his graduation he enrolled at Harvard taking a “full course” of the required curriculum. A college graduate at 21, Baker sought a career as a lawyer and began to study law under Franklin Pierce, a future American president. In 1842 the young Harvard graduate was admitted to the bar.<sup>1</sup>

After his acceptance to the bar, Baker opened a law office in Concord. Also, he invested in the newspaper *The New Hampshire Patriot*, controlling fifty percent of the paper as well as being its editor for three years.<sup>2</sup> As his reputation as a lawyer increased, he earned new posts. In 1845 Baker was named as the Clerk of Court of Common Pleas and the following year received the post of Clerk of the Supreme Court. As many successful men of the law have done, Baker soon turned his interest toward politics and in 1851 was elected to serve in the New Hampshire legislature representing Concord. In the legislature he was elected Speaker of the House where he served with distinction.<sup>3</sup>

1852 was also an important year in the General’s political career as that year’s presidential election neared. The Democratic Party desired to nominate a Northeasterner as

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<sup>1</sup> B. F. Gue, “General Nathaniel B. Baker,” *Annals of Iowa* Vol. I (1893): 82. Gue was the first to write a biography of Baker. This fact along with there being very few other biographies of Baker makes Gue’s article the cornerstone work on Baker’s life. Other historians merely attempted to fill holes that Gue had not filled or simply copied him.

<sup>2</sup> David Hudson, Marvin Bergman, and Loren Horton, eds., “Nathaniel B. Baker,” *The Biographical Dictionary of Iowa* (Iowa City: The University of Iowa Press, 2008), 23.

<sup>3</sup> Gue, 82.

their presidential candidate and the staunchly Democratic Baker was one of the possible candidates. However, Baker's old friend and mentor Franklin Pierce was also being vetted for the nomination, so Baker acquiesced and gave all his political capital to Pierce's candidacy. Pierce received the nomination and achieved a landslide victory. Baker was given the honor of being one of the presidential electors, and it was with great pleasure that he gave New Hampshire's votes to his friend. At the politically young age of thirty-five, Baker was now considered one of the leaders of the Democratic Party.<sup>4</sup>

In 1854 Baker surged to the Democratic Party nomination for governor in New Hampshire. He accepted his nomination with great energy and received the majority of the votes over the Free Soil and Whig candidates thanks to his immense popularity.<sup>5</sup> As governor of New Hampshire he supported bills presented in the state legislature that condemned the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Missouri Compromise although neither received enough votes to pass. He also witnessed the push for a bill to give women the right to author a will but it was also struck down.<sup>6</sup>

Baker served only one term. A reason for this might be that he became involved with Know Nothing politics which did little to help his popularity.<sup>7</sup> A more likely scenario was that the expanding anti-slavery movement in concert with the rise of the new Republican Party most likely hurt the staunch Democrat Baker in New Hampshire.<sup>8</sup> Following his defeat

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 82-83.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>6</sup> "New Hampshire Governor Nathaniel B. Baker." National Governors Association. <http://www.nga.org/portal/site/nga/menuitem.29fab9fb4add37305ddcbeeb501010a0/?vgnextoid=accfa0c234012110VgnVCM1000001a01010aRCRD&vgnnextchannel=e449a0ca9e3f1010VgnVCM1000001a01010aRCRD>.

<sup>7</sup> A. A. Stuart, *History of Iowa Regiments in the War of the Rebellion* (Des Moines, IA: Mills and Company, 1865), 17.

<sup>8</sup> Hudson, Bergman, and Horton, eds., 23.

he moved to Clinton, Iowa, and as later stated by B. F. Gue, “the State of Iowa is chiefly indebted for his transfer of residence.”<sup>9</sup>

After settling in Clinton, Iowa, Baker continued his law profession and in 1859 was elected to the Iowa legislature. War clouds dominated the nation after Abraham Lincoln’s election to the presidency spurred South Carolina and six other southern states to secede from the Union before his inauguration. By the spring of 1861 the Civil War had begun, forcing Iowa Governor Samuel Kirkwood to call for a special session of the Iowa Legislature to formulate a plan to raise and equip regiments for which the state was responsible.<sup>10</sup> The session began on May 16, with Baker in attendance. It seems that Baker was just as popular in Iowa as he had once been in New Hampshire as he immediately became the leader of the House.<sup>11</sup>

Baker was one of the “War Democrats” who remained loyal to the Union even though he did not change his party affiliation and become a Republican as so many of the leading politicians of the North had done. Nevertheless, he had shown a great deal of leadership in the session and was made the chair of the Committee on Military Affairs.<sup>12</sup> He had also shown considerable loyalty to Governor Kirkwood who appointed him Adjutant General of Iowa on July 25.<sup>13</sup>

While he set up his new office as Adjutant General, some in the state thought that Baker could become governor, and in August 1861 a collection of splinter political organizations, who opposed both the Democrats and the Republicans, met in Des Moines and

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<sup>9</sup>Johnson Bingham, “Nathaniel Bradley Baker,” *Iowa—Its History and Its Foremost Citizens*, Vol. I (Chicago: S. J. Clark, 1915), 323.

<sup>10</sup> At his point in time the Iowa Legislature only met on odd years.

<sup>11</sup> Gue, 87.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>13</sup> Stuart, 17.



held a convention as the “Union Party” and nominated Baker as their candidate for governor. Baker refused to accept their nomination and threw his whole support behind Governor Kirkwood.<sup>14</sup>

With politics now behind him, Baker directed all his energies into creating the Adjutant General’s department. This was not easy given the constrained state budget reflecting the Panic of 1857 and its lingering aftereffects. Moreover, Iowa was not as prepared for the war as many thought it to be.<sup>15</sup> Regardless, Baker worked hard and adopted strong business principles as the basis for his new department. He began by seeking and hiring high quality assistants to mold into a professional corps of clerks. The most tedious work in the Adjutant General’s department was the expansive records collection; it contained a precise biography of all of Iowa’s soldiers from lowest private to highest officer who ever served in an Iowa Regiment. As the war continued, Baker’s duties increased. Along with being Adjutant General he was also given the appointments of Commissary Officer, Inspector General, Quarter Master, and Paymaster.<sup>16</sup>

Even with these increased duties, Baker worked tirelessly to help provide for the soldiers, whether they were in the field, in the camps, or in hospitals. He received many letters from soldiers and their families often giving aid to the families on the home front.<sup>17</sup> Gue related one of the events which endeared Iowa soldiers and their families to Baker and demonstrated his prominence as the United States’ best Adjutant General during the Civil War. A railroad accident occurred in Indiana leaving a good number of Iowa soldiers killed

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<sup>14</sup> Hudson, Bergman, and Horton, eds., 24.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Gue, 88.

<sup>17</sup> There are more than 60 boxes at the State Historical Society of Iowa Library in Des Moines, IA of correspondence to Baker during the Civil War.

or wounded after the incident.<sup>18</sup> Baker learned that criminal negligence by railroad officials caused the accident. He sent out a public order to the victims and their friends and family not to settle with the company for he would gain reparations from the company himself, and he succeeded.<sup>19</sup> Baker was also known for his generosity. An example of his altruism and magnanimous nature was found in a story that circulated about Baker and a young soldier. They met on a cold winter day during the war. The soldier did not possess proper clothes for winter, so Baker gave the young soldier his own new coat, which had some money in its pockets.<sup>20</sup>

Baker's greatest achievement during the Civil War was a collection of extensive and concise records which were transformed into eight heavy volumes entitled the *Adjutant General's Reports*. The reports began with his gaining the office of Adjutant General in 1861. They continued through 1867 and were widely considered the most well documented accounts of any state's soldier's activities during the Civil War. The eight volumes read like an encyclopedia, and their accuracy is uncanny.<sup>21</sup> They were especially valuable for soldiers and their dependents when seeking pensions and military compensation. Baker also engaged in other administrative issues during the war including organizing the Iowa home guard militia system. At the war's end he used his clout to help work toward the establishment of the Iowa National Guard.<sup>22</sup>

Following the war, Baker continued as Iowa's Adjutant General even as many other states did not keep that office. During the summer of 1870 Baker and several other officers decided there should a great reunion of Iowa soldiers from the Civil War. Baker wanted a

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<sup>18</sup> Gue does not give a date for this event but it must have occurred during the war.

<sup>19</sup> Gue, 91.

<sup>20</sup> Bingham, 325.

<sup>21</sup> Gue, 89.

<sup>22</sup> Hudson, Bergman, and Horton, eds., 24.

big celebration in the state's capital of Des Moines and used his influence with several railroad companies to provide free transportation for the former soldiers. Also, Baker arranged for General William Tecumseh Sherman and General William W. Belknap of Iowa, current Secretary of War, to be at the reunion and welcome the veterans.<sup>23</sup>

The reunion was scheduled for August 31, and fifty thousand people partook in the festivities, most notably twenty thousand Iowa veterans. The event was so big it continued into a second day. Gue referred to the experience as “the proudest day in General Baker’s life.”<sup>24</sup> All the old soldiers who came to the reunion made sure that they shook the General’s hand, and they displayed palpable feelings of affection for their Adjutant General. Not surprisingly, some of the veterans drank too much during the evening and Des Moines Police arrested them. By morning they were at the courthouse when Baker entered and asked several of the soldiers what they were doing there. They replied that they were under arrest. Baker responded saying, “Arrest, h—l!... Get out of here.” The mayor told Baker the men were about to go to trial and Baker responded, “To h—l with your trial. These are my boys. I’ll take care of them. Fall in, boys,” and had them march out of the courthouse. The police and the court were “dumbfounded,” and no more of “His Boys” were arrested.<sup>25</sup> Baker always referred to the soldiers as “His Boys” and soon the members of “His Boys” homesteading in northwest Iowa were going to need his aid once more.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>25</sup> Andrews, 384-385.

<sup>26</sup> Gue, 92-93.

## CHAPTER 4

### BAKER TAKES COMMAND

In a letter to the editor of the *Iowa State Register* printed on November 11, 1873 as the grasshoppers wreaked their havoc, Baker related how he had discovered for the first time that many of the homesteaders in northwest Iowa were former soldiers from Iowa and other Union states, “His Boys.” He alerted the paper that he would soon learn all their names and actively promote getting them the aid they needed to survive the approaching winter. Baker held that other Iowa veterans “in more favored positions” would gladly and liberally donate items to their former comrades. He felt that these donations would serve as a welcome gift for the upcoming Thanksgiving Holiday.

To help the donations reach their desired areas quickly, Baker wrote that he would accept all donations whether in money, clothes, blankets or any other item and would send them free of charge to the nearest railroad line. Additionally, if any veteran had a former comrade living in northwest Iowa, Baker would make sure that specific items got to the specific comrades for whom they were intended. Baker also asked others to send donations, even if they were not veterans of the Civil War.<sup>1</sup>

Baker also acknowledged that the Superintendent of the United States Express Company, William H. Quick, Esq., in Des Moines and Thomas Adams, Superintendent of the American Express Company in Clinton, Iowa made free transportation of donations possible.

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<sup>1</sup> N. B. Baker to Editor of the *Register*, November 1, 1873, Adjutant General’s Letters, Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa: Correspondence, 1873, Box 1, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

Baker explained that when farm products such as wheat and corn were donated, he would put them up for sale immediately and take only the highest bid, and then send the profits directly to the sufferers. He also detailed the extreme need of the homesteaders and warned donors not to wait until Thanksgiving on November 27 to send items but instead ship them out soon so that the homesteaders of the northwest could enjoy Thanksgiving Day as well. Baker also assured donors their names would be on their gifts so sufferers would know of their act of charity. Baker ended the letter by saying that all Iowa newspapers must reprint this letter and that local committees should immediately start sending items.<sup>2</sup>

Three days later Baker made a plea to the Commissioner of Agriculture asking that he send Baker all available seeds so he could distribute them in northwest Iowa. Baker insisted that they would be distributed properly.<sup>3</sup> On the 17<sup>th</sup> Baker sent a note to Tim Robinson, County Auditor of Osceola County in Sibley, saying that he had sent his first load of donated coal, ten tons, for free on the Sioux City and St. Paul Railroad. He asked Robinson to make sure that other counties, not just Osceola, were looked after with this shipment.<sup>4</sup>

On November 21 Baker demonstrated for the first time that even though most people wanted to be recognized for the charitable works, some preferred to remain anonymous. A good example was the case of C.T. Jones, Esq., the Clerk of Washington County, who donated \$25 but did not wish to have his name linked with his donation. Baker also learned that the homesteaders were being forced to burn hay to keep warm, which worked as long as there was no snow on it.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> N. B. Baker to the Commissioner of Agriculture, November 14, 1873, Adjutant General's Letters, Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa: Correspondence, Box 1, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>5</sup> *Iowa State Register*, November 21, 1873. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1 1873-1874, Box 4. Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

During this time, in large part thanks to Baker's efforts, many of the northwest counties began to organize relief committees. Baker was given the authority to help choose the men who would distribute the items donated. In late November he received a letter from Governor Carpenter, his friend and superior, who gave him a stern warning about the selection process and the overall challenges he would face trying to aid the homesteaders. Carpenter warned that some parties would constantly ask for aid; on the other hand, those who are of a more proud and sensitive character would prefer the prospect of starving and freezing and choosing to "go down to the last notch of honesty" rather than letting their conditions be made public. All the agents that are selected must be forced to go and see the sufferers themselves to get an idea of their situations. Carpenter's final point was that there would probably be local politicians who would attempt to become agents to attain political capital and then send the vast majority of the donations that county received to political supporters, so Baker must work hard to make sure no injustice is done to the sufferers.<sup>6</sup> Taking the issues to heart, Baker ordered the following day that all goods not sent to a specific individual must be distributed without distinction of county.<sup>7</sup>

At this same time, Baker wrote to Robinson in Osceola County saying, "When I made the appeal I did not expect the work to fall so much on me. I thought other men in different counties would organize and do the work. I presume some may have done so, but the largest part of the work falls on me and I shall glory in doing it as long as I can relieve one suffering family."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> C. C. Carpenter to N. B. Baker, November 21, 1873, Adjutant General's Letters, Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa: Correspondence. Box 1, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>7</sup> N. B. Baker to H. G. Day of Estherville, IA, November 22, 1873. Adjutant General's Letters, Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa: Correspondence, 1873, Box 1, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>8</sup> N. B. Baker to T. M. Robinson, County Auditor, Sibley Iowa, November 22, 1873, Adjutant General's Papers, Box 1 Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

Baker's offer to have donations sent to him and then have the donations immediately placed on railroad cars headed for northwest Iowa did not sit well with everyone. An article in the *Sioux City Times* on November 22 entitled "Cheap Capital" denounced his system and questioned his character. The writer presented a hypothetical situation in which "Tom Jones" wanted to send a pig's head to Sibley for the sufferers but lamented that he must first send it to Baker in Des Moines. He claimed that Baker would take all the juicy parts and the éclat for himself. Ten days later the pig's head would find its way to Sibley. Next the author said that if Baker had anything to donate to O'Brien County, he should send to it Robinson immediately. If he had nothing to give to the suffering homesteaders, then he should be quiet and "cease his cackling over the eggs of more honorable and charitable men."<sup>9</sup>

Fearing graft, the writer encouraged potential donors to not send anything directly to Baker, for he did not understand why Baker needed to "soil with his hands" food intended to be used by the sufferers in O'Brien County. He concluded stating, "Away with such mockery of the Divine attribute of charity-----away with your buncombe when men are all starving."<sup>10</sup>

Responding to the article in the *Sioux City Times*, Baker explained that he forwarded all donations bound for Osceola to Robinson and C. M. Bailey, Esq., the Distribution Agent of the Homesteaders Association. He received a receipt from Robinson of his boxes and also sent the receipts of the homesteader who received the goods. As far as transportation, the American Express Company and the United States Express Company sent all donations in the form of clothing and provisions to him free of charge and then sent the items to the

<sup>9</sup> "Cheap Capital" *Sioux City Times*, November 22, 1873. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1 1873-1874, Box 4. Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>10</sup> "Cheap Capital," *Sioux City Journal*, November, 22, 1873. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 1873-1874, Box 4. Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

northwest also free of charge. Also, the C., R., I. and the P. R. R. railroad companies transported donations free for the benefit only of the sufferers. The Sioux City and Pacific, Sioux City and St. Paul along with the C., R., I. and P. and Des Moines Valley railroad companies were sending free cars of coal to northwest Iowa. Baker also related that according to the *Dubuque Times*, the Illinois Railroad was offering free transportation for donations and that possibly the Northwestern Railroad would engage in this charitable enterprise.<sup>11</sup>

As Baker continued to be the public of face of the relief effort, he began to receive a glut of letters from the poor homesteaders. The *Iowa State Register* printed some of these, including one that Governor Carpenter had received from a suffering homesteader.<sup>12</sup> The author of the letter, William Belcher of Osceola County, wrote that he had arrived in the county in 1872 with only a single horse, one cow, one ox, and a mere \$11 in his pocket but had built a house for his family and opened 25 acres. During the fall and winter he worked for the railroad--grading in the fall and shoveling snow in the winter--and used the money he made to buy seed wheat and coal. In the spring, he planted 20 acres of wheat, 16 acres of sod corn, and potatoes for one and a half acres. The results were less than thrilling; he only harvested 8 bushels of wheat, 20 bushels of soft corn, none of which contained "a good strong ear," and the potatoes were merely a half a crop. Belcher further related how he only had enough hay for two cows, two oxen, and a little left to burn. He also informed Carpenter that this year, 1873, he and his wife had broken one hundred acres, but a third of his acres went to pay for his team. Moreover, a cold early spring and two invasions of his farm by

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<sup>11</sup> "More Aid to Homesteaders," *ISR*. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 1873-1874, Box 4. Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>12</sup> Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 1873-1874, Box 4, p. 59. Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.



grasshoppers made the chances of Belcher and his family surviving the winter without some sort of aid extremely slight.<sup>13</sup>

Baker continued to receive similar letters throughout the crisis, but the public heard most often about his efforts in transportation and distribution organization associated with the relief work. Baker warned donors that they should not overload trains even though the express companies were more than willing to ship boxes and packages, but he did not want to anger the railroads by halting them from doing their regular business.<sup>14</sup>

Baker attempted to show the transparency of his relief efforts, and on November 26 printed a letter from Robinson in Osceola County in the *Iowa State Register*. Robinson reflected on how he sent another receipt of goods distributed and how Bailey was gathering more names to send to Baker. He reported that the weather was fairly good considering the season. The major point of Robinson's letter was that the newspapers had exaggerated events in northwestern Iowa. No one in O'Brien County had died of starvation, and due to the mild weather, the suffering had not been as bad as one might have originally thought. Also, a large number of homesteaders continued to have limited supplies. Robinson complimented Baker for his quick response to the relief issue which helped many homesteaders recover by providing for their necessities. Robinson also reported that the committees were continuing to investigate conditions.<sup>15</sup>

After Thanksgiving, Baker sent a special box of supplies to Bailey's wife, which included pins, needles, threads, spools of cotton, etc., paid for by special appropriations for

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<sup>13</sup> *ISR*. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 1873-1874, Box 4. Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>14</sup> *ISR*, November 11, 1873. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 1873-1874, Box 4. Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>15</sup> *ISR*, November 26, 1873. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 1873-1874, Box 4. Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

her to distribute to wives of the sufferers. That same day, November 29, he made clear he did not want to receive any items or money that could be directly sent to the northwest homesteaders by the railroad, including items being sent to certain old comrades. However, he reiterated that, if private citizens wanted to send items but did not have the necessary facilities to forward the items, he would still take them. He also stated that if he received items, they must have the appropriate address and name on the package or they would be sent out for general distribution.

It may seem that individuals were the only ones sending aid to the northwestern sufferers, but that was not the case. Baker received a letter from Keokuk, Iowa, which contained a \$91.37 donation collected at a Union Thanksgiving Meeting attended by Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists, and Presbyterians of the city. They asked that it be sent to any of the counties in need, not just Osceola. In Iowa City, the Ladies Aid Society accrued a sum of \$45 during a collection taken at Thanksgiving services. In Baker's Thanksgiving Day article in the *Iowa State Register*, he thanked all the "soulless corporations such as the railroads, express, and telegraph companies especially C., R. I. & P., United States Express Company and American Express Company, and the Union Telegraph Company."<sup>16</sup>

Baker drummed up support for the sufferers by painting them in a way that would appeal to average Iowans and convince them that the crisis the homesteaders were going through could just as easily happen to them. In an article for the *Iowa State Register* on December 5, Baker described the people of the northwestern counties as strong energetic people who despised asking for aid but on this one occasion they were forced by to do so by

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<sup>16</sup> *ISR*, November 29, 1873. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 1873-1874, Box 4. Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

circumstances they could not control. Always looking to appeal to people's patriotic leanings, he made sure of the fact that many, if not the majority, were Civil War soldiers with honorable discharges.<sup>17</sup>

In early December Baker embarked on a trip to visit the homesteaders and see for himself the suffering they faced. He arrived first at Sioux City where he met three gentlemen who made up the Sioux City committee: R. F. Turner, mayor; Dr. Smith, Receiver of the General Land Office; and E. R. Kirk, one of the leading merchants in town. He met other prominent men, including the editor the *Sioux City Journal*, who gave a well researched update on the situation. From Sioux City he made his way to Sibley via the Sioux City and St. Paul Railroad, passing through two of the devastated counties, Plymouth and Sioux. Dr. Smith and Kirk accompanied him and increased his understanding of the situation, saying that without their help it would have taken two weeks to glean the amount of information he received from them.<sup>18</sup>

At Sibley he met Bailey and other members of the local committee who described their distribution process. All of the townships had their own committees made up of one man and one woman who inquired about the needs of residents and then sent lists of those residents to the central committee in Sibley. Based upon the recommendations reported, goods would be selected and taken to the appropriate families. The committee recorded each delivery, and every night added it to a ledger in Sibley to track what each person had received. Baker told the *Sioux City Journal* that he respected the men who were carrying out this bookkeeping effort in Osceola County.

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<sup>17</sup> *ISR*, December 5, 1873. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 1873-1874, Box 4. Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

The next stop for Baker was Sheldon in O'Brien County where he met their committee headed by J. A. Brown, chairman, as well as Benjamin Jones, H. C. Lane, and C. S. Steward--men in whom he expressed full confidence. After meeting all three committees, he revealed that he had no doubt that the destitution which had been reported was just as bad as reported. He noted that the people of the northwest should not be blamed for what happened as they were as "good as any on God's earth" and certainly not greedy. He also noted that the supply of clothes was satisfactory, but as winter set in, the need would increase. However, food and fuel would be more useful. Baker promised that two hundred tons of coal was on its way to the region and would be there by nightfall ready for distribution.<sup>19</sup>

Upon his return to Des Moines, Baker received news that the meat butchering industry was interested in helping homesteaders. Baker decided to create a meat car to send to the northwest. At first only beef producers were involved, but Baker asked the pork producers to join in this venture, requesting spare ribs as well as some of the more lean pieces as homesteaders would certainly accept them. He planned to send the meat to Sioux City where he had just been a day or two before.<sup>20</sup>

An article in the newspaper *Inter-Ocean* related Baker's life and work and his humanitarian work for the homesteaders in northwest Iowa and gave a hint on how the future of relief might appear. The author praised him for his labor of charity to get the homesteader out of immediate want but declared they all must wait until the Legislature met to fully resolve the situation. The article assured everyone that Baker would continue in this work

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<sup>19</sup> "Gen. Baker, His Trip to the Northern Counties," *Daily State Journal*, December 6, 1873. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 1873-1874, Box 4. Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>20</sup> *ISR*, December 8, 1873. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 1873-1874, Box 4. Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

until the legislature made a decision and that he would continue to spread word to the public on their condition as “he knows exactly where to find the public pulse, and he can make it beat just as it should in any case of emergency.”<sup>21</sup>

Not all Iowans were pleased with Baker’s mission of relief. The November 22 issue of the *Palo Alto Patriot* attempted to shoot holes in his mission. The author claimed that the condition of the homesteaders in northwest Iowa had been extremely sensationalized. True, there were some serious problems in certain parts of Lyon and Osceola counties, but both possessed enough real estate to raise taxes to a level that the counties could aid the sufferers without outside assistance. The author further argued that the homesteaders would avoid increased taxes since their property was exempt from taxation and tax revenue would instead come from the bloated land holdings of the “cormorant” railroads and the land speculators. The author felt that the aid program that Baker put together was far too similar to the fraud the sanitary commissions committed during the Civil War when “it took ten dollars to get ten cents worth of goods to the private soldier.” Instead, he suggested that the county supervisors should oversee the acquisition of aid and “the occupation of philanthropic stock jobbers will be gone.”<sup>22</sup>

Baker’s response appeared in the *Iowa State Register* on Dec. 9. He believed that the author of the original article was proposing that the county government should issue warrants to help raise funds to aid the needy homesteaders. Baker admitted not knowing what the monetary amount of such a warrant was in Palo Alto County, but he did know the amounts in other counties and believed that warrants would depreciate to such a level that they would

<sup>21</sup> *Inter-Ocean*, December 8, 1873. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 1873-1874, Box 4. Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>22</sup> “The Homesteaders. General Baker in Reply to Certain Strictures.” *ISR*, Dec. 9, 1873. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 1873-1874, Box 4. Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

end up rendering no aid to the homesteaders. He also pointed out that even though land speculators and “cormorant” railroads would pay now, soon the homesteaders would be paying these high taxes as well. Additionally, recent court decisions seemed to “preclude the idea of any such warrants and consequent taxation.”

Baker held that those in the state who were currently enjoying prosperity would not allow their fellow citizens in the northwest to suffer for want of provisions. For the first time, he mentioned how the donations sent to Chicago after the great fire in 1871 were not viewed as a “gift of poverty” but instead an act of generosity that a benevolent people wished to provide for a people stricken by the horrors of fire. He felt that contributions from the public as well those of the Patrons of Husbandry would be enough to help the sufferers, but he firmly held that the state legislature would fulfill the task.<sup>23</sup>

Just as Baker was working diligently to secure necessary items for homesteaders before winter fully set in, conditions in the northwest were deteriorating. In an article in Sheldon’s newspaper *The Leader* from Dec. 10, Silas Hansen of the committee in Lyon County noted that the committee had reported the need of some 200 families and discovered that only 51 had the necessary supplies to survive the winter without aid. The families needed clothes, fuel, and horse feed, and money to procure such necessities. The report claimed that horses looked like skeletons after the summer’s work. Families had killed and eaten all the hogs to prevent them from starving and had killed all the cattle that could be eaten as well. There was a great fear that many homesteaders would leave their claim and it would be returned to the federal government.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> *The Sheldon Leader*, December 10, 1873. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 1873-1874, Box 4. Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

It is clear that fear was growing in the middle of December in 1873, so much so that Baker's daily "More Aid to the Homesteaders" piece in the *Iowa State Register* on December 15 tried to assuage these fears, taking on an unnamed editor of an Iowa newspaper who claimed that if the public knew the true situation of the homesteaders in northwest Iowa it was altogether possible that land speculators would cease selling the lands in that region. Baker responded that he would rather see not an inch of land be sold in the region than have one man, woman, or child be forced to suffer. Bringing up again the Chicago fire and great benevolence of the people of Iowa, he stated, "Away with such attempts to stop the swift flowing charities of a generous people."<sup>25</sup>

While Iowans respected Baker for his displays of loyalty and hard work, many were curious about the source of his inspiration to tackle the task of relief to the homesteaders. The *Sioux City Journal* conducted an interview with Baker in order to understand his thought process. According to the article, when Baker first read about the situation in a reprinted *Journal* article in the *Iowa State Register*, he immediately wondered how much fuel and articles of clothing were available. He took it on as part of the impulse of the moment, for he knew that even the best organizations need time to prepare for such a massive undertaking. He believed that prompt action was necessary and took it upon himself to render it. He knew that organization would be critical to sustain the operation; he was also aware that most of the donations he received were sent to Sibley. He hoped that donations then would be distributed by the local committees.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> "More Aid to the Homesteaders," *ISR*, December 15, 1873. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 1873-1874, Box 4. Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>26</sup> Although not stated this is probably because this is the nearest railroad station between Des Moines and the afflicted region.

Subsequently, Baker sought two general depots, one in Sioux City and the other in Fort Dodge. He would forward items to Marvin in Pocahontas County, Storm Lake in Buena Vista County, Cherokee in Cherokee County, Le Mars in Plymouth County, Orange in Sioux County, and Sibley in Osceola County. The reasoning behind this move was that many of the homesteaders were not willing to trek far from their homes; this system would make distribution easier. The *Journal* reported that Baker was not rigid in his beliefs and would listen to any suggestion that could help the relief effort.<sup>27</sup>

Even as plans continued to be devised, winter continued its march into Iowa and the need for coal increased. It was reported in Osceola County that people had no money for coal and were still burning hay. To make matters worse, Osceola County was basically a long stretch of treeless prairie. This was true of most counties of this region, and the need for more flannel and food was increasing for several suffering homesteaders.<sup>28</sup> Baker began to receive more winter-specific letters. He gave an example on Dec. 19 which read: “Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ lives twenty miles from timber in a cold board house which he was unable to finish; wife and nine children; can’t send children to school for want of clothing.” Of course, former soldiers sent many of the letters, such as one who wrote that he had served with the 8<sup>th</sup> Iowa Cavalry, spent six months in the Confederate Prison at Andersonville, and was now in the northwest destitute with a family of five.<sup>29</sup>

One of the more peculiar situations that Baker dealt with involved sending supplies from the citizens of Pella to their fellow Hollanders in Orange City, in Sioux County. Pella’s

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<sup>27</sup> “Relief: Concern Action for the benefit of Destitute Homesteaders-Baker’s Views on Origin etc.” *SCJ. Scrapbooks*, Vol. 1, 1873-1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>28</sup> *SCJ. Scrapbooks*, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>29</sup> “More Aid the Homesteaders,” *ISR*, December 22, 1873. *Scrapbooks*, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.



paper *Weekblad* reported in December that they sent 1,300 tons of worth coal, flour, oats, and clothing, etc.<sup>30</sup> On January 21, 1874 Baker forced the “Holland” committee to supply any of the needy sufferers in the northwest, not just those of Dutch descent in Sioux County. Baker also sent a note to all the committees that there should be no discrimination based on religion, nationality, or county lines in terms of the distribution of aid. Baker warned that if the county’s committee did not follow his order, he would not allow free transportation of aid to those counties.<sup>31</sup>

Yet another situation that Baker dealt with involved those who abused the generosity of the railroad and express companies by taking of advantage of the free transportation. He explained that they had given him close to \$3,000 in free services and that anyone who attempted to abuse this deal should immediately be exposed. He made the point that those who these acts really hurt were the sufferers who may not get the aid they needed because of abuses of generosity.<sup>32</sup>

Even as Baker was fighting off threats and thieves, other people in his trust were having their own troubles, some of their own creation. An article in the *Sheldon Mail* responded to a letter in the *Sioux City Journal* written by a “Homesteader” which complained about the *Mail’s* editors. The letter was written by Robinson in Osceola County, whom the *Mail* called a coward and disregarded his complaints that the *Mail* gave a “selfish representation of certain matters, an insult in the face of certain honest industrious farmers of O’Brien County.” The *Mail* claimed that Robinson could never look through the eyes of an

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<sup>30</sup> “Donations,” *ISR*, December 20, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>31</sup> “More Aid to the Homesteaders,” *ISR*, “More Aid to the Homesteaders,” January 21, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>32</sup> “More Aid to the Homesteaders,” *ISR*, Dec. 23, 1873. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

industrious farmer as he is a “lazy shiftless devil” too indolent to earn a respectable living.<sup>33</sup> It appeared that political rivalries were still in play even as crisis was unfolding around them.

In Des Moines, Baker was still having problems with those abusing the free transportation pledge. On the verge of anger, he wrote in a December 30 update in the *Iowa State Register* that any goods he had or would have that were actually not intended for homesteaders to use and were instead gifts for wealthy people or those not needing aid he would confiscate and those involved would have their deed and names published.<sup>34</sup> He also sent out a warning that there should be no traveling agents in northwest Iowa or anywhere in the state. He continued saying that the local committees and the old comrades of the soldiers would do the work of giving aid to homesteaders and they would attend to their emergencies. Baker also addressed the question of whether the letters he received about terrible times in northwest Iowa were true. He held that any soldier of the late war who had no blemish on his record would never lie to him. In the case of non-soldiers, if they had certificates and references, he found no fault with them. He believed in homesteaders and knew that “respectable committees” would substantiate all his hard work. Baker also reported that officials at Sibley sent some of their aid to Minnesota’s southern counties, a move he fully endorsed.<sup>35</sup>

Also in late December, Baker was alarmed that there were three state newspapers that were complaining about his relief work, and he aired his grievances in a letter to Kirk of the Sioux City Committee. He admitted to Kirk that there was nothing anyone could do about their “growling, howling, and grumbling,” and that he simply could not understand their

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<sup>33</sup> *Sheldon Mail*, December 24, 1873. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>34</sup> In all of Baker’s scrapbooks there is no mention of anyone ever being caught.

<sup>35</sup> “More Aid to the Homesteaders,” *ISR*, December 30, 1873. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

motives. He continued by saying that it was better to aid the needy even if one or two packages turned out to be fraudulent. Baker also chastised local politicians who complained that they were not put in charge of distributing the aid received in their counties. He called these men “reprobates” and wanted them to be known to the public. He noted that one man attempted to get on a committee but was refused and then became angry with the committee because his neighbors would no longer trust him. There was another man in a similar situation who Baker claimed knew less about “faro” than distributing supplies and probably did not know enough to cheat. Men such as these were making a scene against Baker and his associates’ efforts. Baker concluded his letter by telling “Old Kirk, the mayor, and Dr. Smith that he trusted them and that they should not be frightened by these guerillas and that they [should] stand their post just as he was.”<sup>36</sup>

Baker’s opponents were more than just frustrated local politicians looking to advance their careers. Other men were intent on downplaying the needs of the northwest. The *Cedar Rapids Republican* published a reprint of an article that appeared in the *Le Mars Sentinel* on December 12 by a Dr. J. L. Enos, who claimed to have been traveling along the border between Iowa and Minnesota. He charged that the claims of destitution in the area were highly exaggerated, and that no such destitution existed at all. Enos claimed that he did find a few cases of real poverty but that he was also aware that there was a gravel train in the area and men were offered \$1.50 a day to work on it. Several homesteaders turned down the offer and instead asked for public aid. Enos further explained that a gravel train was forced to halt at Sibley because it could not find any men willing to work. They raised the salary to \$1.75 a

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<sup>36</sup> *SCJ*, December 27, 1873. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

day and still no one offered to work for them. The company was forced to abandon the graveling. Enos claimed that the trainmaster in Le Mars would support his account.<sup>37</sup>

As attacks on the relief effort increased and spread, they spurred one sufferer in Clay County, J. W. Le Master, to write an extensive letter to the Chicago *Inter-Ocean* explaining that all the stories of suffering were lies, that the sufferers had enough wheat to plant next spring, and that any industrious man could obtain fuel if he was willing to work for it or possessed the money to pay for it outright. Le Master also asserted that he did not know of any family in Clay County that feared death because of an oncoming famine.<sup>38</sup>

Le Master wrote this letter specifically for the *Inter-Ocean* because he believed there was a smoke-filled room conspiracy to get the “good people” of Illinois to donate items to his county. He claimed that they would soon receive a call from Iowa’s soliciting agent, or as Le Master and the sufferers referred to him--our beggar--to help in the relief effort.<sup>39</sup>

Le Master continued and explained how he saw this whole situation originating, calling the county’s “beggar” a “smooth tongued philanthropist” who heard about the relief effort just west of Clay County.

This beggar then went around the county, calling meetings and making impassioned speeches about how poor the people were and that people in the East were more than willing to aid them. His oratory powers were so great that he could make a man feel like he was starving to death while at a banquet or convince a very poor man that the

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<sup>37</sup> *Cedar Rapids Republican*, December 22, 1873. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>38</sup> “A Clay Homesteader Ridicules the Statement that Settlers in that Region are starving,” *Inter-Ocean*, Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

major philanthropist of the East wanted to set him up in the banking business; all he had to do was let them know he was ready.<sup>40</sup>

Le Master's mockery continued as he instructed the donors in the East that any food or drink that was sent to northwest Iowa should be oysters, canned fruits, champagne, fresh mackerel, boned turkey and other essentials the sufferers could not indulge in because they were starving. If clothing was the donation of choice, Le Master instructed that samples of the best cloth should be sent so the sufferers had an opportunity to choose their favorites. They would also send back their measurements as they all deserved new suits cut in the most up to date fashion. If the choice was to send seed wheat, then they must send a portion large enough to sow between forty and eighty acres for every farmer in Clay County. Le Master reminded them that no farmer in Clay County was a small fry.<sup>41</sup>

Le Master ended his letter by quoting the Bible when Christ said to Judas, "Whatever you do, do it quickly." Le Master further explained the issue saying there are some who would not help themselves until they saw just how far their "begging scheme" would go.<sup>42</sup> Baker and his relief endeavors obviously engendered criticism as well as praise.

As 1874 began Baker reported in the *Iowa State Register* that on January 1 some railroads had adopted stringent new rules on what he could send to the northwest. The railroads also demanded to know exactly what was in the boxes and sacks, and Baker needed to know the status of the person who would be receiving the box or sack. If the person was not needy, the aid would not be sent. Baker reiterated that donors could still send provisions free but once again warned that if there were "any cheats in the pile" he would confiscate the items and send them to the needy.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

The most interesting element of this January 1 update was that Baker acknowledged that he received several letters inquiring about Dr. Enos' statements in the *Cedar Rapids Republican*. Enos had written directly to the *Republican* demonstrating his commitment to criticizing the alleged suffering. Enos wrote that all the mail he received vindicated his initial stance that the suffering was exaggerated. He further held that there would be three or four more years of relief to the region and that this wailing for bread whether true or false would stop any men of sterling reputation from ever considering moving to northwest Iowa.<sup>43</sup>

Baker's initial response to Enos' accusations appeared in *The Cedar Rapids Times* January 8.<sup>44</sup> He stated that if an individual cheated him, or if men in Sibley would not work on a gravel train, or if when he travelled to Sheldon and was only there for two hours and therefore could not fully understand the situation in the northwest, why should any of those issues deny relief for the homesteaders. He had letters representing 6,000 northwest homesteaders, and he would prefer to believe the dependable word of good soldiers, upstanding citizens, and truthful men over anything Dr. Enos could conjure up from three newspapers.

Baker then disputed Enos' positions. First, Dr. Enos claimed that there were no homesteaders who required fuel, clothing or seed for the coming spring, which was false. Second, Enos defended his letter because he was an obstinate man who would not admit that his sources were weak at best. Third, Baker asked, did Enos believe that the all the items intended for aid sent to the northwest would be distributed in an unfair way? Baker then

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<sup>43</sup> "More Aid to the Homesteaders," *ISR*, January 1, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>44</sup> The letter was written in Des Moines on December 31, 1873. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines. It is possible that this response appeared in the *Iowa State Register*; however, it was not present in any of the scrapbooks.

stated that men of incredible integrity, ability, and sense of honor ran all the committees he worked with, especially the committees in Sheldon and Sibley, and he would not have sent items to their committees if he had any doubts. These men were doing their duty in Baker's eyes, and he concluded by asking if Dr. Enos was doing his.<sup>45</sup>

Baker dedicated his response to committees, citizens, former soldier homesteaders, non-soldier homesteaders, and the other settlers and also had letters printed in the *Cedar Rapids Times*. He admitted that he regretted answering Enos' charges, saying that he should have let the doctor "go on his way rejoicing" and "perhaps he has struck his particular *forte* in this business." Baker stated that perhaps Enos would next attack H. M. Rice and H. H. Sibley of Minnesota who were acquiring aid for the sufferers in southwest Minnesota as well as Osceola and Lyon counties in Iowa. Baker charged that Enos probably knew the wants of sufferers in Minnesota fairly well since he was so aware of the needs of the homesteaders in northwest Iowa.

Baker further offered that other first hand accounts contradicted Enos' observations, including Mr. Gregg of Linn County who spent a good deal of time with the homesteaders. Also two members of the Patrons of Husbandry, Mr. Harbor and Mr. Prindle, also were in the region and flat out contradicted Enos' observations. Baker ended by encouraging newspaper editors throughout the state to allow Enos to continue his "glorious satisfaction" of writing but there should be no reply to any of these writings.<sup>46</sup>

After putting Dr. Enos in his place Baker moved on to more pressing matters, reporting that the Sioux City and Pacific Railroad would no longer transport carloads of

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<sup>45</sup> *Cedar Rapids Times*, January 8, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>46</sup> "More Aid to the Homesteaders," *ISR*, January 1, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

supplies to the homesteaders. However, smaller packages would still be acceptable.<sup>47</sup> On January 2, Baker received word via telegraph from Kirk in Sioux City that there were two carloads of coal and one with corn stopped at Missouri Valley because the railroad company S. C. and P. would not allow it to arrive in Sioux City. The reason for this stoppage was that the railroad company decided as of January 1, 1874 that it would no longer ship aid items to the northwest free of charge. Baker asked that the three cars be sent immediately to their destination, contending that the cargo left before January 1 and fell under the previous agreement. Baker apologized to the homesteaders about the loss of free transportation over that line but complimented the company for the generosity it had already provided and hoped it would extend free shipping for another month.

Baker feared he might lose more railroad companies' free transportation agreements. He was encouraged, though, by N. W. Railroad and their General Freight Agent Mr. Wheeler, who telegraphed saying that his line would continue to send anything and would not stop Baker's freight on the road. The next day he learned from Mr. Burnett, Superintendent of the Sioux City and Pacific Railroad that the three cars in question earlier had been sent to their final destination.<sup>48</sup>

The Sioux City and Pacific Railroad ended up extending its free transportation deal with Baker until February 1. Although he was not pleased to see the free transportation deal expire, he did praise the company for its generosity, admitting that the transportation of aid to

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> "More Aid to the Homesteaders," *ISR*, Jan. 2, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.



the northwest put a heavy tax on the railroad's infrastructure. Baker also confirmed that he would continue to send supplies on that rail line.<sup>49</sup>

As January continued, a Judge Oliver decided to take a trip to the northwest counties and report on what the conditions were at the time. He found the areas hardest hit were Osceola, where the entire county's population was affected, the northern half of O'Brien, the east third of Lyon, and northeast corner of Sioux county. The Judge also noted that many of the homesteaders were originally from eastern Iowa. He also suggested that \$100,000 be appropriated for use by the homesteaders to pay for seed wheat.<sup>50</sup>

Opposition to the idea of appropriation appeared later in the month in the pages of the *Dubuque Times*. This far eastern Iowa newspaper, perhaps attempting to defend the honor of both former eastern Iowans and the state of Iowa as whole, asserted that if the appropriation was passed there would be an overwhelming "natural repugnance" for the precedent. The *Times* instead suggested that afflicted counties issue municipal and county backed bonds with long term maturity rates to pay for acquisition of seeds.<sup>51</sup>

Back in Des Moines, Baker had problems with sacks used to store supplies after their initial purpose had been fulfilled. On January 6 Baker asked that flour sacks not be returned to him and that homesteaders should use them to make overalls or possibly pants. Later, Baker's expenses and use of bags would become a larger issue but at this point it was a mild one.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> "More Aid to the Homesteaders," *ISR*, January 30, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>50</sup> "The Homesteaders. A Timely Letter from Judge Oliver," *ISR*. Scrapbooks Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4. Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>51</sup> "Concerning Northwestern Relief," *The Dubuque Times*. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4. Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>52</sup> "More Aid to the Homesteaders," *ISR*, January 16, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

Just as Baker faced attacks from many sides concerning the fair distribution of aid or the need for any aid at all, so did the local committees. The committee in Emmetsburg, Palo Alto County had the *Palo Alto Patriot* print a form that township level committees must have each applicant fill out before they could receive aid:

- 1<sup>st</sup>. Name of Applicant.
- 2<sup>nd</sup>. Section, township and range.
- 3<sup>rd</sup>. Title to land.
- 4<sup>th</sup>. Acres cultivated.
- 5<sup>th</sup>. Amount raised.
- 6<sup>th</sup>. Amount on hand.
- 7<sup>th</sup>. Citizen or soldier-giving regiment and company.
- 8<sup>th</sup>. Amount of stock not mortgaged.
- 9<sup>th</sup>. Children in family, giving age of eldest and youngest.
- 10<sup>th</sup>. Articles needed.
- 11<sup>th</sup>. General Remarks.<sup>53</sup>

A month later the same committee created a similar form for those who needed garden seeds. The first line on the form asked for the applicant's name. The second line asked the applicant to list types of seeds he wanted that were available according to the following list: Blood Beet, Cucumber, Radish, Turnip, Rutabaga, Lettuce, Cabbage, Tomato, Musk Melon, Summer Squash, Onion, Bassam Beet, Parsnip, Sweet Corn, Water Melons, Beans and Peas. The third asked for the exact number of acres the applicant had ready for spring planting. Lastly, the form had to have a signature from one of the men in his

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<sup>53</sup> *Palo Alto Patriot*. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

township's committee.<sup>54</sup> Soon other counties would adopt forms similar to these in order to expedite their own distribution.

In his January 9 column in the *Iowa State Register*, Baker proudly wrote that he had received from D.M. Osborne, & Co of Chicago, the maker of "The Kirby" reaper, a donation of \$100 for the relief effort. Baker was extremely pleased and hoped that other manufacturers would follow. However, D.M. Osborne, & Co was the only manufacturing company cited for a monetary gift.

The more important issue which dominated the second half of Baker's update was his stated commitment to be more transparent about aid shipments. He wanted to reassure people that all the donated money that was used to purchase relief items reflected the list of needed supplies the local committees sent him. He stated that anyone could visit his office and see the books showing income and outgo. He challenged the state legislators of counties who both sent and received aid to peruse his account books. He also asked for the return of seamless bags to Des Moines immediately because of the economic toll they were taking on him and because refilling each seamless bag saved him \$33 per hundred.<sup>55</sup>

Baker was proud of his disclosure and transparency, but benefitted greatly from Caleb Gregg of Springville, Linn County who had recently passed through northwest Iowa and discovered the answer to whether there was any validity to any of the reports of destitution. Once there, he had found a larger number of families that had only enough provisions to last a week, and that numerous women and children did not have good winter clothes. Gregg claimed that most of the sufferers were so used to enduring hard times that they forgot to tell

<sup>54</sup> "Relief Notice," *Palo Alto Patriot*, February 13, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>55</sup> "More Aid to the Homesteaders," *ISR*, January 9, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

the “naked truth.” Gregg did confirm that some people who pushed committees to get them more items probably did not require them in the first place, but he further asserted that the acts of unscrupulous men should not be a reason to allow the truly suffering to not receive aid.<sup>56</sup>

Just as Gregg had condemned unscrupulous men seeking more aid than they deserved from the local committees, a new group of men appeared in the northwest who Baker considered even more duplicitous. In his January 10 update he warned the homesteaders to be on the lookout for “wretches” who were trying to prevent aid from getting to the northwest and more seriously to convince them to desert their homesteads. That would allow those “sad wretches” to gain possession of the acres that had been broken, which were worth \$5 each, for their own gain or that of their clients. Baker then wrote an impassioned plea: “Stick to your farms, old soldiers. A kind Providence has given you pleasant weather thus far this winter, and the benevolent people of Iowa will not see you suffer.” Extremely outraged, he continued that men whose purpose was to cheat the homesteaders as well as benefit from free transportation would not enjoy their ill gotten gains in this world nor the pleasures of the hereafter.<sup>57</sup>

Baker received further support for his views from R. R. Harbour, who wrote to the State Grange Committee six days later that land sharks had hindered the relief effort. Whether these land speculators held office or not, Harbour was convinced that they were dedicated to seeing the people of the northwest freeze or starve as they endeavored to drive the homesteaders off their land and acquire it for themselves. Harbour claimed that he heard

<sup>56</sup> “The Homesteaders,” *Cedar Rapids Republican*, January 8, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>57</sup> “More Aid to the Homesteaders,” *ISR*, January 10, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

a multitude of stories about the dastardliness of the land buyers but would not relate them because he did not believe that any one in the state would commit such acts that would “consign him to eternal infamy and disgrace.”

Harbour did list the arguments that the land sharks used to remove settlers from their homesteads, which included reminding them of the previous winter’s merciless storms, telling homesteaders that the counties had no money for aid, that the citizens of the counties to the south were not prepared to aid them, and that they had no way of acquiring seed wheat for the spring. After stating their case, the land sharks would offer the homesteaders a gift of between \$25 and \$35 to desert their claim. Harbour asked the committee if they had a Webster’s Unabridged so they could imagine adverbs and adjectives he had in mind for these unscrupulous agents.<sup>58</sup> On January 27, Baker again expressed his views on these “traveling agents.”<sup>59</sup> A few days later he once more warned homesteaders about men who pretended to be collectors of funds. He stated there were no Grange or state agents who were involved in this practice.<sup>60</sup>

In the same update that Baker originally chastised the nefarious land speculators, he also mentioned that the *Iowa State Register* asked him to report on his relief work of the past two months. Although unprepared to give a full list of his activities, he did present some important items. He reported that he sent 470 tons of coal, making sure to play to the local reader’s interest by mentioning that the number included the donation made by the Polk County Supervisors, 14,350 pounds of flour, 9,805 pounds of meal, 33 bags and sacks along

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<sup>58</sup> “The Northwest Homesteaders,” *ISR*, January 16, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>59</sup> “More Aid to the Homesteaders,” *ISR*, January 27, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>60</sup> “More Aid to the Homesteaders,” *ISR*, February 2, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

with two carloads of corn, 21 bags of seed oats, one sack of seed rye, 58 boxes, sacks, packages, and parcels of clothing, 21 boxes, barrels and sacks of groceries, 50 boxes, barrels, sacks and kegs of various provisions, 2,400 lbs of beef and pork, and one car load and 195 boxes, barrels, sacks, and packaged yarn, boots, shoes and all sorts of miscellaneous relief. He spent \$725.50, including \$145.65 for bags, blankets, corn, flannel, medicine, molasses, rice, seed wheat, yarn and extra travel expenses.<sup>61</sup>

Three days later Baker wrote in his update that there was no way he could read all the letters which he received from the homesteaders each day and that committees should send supplies to individuals as they are the best judges of what items the homesteaders needed. Nonetheless, he admitted that receiving letters after homesteaders received aid was particularly useful because it allowed him to know where the next shipment should go.<sup>62</sup>

In the January 20 update Baker reported on the problems that occurred when he received too much of one or two items; in this case it was corn and oats. He preferred to receive items like corn and oats in the form of carloads because smaller quantities required him to pay for re-sacking or to store the grain in large bins, which he did not possess. If he tried to sell the items, they would only equal the price of a good seamless bag. As a result, the state's arsenal became a granary filled with corn, wheat, oats, flour, meal, as well as other supplies. He mitigated his frustration by asking that "all men, officers, soldiers, civilians, churches, friends, Odd Fellows, Grangers, Masons, &c.; &c.," send their donations in an already packed box or bag so he could handle packages more easily and ship them out more expediently. He reminded donors to send invoices each time they sent something. Baker

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<sup>61</sup> "More Aid to the Homesteaders," *ISR*, January 10, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>62</sup> "More Aid to the Homesteaders," *ISR*, January 13, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

once again touched on the subject of those who abused the free transportation, stating that if discovered, they must pay the shipping charge or the items would be sent to the homesteaders indiscriminately.<sup>63</sup>

One of the major events that dominated the relief effort in the early months of 1874 was the question of where to obtain seed wheat that homesteaders needed for spring planting. Baker was adamant that the state legislature had to decide this particular issue. Even though he believed he could directly solve that problem, he wanted the homesteaders to feel better about the situation by detailing how in the past countries, states, and individuals had been preserved in moments of great emergency. Baker held that the people wrote the United States Constitution and laws and that if necessary government should be used to benefit people in great need. This country had a track record of helping to relieve sufferers who experienced disasters similar to the situation the homesteaders were facing. Not only had the federal government helped in the case of disaster so had almost all the states. Baker saved his most comforting and straightforward message for the conclusion of his update, saying that the state of Iowa would never allow 50,000 acres to be left unsown because the hearty settlers there had no money after disaster had devastated the region.<sup>64</sup>

It was through compassionate messages like this that the people of northwest Iowa came to love “Old Pap” Baker, and not just the former soldiers who already held this opinion. The Recorder of Palo Alto County J. L. Martin suggested that when the also beloved Governor Carpenter stepped down that Baker should be the choice as the next governor. The

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<sup>63</sup> “More Aid to the Homesteaders,” *ISR*, January 20, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>64</sup> “More Aid to the Homesteaders,” *ISR*, January 22, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

enthusiasm would be so great in the northwest that it would match the inspiration that he had given to “the boys in blue when the nation quaked and disloyal hosts were broken.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> *Milwaukee Sentinel*, January 19, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.



## CHAPTER 5

### THE LEGISLATURE AND THE SEED BILL

In Des Moines the state Legislature was in session, and the Iowa Senate asked Senators George D. Perkins and Samuel H. Fairall to investigate the condition of homesteaders in the northwest and to determine whether the state needed to purchase seed for sufferers. Perkins and Fairall accordingly went to Baker's office as Adjutant General. They found Baker busily writing his daily update for the *Iowa State Register*. It appeared to Perkins that "Homestead Relief" was taking up much business at the office, and Baker demonstrated an enthusiasm for the project similar to that of a young boy. Baker showed both men his scrapbook with featured articles on the subject from many newspapers, letters received from a multitude of individuals, as well as many of his updates from the *Iowa State Register*. Baker also displayed letter books which featured correspondence from him and to him, cash books, and receipt books.<sup>1</sup> He pointed out a stack of papers that constituted a roster of the needy, which listed their former regiments and companies during the Civil War. Perkins claimed that the ledger contained whether the homesteader had an Army record, how many acres he had ready for cultivation, and whether or not he acquired seed in the fall either through supply or money. Baker held that there were 7,000 to 8,000 people who could be considered needy and also estimated that 75,000 acres would most likely not be seeded in the spring without some sort of relief.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The cash and receipt books are unavailable and may no longer exist.

<sup>2</sup> "General Baker and His Boys," *SCJ*, January 29, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

Throughout the meeting Perkins was surprised how often Baker referred to the homesteaders as “My boys.” When Perkins or Fairall mentioned that some of “His Boys” may not be telling the truth about their condition, it caused Baker great distress. As the conversation continued, his eyes began to well up, and he eventually completely broke down. Reviewing this sight, Perkins reflected, “you don’t often meet a man with such a great heart.” Baker worked to help the homesteaders from the moment he woke up until late into the evening hours since he had taken charge of the relief effort in November. He talked about nothing else and always made sure that he had the last word. Perkins was particularly impressed that Baker appeared to not have a selfish thought on the issue. He was dedicated to “His Boys.” Perkins hoped that each of the northwest homesteaders could one day meet Baker and have a conversation like he had on January 24 with this man.<sup>3</sup>

The *Sioux City Journal* also heaped praise on Baker. The paper ran an article that gave Baker, and to a similar extent the State Grange, the credit for northwest relief and saving many lives from starvation. It stated that it was a rare person in the region who was not in some way tied to the aid that Baker and the local committees received. And for some of the homesteaders, their only source of nourishment came from the supplies that Baker sent.<sup>4</sup>

Material encouragement came to the aid of the homesteaders in late January when Baker received a letter from the General Manager J. W. Bishop of the St. Paul and Sioux City Railroad. The letter explained that the company would allow settlers in the counties of Cottonwood, Jackson, Martin, Murray, Nobles, Pipestone, Rock, and Watonwan in Minnesota and the counties of Dickinson, Lyon, Osceola, O’Brien, Plymouth, and Sioux in

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> *SCJ*, February 6, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

Iowa to use all the timber that the company owned and situated more than a mile from the railroad track. This was only available to “actual” settlers. The company made the township supervisors act as agents representing the company in charge of distributing the wood. This deal was to last only a year and only the needy could use the wood for fuel. Once fuel needs had been appropriated, all logging must end immediately.<sup>5</sup>

Not all experienced generosity from railroad companies. The *Sheldon Mail* reported in late January that the cost to ship supplies from Le Mars to Sheldon equaled \$30.00, a very hefty sum in 1870s Iowa. The article went on to say the railroad companies would “wring the blood of out this country” if they were given the opportunity and that anti-monopolists should take these “corporate thieves” by the neck and hold them like a dog would do with a skunk.”<sup>6</sup>

On the first of February, Fairall and Perkins made their way to Sioux City and prepared to begin their investigation when the news reached Iowa that the Minnesota State Legislature had passed a measure that appropriated \$50,000 for their sufferers to acquire seed for spring. It was hoped that Iowa’s legislature would soon follow suit.<sup>7</sup> During their investigation Fairall and Perkins met several hundred of the homesteaders including several families in their homes. The two learned that the situation was worse than reported as there were no jobs available. The *Sioux City Journal* explained this situation as if a man had “pinioned arms.” The reporter in the *Journal* then wrote a heartfelt impassioned plea:

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<sup>5</sup> “More Aid to the Homesteaders,” *ISR*, January 31, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>6</sup> *Sheldon Mail*, January 28, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>7</sup> “Looking after the Destitute,” *SCJ*, February 1, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

Let any man of soul--any man who loves wife and babies--imagine a hut on the prairie, not a dollar in the world, a bushel or two of donated coal, a few pounds of relief flour, and little meal perhaps, but nothing more, and with power within himself to get more when supplies let him imagine this, and do as we would under like circumstances.<sup>8</sup>

When Fairall, Perkins, and the rest of the legislative committee attended a meeting in Sheldon to examine conditions in O'Brien County, the citizens of the town were so relieved that the government was taking a serious look at their situation that they cheered three times for the man who alerted the public about their hardships: General Baker. The homesteaders prayed for Baker often saying "May God bless and prosper him."<sup>9</sup>

Baker soon received word that Fairall and Perkins had concluded their investigation. Fairall reported that the counties of Lyon, Osceola, O'Brien, and Sioux desperately needed immediate aid and that destitution was the norm in these counties. If the legislature did not approve an aid package for the homesteaders, many would be forced to desert their claims. Fairall, Perkins, and the rest of the committee agreed they would propose that the legislature appropriate \$100,000 for purchase of seed wheat. The committee also stressed the importance of the need for the benevolent people of Iowa to quickly send provisions to the needy families of the northwest including clothing, feed for teams, and other provisions.<sup>10</sup>

On February 8, Senator Perkins brought to the floor of the state senate the question of the \$100,000 appropriation. Perkins and the committee also tacked on an extra \$5,000 for

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<sup>8</sup> *SCJ*, February 6, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>9</sup> *Prairie Preview*, February 20, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>10</sup> "Relief for the Northwestern Homesteaders," *ISR*, February 7, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

transporting and distributing the seed wheat that the initial sum would purchase. The committee also submitted, but did not recommend, that an additional \$15,000 be appropriated to purchase feed for the teams whose use in planting would be critical. At the time many believed that the committee was asking far too much in funds and exaggerating the situation. The *Sioux City Journal* reported that it felt that there was a strong chance that the legislature would pass a measure giving the committee all provisions recommended, which included immediate action.

The bill included low interest payments homesteaders would repay upon receiving seed. Not every homesteader would receive enough seed wheat to cover all of his acres, but there would be enough seed for a suitable crop and would allow the homesteaders to harvest their own seeds for the next planting and to pay for their families' needs throughout the winter.<sup>11</sup>

On February 19, Baker wrote a letter to Senator Perkins during the debate over the relief bill. Baker informed Perkins what he would do if he were in Perkins' place. Baker asserted that homesteaders must continue to receive aid until there was an assurance that there would be a productive crop. He feared that people would believe that with the Grange taking over much of the relief effort that there would no longer be a reason to donate items. He did not think the Grange could supply 5000 people for three to four months unless a miracle occurred. Numerous people thought that they had done their part and that previous donors should not have to be called again to aid the homesteaders. Baker believed the state should pay for the relief in tax money. He thought that if the state was going to give \$100,000 for seed and \$5000 for expenses, it would be better if the money were distributed

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<sup>11</sup> *SCJ*, February 9, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

with \$5,000 for expenses, \$75,000 to purchase seed wheat, and \$25,000 or more to be spent for relief of settlers for the next three to four months. Baker also hoped the bill would be amended to allow each settler the equivalent in seed of thirty bushels and that the only requirement of the homesteader when he turned in his note would be his honor. Baker held that the state would lose very little if the legislature acquiesced to his proposed additions to the bill.

Baker fully realized that some doubted the constitutionality of the bill; he informed Perkins that in no way did he believe the committee's bill was unconstitutional. What he really wanted was for the bill to be just a large donation. He also informed Perkins that there were specific episodes in the history of their young nation where citizens faced with disasters like famine, pestilence, and fire gave aid that was approved by both state and congressional legislators. He specifically mentioned the fire that engulfed Portland, Maine, the great fire of Chicago, and Wisconsin's Prestigho fire. Baker concluded the letter by stating that the fires that afflicted Portland and Chicago did just as much damage to their streets as the grasshoppers had done to the fields of the homesteaders in northwest Iowa.<sup>12</sup>

As the debate continued, Senator Larrabee successfully pushed through a resolution which forced Fairall and Perkins' committee to give the senate a report on the amount of aid the northwest had thus far received. Perkins asked Baker to use his records to put together the required report. He agreed and one day later Perkins submitted the report to the senate. The report was only an approximation but held great weight and detailed the following:

Clothing – 3 barrels, 55 boxes, 13 packages

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<sup>12</sup> "The Legislation He Wanted for 'His Boys,'" *Des Moines Journal*, February 27, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

Food – 774 boxes, barrels, bags, sacks, and packages of flour, meal, rice, hominy, molasses, groceries etc.

Grain – 11,750 pounds of corn, 52 bags of corn, 2 car loads of corn, 29 bags of oats, 55 bags of wheat; also 1 car loaded with corn, flour, beans, pork etc.

Coal- not far from 500 tons<sup>13</sup>

Baker also claimed to have possessed \$146 in seed wheat which he acquired by selling wheat in Des Moines and had used the proceeds to purchase wheat at markets closer to the northwest in order to save money on transportation costs. He also explained that he had sent cash to the committees equaling \$351.35 and had paid for bags, blankets, coal, drayage, leather, molasses, rice, transportation, and yarn and other expenses that totaled \$1,015.35. In all, he had spent \$1,512.90.<sup>14</sup>

At the end of the report Baker wrote a disclaimer that he was not completely sure how much coal the northwest received because occasionally those transporting coal did not follow his orders and sent it *directly through*. Also, some donations got mixed up and were thought to be given out by the Grange. Consequently, no invoice came back to Baker, and some of the Grange's packages had their invoices sent to him.

The Senate also received a report from J. D. Whitham and Harbour representing the committees in the northwest about the shipments they received:

Coal – Four hundred tons

Pork – (Side Meat) Fourteen thousand pounds

Meal, flour, grain, and &c. – One Hundred and twenty-five tons

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Bedding, Clothing, &c. –twenty packages, including five hundred yards of flannel.<sup>15</sup>

The cash that the committees had paid on freights at that time totaled \$500. Harbour and Whitman reported that they had not received everything the region was supposed to receive and could not add that amount to their report. They admitted that they knew several more shipments from all over the state were on their way. Their report concluded by acknowledging that they had \$3,700, half of which had not yet been appropriated.<sup>16</sup>

In the midst of this activity, Baker again sought seeds from the federal government. Toward that end, he solicited the backing of Senator William B. Allison, who responded to Baker, “You deserve great credit for your active services.” Allison agreed to seek free “garden seeds” from the government.<sup>17</sup> However, Commissioner of Agriculture Frederick Watts told Allison that he knew of the grasshopper problem in Iowa and that he had “regarded favorably, to the extent of the means of the Department, numerous applications for seeds from individuals in that section, as well as from your colleague Senator George Wright” of Iowa. Unfortunately, he was “sorry to say that it would be impossible to increase our supplies in that direction, without injury to other sections of the country from which calls for seeds are unusually pressing.”<sup>18</sup> Allison then wrote back to Baker, “your friends have already largely drawn upon the department. If there is any mistake about it let me know and I will try again.”<sup>19</sup> Baker obviously could expect little to no direct assistance from the agriculture department for the moment.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> William B. Allison to N. B. Baker, February 16, 1874, Adjutant General’s Papers, State History Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>18</sup> Frederick Watts to William B. Allison, February 19, 1874, Adjutant General’s Papers, State History Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>19</sup> William B. Allison to N. B. Baker, February 23, 1874, Adjutant General’s Papers, State History Society of Iowa, Des Moines.



At the same time, the Grange's relief efforts were starting to take off. The same day that Perkins introduced the bill for relief, Harbour reported that the Grange had \$400 for aid and that number increased to \$1,000 when the value of supplies they received was added. The Grange and Baker were especially satisfied that Fairall, Perkins and their committee had substantiated the relief missions. However, there were a few who were not pleased with the day's results. One of the committee members from Le Mars believed that the legislative committee "made asses of themselves." Perhaps he concluded this after his meeting with Fairall and Perkins and learned that Osceola and O'Brien counties would receive more aid than Plymouth County.<sup>20</sup>

Once word reached the rest of the state that the relief bill had been presented, many donors answered the call to send aid quickly. Baker sent word to potential donors that if they were planning to send flour or wheat or if they lived south of the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Railroad, or if they were situated north of that railroad "and east of the line thirty miles east of the Des Moines River," they should have these items converted to money and sent to Baker and J. D. Whitman in Des Moines to save on transportation costs because the same products could be purchased at the same price in towns closer to the northwest. However, corn and corn meal were to be sent as is.<sup>21</sup> With more aid coming Baker's way, he had to once more ask that seamless bags still in good condition be sent to him immediately. Baker was down to only 300 bags, and if any one could send him any goods that he could refill, they could send them for free.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *SCJ*, February 9, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>21</sup> "Relief for the Northwestern Homesteaders," *ISR*, February 7, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>22</sup> "More Aid to the Homesteaders," *ISR*, February 12, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

By late February, Perkins' proposed bill had passed through the legislature and Governor Carpenter had promised to sign it, but questions of constitutionality arose again. But by the time the final vote arrived, the legislators had such sympathy for the homesteaders that few voted against the measure. The Burlington *Hawkeye* asserted that most Iowans would have preferred that the money for seed come from donors and not the state, but once the bill had passed no one in the state was interested in complaining. However, the legislature only appropriated \$50,000 for seed wheat, half of what the committee recommended.

Financially, the bill was somewhat worrisome, for the state only had \$500,000 for the next two years for exceptional appropriations. The state opted to cut its appropriations across the board to help the homesteaders because it was unwise to make appropriations exceeding the revenue from a two mill levy. In fact, *The Hawkeye* suggested that the legislature keep the figures down so the state could return to the one and a half mil rate that was in place in 1860.<sup>23</sup>

Baker had hoped to secure the original amount of \$100,000. For the first time, he admitted to the public his fear that nothing had been appropriated in terms of aid beyond seed wheat. Baker also admitted his fear that the Granges could not meet the demand even if there were an early spring and warm temperatures. Baker was forced to make yet another appeal, this time to churches, citizens, and societies who had not donated to the relief effort. Baker's words seemed somewhat desperate as he promised to respond to anyone who wrote to him with directions for donations to ensure that goods were distributed equitably. Baker preferred that all donations be sent directly to the northwest but if the donors wished to send

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<sup>23</sup> "Extraordinary Appropriations," *Burlington Hawkeye*. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

donations to him he would forward them himself.<sup>24</sup> He claimed that all the donations and packages sent to former comrades were received.<sup>25</sup> He reminded former soldiers that their comrades' wives and children were giving their all to "keep the wolf from the door."<sup>26</sup>

On March 2, the Iowa Senate learned from Governor Carpenter the names of nominees to be the commissioners to distribute the \$50,000 of relief. They were James Tasker of Jones County, Levi Fuller of Fayette County, and O. B. Brown of Van Buren County. During a senate executive session all three men were confirmed unanimously.<sup>27</sup>

On March 8, the new commissioners issued a statement that Baker should receive all communications that were directed to them. They intended to be on the move, so collecting correspondence in one place was of utmost importance. Additionally, Baker was informed everyday by each commissioner where he would be travelling that day.

Baker responded that he did not originally endorse the decision, believing that it was better for them to receive information directly. But he wholeheartedly accepted the task, and he would send all the packages and letters to them or to the places they preferred they should be sent. He further informed the public that all letters meant for the commissioners should be sent to his mail box at the Des Moines Post Office and he would forward them immediately.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> "Another Appeal For Aid to the Homesteaders," *ISR*, February 24, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>25</sup> "More Aid to the Homesteaders," *ISR*, February 27, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>26</sup> "Another Appeal For Aid to the Homesteaders." Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>27</sup> "Relief Commissioners – President Pro Tem of the Senate, Etc." *SCJ*, March 4, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>28</sup> "Northwestern Seed Commissioners," *ISR*, March 7, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

On March 12 the seed commissioners and General Baker stated in the *Iowa State Register* that on April 1 they would distribute almost all of the supplies in their possession to sufferers in the northwest. Only a small amount would stay in Des Moines. The message also warned the local committees to be careful with the aid they already possessed. Any benevolent societies or groups such as the Grange should immediately send all the aid they had collected because any deals with the railroad companies concerning free transportation would probably expire on April 1. The statement concluded by thanking the railroad, telegraph, and express companies for all they had done in aiding the northwestern homesteaders and that their service would not soon be forgotten.<sup>29</sup>

Following their statement in the *Iowa State Register*, the commissioners made a controversial move by announcing to the public that they would travel to Minnesota and purchase seed wheat with the appropriated funds. From Minnesota they would send the seed to the various locations throughout northwestern Iowa, where the three commissioners would complete the payment of the seed on location and report the cost of each bushel, for the state had ordered the commissioners to keep accurate records of the money they spent to prove that the funds were not being squandered.<sup>30</sup>

Once the seed made its way to its final destination, the process of distribution began. A homesteader who received seed had to fill out an affidavit to determine whether he deserved to receive any seed, and if so, how much. If the homesteader did receive seed, he had to produce his receipts in triplicate with one going to the State Auditor and one going to

<sup>29</sup> "To the Public," *ISR*, March 13, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>30</sup> *SCJ*. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

the seed commissioners.<sup>31</sup> As the process continued, the commissioners discovered a new problem and wanted to answer it with an old proposition. The commissioners were convinced just as Baker, Fairall, Perkins, and the rest of the original committee had been that there should be some expenditure used to help provide subsistence for the settlers and their teams before and during planting season. They held that an appropriation of at least \$15,000 would be needed and it should not come out of the already appropriated \$50,000. Attempting to make sure their plan gained the legislature's approval, they argued that the new expenditure should be used broadly over the northwest, giving each homesteader just a small amount of the expenditure.<sup>32</sup>

The same day that Baker and the commissioners announced their decision to have all aid distributed by April 1, a letter appeared in the *Sioux City Journal* reporting that Baker and other prominent individuals engaged in the relief effort planned to reduce their work hours.<sup>33</sup> On April 17, one of Baker's associates and disciples, Captain Riley, replied to the author of the letter, saying that he had just visited with Baker at his office in Des Moines and that the Adjutant General showed no signs of relaxing his efforts.<sup>34</sup> On the contrary, Riley asserted that Baker was hard at work "with all his great energy and magnanimity of the soul, and stated that it was his purpose to do all he could to help the people over seed time, when they could probably get aid and thus live until harvest."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *Sibley Gazette*, March 13, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>32</sup> *Daily State Journal*, Northwest Sufferers, March 16, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>33</sup> "An Unpleasant Topic," *SCJ*, March 12, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>34</sup> The scrapbooks did not contain the portion of the article that listed the writer's name.

<sup>35</sup> "Another Card from Captain Riley." *SCJ*, March 17, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

Late in March, Baker along with Grangers Harbour and Prindle decided to return to the northwest to check on the region's condition, arriving in Sioux City on March 21.<sup>36</sup> By March 23, the three were in Sibley checking out how well the committees were doing in terms of distribution of aid and seed. Later in the day, all three made speeches at the county court house. The *Sioux City Journal* claimed that those who attended gained a much greater understanding of how the relief work was going at that time.<sup>37</sup> During their speeches all three spoke of how they tried to increase the number of the donations being sent to the northwest and used all their power to obtain a seed appropriation of \$100,000. However, they said when they had learned that the bill only appropriated \$50,000, they nonetheless did their best to secure its passage. The critical *Sibley Gazette* responded to their speeches by saying that while it might be wished what was said were true, it was not.<sup>38</sup> No doubt many in Sibley and Osceola County believed that the fight for state aid had not been strong enough.

There was some good news, however, for those assembled in Sibley when it was announced that a car load of flour and pork was nearing Sibley and should arrive in a day or two. Those in Sibley did believe what they heard about the two carloads, and they knew that this may be the last aid shipment to their county. Even better news came when it was reported that the pro rate share for the seed would be much lower than had been originally estimated.<sup>39</sup>

Returning to Des Moines after his trip to the northwest, Baker realized there was a strong chance that many homesteaders would not receive enough seeds for the amount of

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<sup>36</sup> *SCJ*, March 21, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>37</sup> "Sibley Items," *SCJ*, March 24, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 3, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>38</sup> *SCJ*, March 29, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 3, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>39</sup> "Sibley Items." Scrapbooks, Vol. 3, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

land they had broken. Baker put out another plea in his update on March 28, asking especially old soldiers for help, stating that “now’s the day and now’s the hour.”<sup>40</sup> On the previous day, Baker had instructed Brown and Tasker to use “utmost caution and care” reiterating that “only the really needy” received help. The recipients of aid also now had to sign an “oath” that they did “solemnly swear, so help me God, that I have not flour or other provisions sufficient to last my family one week, and that I have no means, on hand or at my command, to procure subsistence for my family.”<sup>41</sup>

On March 28 the *Sioux City Journal* reported a potential stroke of good luck for homesteaders. Farmers in the Dakotas had discovered that after the grasshoppers cut off the heads of last year’s wheat crop that the grain fell to the ground and was plowed under in the fall, and by spring volunteer wheat began to peek through the ground. A few homesteaders heard about the situation, and when they saw their fields populated by volunteer plants, they decided not to take any of the seeds that the state had appropriated. Some farmers reported that the volunteer wheat was coming up too thick but that they thinned it using a seeder or a cultivator, which required little manual labor.

The article warned farmers to check their land before they received any seed from the state because the volunteer plants may suffice. If the volunteer plants could not cover all of the farmer’s land, then he should apply for the seed from the state. However, the wheat resulting from the grasshoppers’ attacks appeared to be coming up and any additional seeding might have been wasteful. The article did warn that while farmers should carefully consider this development, those sufferers in the northwest who had not received any seed

<sup>40</sup> “More Aid to the Homesteaders,” *ISR*, March 28, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 3, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>41</sup> D. A. W. Perkins, *History of Osceola County, Iowa* (Sioux Falls, SD: Brown & Saenger, 1892), 154-155.

and knew that they would never be able to obtain any should definitely consider relying on volunteer plants before deserting their homesteads. The author concluded by thanking the providence of God for His blessing in a time of destitution and disaster.<sup>42</sup>

Baker responded to this blessing in his update on April 1 and denounced the article outright. Although he openly admitted that he was not much of a farmer, he did not believe that spring wheat could grow after being treated in the fall as the article described. He reported that the spring wheat in Iowa was not showing the signs of vitality that the article depicted and that donors should and must continue to send seed to the northwest regardless of the *Sioux City Journal's* referencing “The province of nature--or , if you please, the Providence of God.”<sup>43</sup>

The *Journal* fired back at Baker and his comments on the wheat sowed by the grasshoppers. The paper was not prepared to state what Baker's exact objections were but did publish what it believed them to be. Baker did not believe there was a volunteer crop. He feared the news because it could derail the relief effort and the donations that were its life blood. The paper stood behind its story as the absolute truth. However, it could not predict the extent of the benefit. The paper ridiculed people who might stop sending seed and relief items due to this small ray of hope for truly suffering and destitute people like those in the northwest. The paper was fully behind the aid but would not allow possible help to go unreported and unanalyzed. Nature had intervened and the *Journal* would not stand in its way.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> “The Volunteer Crop. Aid for the Homesteaders from Unexpected Source,” *SCJ*, March 28, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 3, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>43</sup> “That Wheat,” *ISR*, April 1, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 3, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>44</sup> *SCJ*, April 3, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 3, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.



As the date for the distribution of Baker and the seed commission's aid neared, news concerning the seed distribution got worse. As some expected, after the legislature passed the appropriations bill new applications for seed flew into the mailboxes of the local committees. Over 3,000 applications for seed were collected, but the commission only accepted 2,200 to 2,300 applicants as truly needy. Of the applications that the committee approved, the number for each county via their committee's headquarters was:

Sibley: 750

Sheldon: 400

Algona: 350

Le Mars: 125

The remainders of the applicants were from Storm Lake, Pomeroy, and Marvin.<sup>45</sup>

The next day the commissioners were in Cherokee examining over two hundred applicants who braved their way through rough weather to O'Brien County to meet them. If their applications were accepted, they received on the average fifteen bushels worth of seed along with a healthy package of garden seeds.<sup>46</sup> One of the commissioners, Tasker, stayed in Cherokee for another two days, and it was remarked that "he discharged this peculiarly difficult duty in a singularly felicitous manner."<sup>47</sup>

In mid April the seed commissioners came to Sibley with sixteen carloads of seed wheat and distributed 6,631 bushels to 418 of the suffering homesteaders. The committee then traveled to Sheldon and began distribution at 10:30 on a Monday morning and was not completed until late Wednesday night, during which time there were 150 teams in Sibley. As

<sup>45</sup> "Relief Grain. Work to the Commissioners to help extend to Fourteen Counties – The Distribution, Etc.," *SCJ*, March 31, 1874.

<sup>46</sup> "From Cherokee," *SCJ*, April 1, 1874.

<sup>47</sup> "Homesteader Relief," *SCJ*, April 4, 1874.

reported earlier, the applicants also received a package of garden seeds, each one containing nine different varieties of plant seeds. The next destination for the commissioners was Le Mars, where 2,798 bushels were distributed to 189 homesteaders.<sup>48</sup>

In mid April the *Iowa State Register* printed portions of a letter J. W. Bishop of the St. Paul and Sioux City Railroad sent to Baker. It responded to a letter in which the Adjutant General thanked the company for all the help it had given in the relief effort. The major point of Baker's letter had been their shared desire for the construction of a new line from Mankato, Minnesota to Fort Dodge. Bishop replied to Baker that Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa had recently passed laws making it difficult for new railroad projects to start up. Bishop wrote that his company had a charter to do what Baker wanted and had invested several thousand dollars in surveying and deciding on exactly where to lay tracks but because of the new restrictions the company would do no more.<sup>49</sup> While Baker understood the need for better transportation of goods and for the further development in northwest Iowa, he also knew that the issue over more rail tracks revolved around the so-called Granger Laws by which Iowa and the other states gave their state legislatures the authority to set rail traffic rates. In turn, angry railroad leaders decided to refrain from further construction in underdeveloped areas such as northwest Iowa. The help the rail companies offered Baker, which he gratefully appreciated, was grounded not only in charitable civic concern but also in an effort to improve their image among Iowa farmers.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> "Seed Wheat. The Commissioners at Sibley – 6,631 Bushels to 418 Persons.," *SCJ*, April 12, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 3, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>49</sup> "A Railroad Man on the Tariff Law," *ISR*. Scrapbooks, Vol. 3, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>50</sup> For more on farmers, railroads, and regulation, see Mildred Throne, "The Grange in Iowa, 1868-1875," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 47 (October 1949): 289-324, and Charles Aldrich, "The Repeal of the Granger Law in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 3 (April 1903): 256-270.

At the same time in April, 1874, Seed Commissioner O. B. Brown reported to Baker on the distribution of seed, which was featured in Baker's newspaper update:

Distribution:

	Persons	Bushels
Cherokee	124	1,903
Le Mars	120	1,846
Sheldon	180	2,806
Sibley	417	6,631
Spencer	<u>188</u>	<u>3,224</u>
	1032	16,420

The total number of people who received seed was 1,032 and the total number of bushels 16,420.<sup>51</sup>

A second report was added and it claimed that seed wheat was distributed in Emmet, Kossuth, and Palo Alto counties. The cost for the commissioners was \$10,000. A small sum was also used in Estherville in Dickinson County. Other distribution included:

Distribution:

	Persons	Bushels
Marvin	49	787
Newell	43	686
Storm Lake	<u>53</u>	<u>838</u>
	145	2,311

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<sup>51</sup> "A Railroad Man on the Tariff Law." Scrapbooks, Vol. 3, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

The total number of people from this distribution was 145 and the total number of bushels was 2,311.<sup>52</sup>

On April 17 the *Journal* received from the seed commissioners the final report of the seed distribution. The new table the commissioners sent changed little other than changing the term “people” to “applicants,” showing Pomeroy’s numbers, which were 46 applicants and 634 bushels, and presenting a new total which was 1,224 applicants and 19,351 bushels.

According to the *Journal*, the commissioners reported they still had \$8,000 of the \$50,000 that they had received and planned to return funds to the state after all “pressing necessities” had been met as far as their specific duties would allow. They wanted to spend \$8,000 to \$10,000 to provide teams with feed throughout the planting season but were hindered by the fact that authority granted them by the state in this matter did not allow them to use those funds in that manner.<sup>53</sup>

When Baker learned that the *Journal* and other newspapers had published that the seed commission had \$8,000, \$15,000, or \$20,000 left to return to the State Treasury, he wrote the *Journal*’s editor, saying that all these figures had no foundation in truth. Two of the commissioners were in Des Moines at that time, and they stated that they could not know how much money was left because the commission had not completed its business.<sup>54</sup>

The *Journal* responded stating it had never reported that \$8,000 would be returned back to the State Treasury. It had printed the opinion of Commissioners Tasker and Brown

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> “Free Seed. Work of the Commissioners – The Wheat Distribution Concluded – There Will be \$8,000 to Return to State Treasury”, *SCJ*, April 18, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 3, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>54</sup> “Homesteader’s Relief Fund,” *SCJ*, April 24, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 3, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

that \$8,000 constituted the sum they would have to return to the state. The *Journal* also carried an article found in the *Dubuque Times* by Dr. Fuller who stated that \$15,000 remained that fell under the same circumstance.<sup>55</sup>

In late April, Baker made another trip to northwest Iowa. He reported that there was no snow in the region but ash filled the air due to prairie fires. The homesteaders appeared to be in “comfortable condition”; however, what little livestock they had looked to be in extremely bad health. Homesteaders seemed to be encouraged that they now had seed, and both men and women were engaged in sowing their fields. Baker told the *Iowa State Register* that any report of homesteaders grinding their seeds into flour was an “unmitigated falsehood.” He claimed the commissioners informed him that they had a report of one particular settler doing this, but they could not substantiate it. The spring of 1874 in northwest Iowa was similar to the spring of 1873, but homesteaders were hopeful that there would be a different outcome when fall arrived. More importantly, Baker reported that no grasshoppers were to be seen anywhere in the region.<sup>56</sup>

At this point Baker’s scrapbooks no longer exhibit a concise timeline of events linking him with any major aspect of the relief, probably because the spring planting had concluded. The only interesting tidbit about the northwest homesteaders that he related in the newspaper later that spring occurred during his visit to Silver Lake, located about twenty-one miles east of Sibley, which he described as a beautiful site.<sup>57</sup>

During the summer Congress passed a bill to aid the homesteaders in the grasshopper districts throughout the country. The *Journal* printed a letter to be read by the people of this

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> “Northwest Homesteaders. – Return for a trip to the Northwest.” *ISR*, Scrapbooks, Vol. 3, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>57</sup> “The Future Watering Place of Iowa,” *ISR*, May 1, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 3, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

region from the Commissioner of the General Land Office in Washington, D.C., explaining what each section of the law meant in laymen's terms.

Section 1 allowed for settlers to take a leave of absence from their homesteads if grasshoppers had seriously damaged their crops in 1873 or if it took place again in 1874. Section 2 stated that settlers forced to leave homesteads during 1873 or 1874 because of grasshoppers those years still counted toward the five years the settler had to improve the land. Section 3 stated that if the settler had arrived on his homestead in 1874 and grasshoppers destroyed the crop he, too, could leave without penalty. The act only recognized absences between the dates of June 18, 1874 and May 1, 1875.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> "Homestead Relief Important to Settlers in the Grasshopper Districts – Rulings of the General Land Office on the Recent Act of Congress," *SCJ*, July 18, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 3, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

## CHAPTER 6

### RETURN OF THE GRASSHOPPERS

In the summer of 1874, numerous homesteaders discovered the usefulness of the new federal law when the grasshopper reappeared. In an attempt to mitigate further suffering, Baker wrote to Perkins on July 30 that he did not want to scare people but he wanted to set up two conventions to offer encouragement to settlers, one in Algona and the other in Sheldon. Homesteaders in Emmet, Hancock, Humboldt, Kossuth, Palo Alto, Winnebago, and Wright counties would meet in Algona. Homesteaders in Buena Vista, Cherokee, Dickinson, Lyon, Osceola, O'Brien, Plymouth, and Sioux would meet at Sheldon. Baker wanted the meetings to cover how crops fared in these counties and how to preserve homesteads and to protect homesteaders. When Baker made this proposal, damage seemed to be the worst in Kossuth County where 100 families left the county that day.<sup>1</sup>

Four days later the *Sioux City Journal* printed a letter from Sibley that detailed the grasshoppers did little damage when they first arrived, but by the third day their numbers had grown and the devastation commenced. Within a half a day the corn fields appeared as if a hurricane had descended leaving only worthless bare stalks. Gardens were also victims, and by day's end they appeared as they would in the middle of winter. On the bright side, the small grain survived either because it was too ripe or because it had already been harvested. A few fields of oats were also injured.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Homesteaders. General Baker on the situation – He Proposed Convention at Algona and Sheldon," *ISR*, August 4, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 3, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

Reports claimed that only the western half of the county had been invaded which amounted to about two townships. Conflicting stories about the damage in Lyon County also spread; some said that there was total devastation while others reported the losses were minimal. The grasshoppers that appeared were very small, only half grown and left no eggs. The residents of Sibley wondered about the origin of these grasshoppers: did they come from northern Dakota, or eggs deposited earlier that year in Minnesota, or did they arrive from Canada? Fortunately, a strong north wind came up and blew the grasshoppers out of the region; the locals hoped they would not land for another thousand miles.<sup>2</sup>

As for Baker's desire for conventions to be held in Algona and Sheldon, the people of Sibley liked the idea and held that such a meeting should take place as soon as September 30. Baker believed that the convention would do well to create a uniform plan that would determine if aid were necessary and to avoid the outcry that had somewhat hampered relief efforts in the past. At the same time, good news reached Baker that the expected aid needed in Osceola County would likely be little if any.<sup>3</sup>

As the relief mission appeared to be ramping up once more, Baker again took criticism for sleeping on the job. The *Northern Vindicator* came to his aid by commending his record of the past ten months and applauding his proposal for regional conventions to convene and gather information on the disaster.<sup>4</sup> On August 15, the *Vindicator* further

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<sup>2</sup> "Sibley Notes," *SCJ*, August 8, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 3, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Northern Vindicator*, August 8, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 3, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.



backed Baker by reminding their readers that the Iowa Legislature would not be in session again until 1876, so getting behind him and his activities was probably in their best interest.<sup>5</sup>

On August 21, the *Humboldt County Independent* reported that both Baker and Thomas Sargent had received invitations to visit the grasshopper districts and to give a report addressing the following points:

1. The condition and amount of crops.
2. The counties in which aid to settlers may be needed.
3. The number of settlers in such counties which will need help to remain on farms and homesteads.
4. The course to pursue if aid were needed.
5. The best plan to distribute any contributions.

In addition to these topics, there were other questions such as how much seed might be required the next spring.<sup>6</sup>

Baker's opinion on creating new local committees, according to the *Independent*, was that people of the county should elect committee members and county supervisors should assist their county committees in ascertaining the condition of crops and determining if there would be enough seed for the next spring.<sup>7</sup>

Baker and Sargent were expected to appear in Humboldt County sometime during the day and would then meet with R. R. Henborn of the Grange Committee. Baker and Sargent looked over both Humboldt and Pocahontas counties before they made their way to Algona.

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<sup>5</sup> "The Locust Scourge of Emmet County," *Northern Vindicator*, August 15, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 3, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>6</sup> *Humboldt County Independent*, August 21, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 3, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

Baker firmly believed that Humboldt County was not in any serious danger and was more than prepared to handle the upcoming winter. However, the question of seeds for spring was another matter but was not extremely pressing for the county in late August.<sup>8</sup>

On September 2, Baker and Sargent returned to Des Moines and Fort Dodge, respectively, after their fact finding trek through once again grasshopper ravaged northwest Iowa. Both Baker and Sargent began preparing a report to the Governor. Some of the preliminary findings were that grasshoppers badly damaged crops in Emmet and Kossuth counties along with edges of other counties bordering them. Baker also responded to an article in the *Iowa State Register* by a Mr. Hotchkiss of Clay County which stated that the crops were in good condition in Clay County where people could handle things on their own. Baker denounced this claim as completely false.<sup>9</sup>

On September 15, Baker and Sargent, who received help in their inspection of the crops in northwest Iowa from Harbour, completed their report to the governor. They stated that they inspected Clay, Dickinson, Emmet, Humboldt, Kossuth, Osceola, O'Brien, Palo Alto, and Pocahontas counties while riding on the railroad lines of the Sioux City and St. Paul and the Illinois Central. The report made it clear that Emmet and Kossuth counties along with sections of Dickinson and Palo Alto counties had seen the most devastation by the grasshoppers that year and that immediate aid must be sent to Emmet and Kossuth counties to avert a major crisis. Baker, Harbour, and Sargent also noted that they alone had appointed the committee for Dickinson County, which needed aid with all due speed.<sup>10</sup> Better news in

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<sup>8</sup> *Humboldt County Independent*, August 21, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 3, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>9</sup> "The Hoppers," *ISR*, September 3, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 3, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>10</sup> "The Grasshopper Report of the State Commission on the Devastation in the Northwest," *ISR*, September 15, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 3, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

the report concerned grasshopper eggs. They had heard of only one place where eggs had been deposited. It was generally believed the grasshoppers had left Iowa before it was time to lay eggs. Baker wrote that he hoped they would not return for several years, if ever.<sup>11</sup>

After filing the report to Governor Carpenter, Baker returned to asking donors for relief in the *Iowa State Register*. On September 19, he sent a letter to the paper again asking for donations but this time ordering donors not to overload boxes as they had done previously. Boxes were to be “carefully and compactly packaged.” If anyone wished to send food, money, seed, or other items, Baker demanded that he must know exactly what the contents of the package were and to whom it was intended to be sent because the items could only be sent to the truly suffering and needy. Baker reminded all donors that he would do nothing that would upset the United States Express, which had again demonstrated its benevolent spirit by allowing for free transportation.<sup>12</sup>

On September 16, the committees of the counties afflicted by grasshoppers that summer asked Baker “to assign districts to each of the committees, so that there will be no committee or agent of said committee of several counties asking aid from the same county.” General Baker assigned himself to the counties of Dallas, Madison, Polk, Warren, and the First Congressional District. For all the counties east of Des Moines along the line of the C., R., I. & P Railroad, Baker assigned Judge Orson Rice of Dickinson County. Both Governor Carpenter and Baker fully endorsed the judge. Baker appointed the Kossuth County Committee to be the agents for all counties that lay east of theirs as well as the counties of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> “A Generous Offer.” *ISR*. Scrapbooks, Vol. 3, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

Black Hawk, Buchanan, Delaware, Dubuque, Grundy, Hamilton, and Hardin counties. Baker also kept watch over other counties in case of emergency situations.<sup>13</sup>

Even though it was not reported that Judge Rice was an agent for the above counties until the October 16, Baker must have appointed him before October 12 when Rice began to put up signs throughout the counties that sat along the C., R., I. & P extending from Polk County to the Mississippi River. The signs read: “All donations can be sent to Gen. Baker at Des Moines, per express but they must be securely packed in boxes not weighing over one hundred and fifty pounds each.”<sup>14</sup>

While Baker spent most of the rest of the month working on a new project, building a hospital in Des Moines, problems that Iowa faced with grasshoppers were also occurring in Nebraska and Kansas. Consequently, as Baker kept up his work with the relief effort, he began sending some of the donations to Kansas and Nebraska. In late November, a meeting was held in Baker’s office to establish a committee to aid some counties in Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska. Governor Carpenter became the chair with Baker and S.F. Spofford being named secretaries. Baker stipulated that donors should not ship relief items until contacting him first.<sup>15</sup> By mid December the committee also sent supplies to South Dakota.<sup>16</sup> On December 20, Baker wrote in his *Register* update that he had just purchased six carloads of coal and other supplies for Kansas and Nebraska.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, Baker met several trains that were

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<sup>13</sup> “Northwestern Iowa, To the Benevolent and Charitable People of All Counties in the First Congressional District,” *ISR*. Scrapbooks, Vol. 3, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>14</sup> Scrapbooks, Vol. 3, 1874, Box 4, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>15</sup> *ISR*, November 20, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 4., 1874-1875, Box 5, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>16</sup> *ISR*, December 12, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 4., 1874-1875, Box 5, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>17</sup> *ISR*, December 20, 1874. Scrapbooks, Vol. 4., 1874-1875, Box 5, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

passing through Des Moines that were filled with returning Iowans escaping the devastation they experienced in Kansas and Nebraska. Once the trains stopped, Baker took all the passengers to the Des Moines House restaurant and treated every passenger to a hot meal.<sup>18</sup>

In early January, Baker complained in his update that rough handling and nails often destroyed paper bags on the trains en route to the grasshopper districts.<sup>19</sup> A few days Baker told the *Register* that he would no longer accept any meal of flour that arrived in paper sacks. When he had to re-sack, it cost him \$32 per hundred for a new sack; after multiple re-sackings, the cost was already up to \$100.<sup>20</sup> Baker commented that he was receiving so many letters from homesteaders and officials at the Adjutant General's office that most could not be read until a day two after they were delivered. Additionally, the *Register* called Baker the busiest man in Iowa as he labored writing official correspondence, preparing for certificates that needed to be sent to veterans whose discharge papers had been lost or misplaced, answering letters from soldiers inquiring about bounties and other issues, as well as dealing with the grasshopper problem.<sup>21</sup>

By month's end, Baker and homesteaders received some good news. Congress amended its bill from the previous summer, allowing that if grasshoppers once again returned during the summer of 1875, homesteaders could desert their claims until July 1, 1876.<sup>22</sup>

On February 2, a great Seed Convention took place in Fort Dodge. Baker called the meeting to order, and the gathering chose Governor Carpenter as chair. Everyone in

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<sup>18</sup> Johnson Bingham, *Iowa—Its History and Its Foremost Citizens*, Vol. I (Chicago: S. J. Clark, 1915), 325.

<sup>19</sup> *ISR*, January 5, 1875. Scrapbooks, Vol. 4., 1874-1875, Box 5, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>20</sup> *ISR*, January 8, 1875. Scrapbooks, Vol. 4., 1874-1875, Box 5, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>21</sup> *ISR*, January 8, 1875. Scrapbooks, Vol. 4., 1874-1875, Box 5, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>22</sup> *ISR*, January 26, 1875. Scrapbooks, Vol. 4., 1874-1875, Box 5, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

attendance agreed that Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas needed seed, but the question was how they would distribute the seed fairly. Baker told of his relief work over the last year, saying that he thanked God for being cheated out of only five to ten percent of the relief resources with the rest going to the needy.

Two decisions were made at the convention. First, all members would continue to ask for and collect seed from donors. Second, Baker as executive secretary of the Iowa State Relief Committee would attempt to gain a loan if possible. Applicants would have to provide the following information:

1. The condition of their crops last year
2. Amount of stock on hand
3. Conditions of property amounts
4. Kinds of seeds needed
5. The percentage of crops raised to be allowed

The proposed application had to be endorsed by the local county committee, and if the applicant was not a resident of Dickinson, Emmet, Kossuth, or Palo Alto County, he must also have the signature of the county auditor. The committee also agreed to attempt to coax seed merchants to help with relief.<sup>23</sup>

After returning to Des Moines, Baker asked the *Register* to print that it was simply not possible for him to answer the one hundred to three hundred letters, many of which were three to four pages long which he received daily. The *Register* also stated that the only letters he would accept were those from homesteaders who needed aid and seed and did not have a relief committee in their county.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *SCJ*, Feb. 7, 1875.

<sup>24</sup> *ISR*, February 9, 1875.

A week later, Baker asked that donors send goods together in one shipment from one point. Baker was running low on funds for the relief effort. It was a great task for him to go into the arsenal and retag goods for reshipment, which was also an immense expense for him.<sup>25</sup> The *Register* reported that Baker was receiving several items, but none of the donations were money, forcing him to sell grain stored in the arsenal to pay for transfer, freight, and transportation. Thus, for example, on February 19, Baker had to pay out over \$20 despite the aid he had been given for the relief effort by the express companies and railroads, as the transfer agents, labor draymen, and express wagons would only accept cash as payment.<sup>26</sup> On March 7, the *Register* further reiterated that Baker would no longer re-box or re-sack unless money was furnished to cover the expense.<sup>27</sup>

In mid February Congress passed a new bill that gave \$150,000 to those devastated by grasshoppers and now had no food or clothing. The Army was charged with applying the funds.<sup>28</sup> By March, Baker and U.S. Army General Brisbane, who had been placed in charge of Iowa's appropriation, were fighting with each other over the distribution of aid. Baker was appalled by the level of red tape and attempted to move Iowa's share from the hands of the Army and into his own. Baker was not successful in his efforts, because of the Secretary of War's rigid interpretation of the law. Baker then attempted to have some of the money

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<sup>25</sup> *ISR*, February 19, 1875. Scrapbooks, Vol. 4., 1874-1875, Box 5, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>26</sup> *ISR*, February 20, 1875. Scrapbooks, Vol. 4 1874-1875, Box 5, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>27</sup> *ISR*, March 7, 1875. Scrapbooks, Vol. 4., 1874-1875, Box 5, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>28</sup> *ISR*, April 28, 1875. Scrapbooks, Vol. 4., 1874-1875, Box 5, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

appropriated for food and clothing changed to seed and or money to purchase seed.<sup>29</sup> The Army, however, would not acquiesce to his request.

A new controversy arose in the middle of March when a letter featured in the *Des Moines Leader* asked about the suffering people of Des Moines. The writer said that the local Ladies of Relief Society was working hard and doing quite a bit of good but could not do everything. He felt that since the sufferers of the northwest were now fairly taken care of, “we trust that charity will begin at home.”<sup>30</sup>

A feisty Baker responded to the letter from the *Leader* in the *Register*, stating that “Gen. Baker’s grasshopper sufferers” do not simply belong to him but to the entire world “where the cry of suffering can be heard.” Baker asserted that he was merely the instrument, along with help from the railroads and express companies, to send supplies that were donated. He reminded everyone that he had daily written public letters about what he had received and sent out so that donors and the sufferers could see how openly and fairly the relief effort operated. If updates had convinced even a single person to donate, that encouraged him, and if any citizens of Des Moines were needy and asked for help, he would do his best to aid them.<sup>31</sup>

On May all the work and the bickering over the last eighteen months caught up with Baker and so in a May 22 letter to the *Register* he wrote:

I think that I have done my part in this work for the nearly two years past, and I premtorly [sic] decline to serve any more. I have labored in this cause until my

<sup>29</sup> *Spirit Lake Beacon*, March 11, 1875. Scrapbooks, Vol. 4, 1874-1875, Box 5, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>30</sup> *Des Moines Leader*, March 17, 1875. Scrapbooks, Vol. 4, 1874-1875, Box 5, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>31</sup> *ISR*. Scrapbooks, Vol. 4, 1874-1875, Box 5, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.



health has been injured but have continued against the advice of my physicians because no one else could be found to step in and serve out the balance of the spring service... I wish only to add that for six months from October 1874 to April 1875 I was compelled to answer grasshopper letters before I ate my breakfast and often after I ate my supper; to pack boxes and bags in the day time, after I had to attend my original duties of my office. This may seem egotistical to some, but I am compelled to state it was the ground of my refusal for further services.<sup>32</sup>

Although Baker gave up his relief, he continued to hold the office of Iowa's Adjutant General, but his health had begun to fail. In March 1875 while in northwest Iowa dealing with the grasshopper plague, he spent a day in a cold storm of rain, sleet, and snow. By fall he had a cough which did not improve with spring and summer. His doctors said that he had developed "inflammation of the mucous membrane" and "malarial fever." Because of his public position and popularity, newspapers covered his medical condition as his health deteriorated. When he died on September 13, 1876, many Iowans received the news with expressions of much sadness.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *ISR*, May 22, 1875. Scrapbooks, Vol. 4, 1874-1875, Box 5, Adjutant General Disaster Relief in Northern Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

<sup>33</sup> Bingham, 326.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

When Baker died in 1876, Kirkwood, who again had been elected governor, broke the news to the state. He eulogized Baker remarking, “To his skill, his indomitable energy, and his tireless industry our state owes not a little of the high reputation her military record has for her.” Concerning Baker and his relation with “His Boys” Kirkwood stated, “To the soldiery of Iowa, of whose deeds he was ever proud, and whose history he did so much to preserve, he was especially dear; and so long as that history shall be read, with the memory of Iowa’s great Adjutant General be perpetuated.” Kirkwood then hailed Baker’s relief efforts for the northwest saying, “during seasons of great destitution in the new parts of Iowa and adjoining states, the same characteristics that had distinguished his services in the department of arms were of measureless value in securing relief to the impoverished and starving settlers.”<sup>1</sup>

Governor Kirkwood chose to have proper military honors be paid to Baker, and on the day of his funeral on September 15, 1874, minute guns were fired beginning at noon and continuing until sunset. The service was held at Baker’s home in Des Moines, and the proceedings were overseen by Lieutenant Colonel Townsend.<sup>2</sup>

Two years later on September 6, 1878 during the dedication of Baker’s monument in Woodland Cemetery in Des Moines, Kirkwood addressed those in attendance. He spoke of the time when as governor he asked Baker to assume the office of Adjutant General: “He [Baker] *created* the Adjutant General’s Department in Iowa. Before the rebellion it had

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<sup>1</sup> Bingham, 325-326.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 326.

existed in name only. He made it a reality, gave it form and substance and made it one of the best of the best, if not the very best, state Adjutant General's offices in the United States."<sup>3</sup>

In developing the office of Adjutant General of Iowa, Baker had devoted himself first to the war effort of 1861-1865, but thereafter he not only retained the office but also advanced his and its role in Iowa. By reacting quickly and strongly to the plight of farmers in northwestern Iowa due to the grasshopper plague of 1873-1874, Baker further enhanced his authority as Adjutant General. In doing so, he broadened the scope and function of the office of Adjutant General in Iowa.

Concurrently, the state and federal government responses during the grasshopper plagues exhibited how far these institutions would go monetarily and how long they would wait to decide whether or not to help the homesteaders. The Iowa state legislature only provided aid to the homesteaders after a commission was created in February to investigate. However, when aid was appropriated, it was only half of what the commissioners wanted. The legislature created a second commission to distribute the aid, which did not happen until early April of that year, close to nine to ten months after the grasshoppers first appeared. The legislature was only in session on even numbered years to save the state money, so when the grasshoppers appeared again in 1874, the homesteaders would have to wait two years for the chance of a new appropriation.

The federal response in 1874 only applied to the Homestead Act, a federal law. In 1875, \$150,000 was appropriated for several states devastated by grasshoppers, but state officials and Baker were unhappy with the way the U.S. Army was to distribute it and tried to take control of it. What is clear is that there was a chain of activity in which the relief issues operated, and even though both sides attempted to work in harmony, they seemed at times to

<sup>3</sup> "Address of Governor Kirkwood," *The Iowa Historical Record*, Vol. VII. (January 1891): 73.

have trouble doing so. In a century that did not have the Federal Emergency Management Agency and where the states had more power than they do now, it was up to the state to take charge of the initial, vital relief.

Without question, the Adjutant General's Office of Iowa expanded in peace time simply because Baker chose to take on new duties, not because the Governor or the Legislature ordered him to do so. As Kirkwood acknowledged, Baker was the man who truly created the office in Iowa, and the idea that he could expand it into areas not covered by other government departments gave him all the permission he needed.

Additionally, learning the thoughts and wishes of the homesteaders in northwest Iowa allows for an understanding of their mindset and values. Many homesteaders were too proud to have written letters to ask for aid and would prefer to starve. They would rather subsist on their own hard work and not blame anyone or anything, like nature, for their plight rather than receive any relief from donors or the government. Pride and hard work were the values that defined the majority of homesteaders; however, a few did not share this impulse.

As is true in any situation where governments and benevolent people donate and supply aid for free, there will always be those who try to cheat. In this case there were farmers whose fields were in better shape than most of the neighbors, but when they heard that free items were sent to counties, their greed got the better of them. This is also true of those who were not suffering but took advantage of the free shipping that railroad and express companies offered Baker throughout much of the relief mission. Such crass individuals have been present since the beginning of history. It is no surprise that they once again appeared during this disaster.

The story of General Baker and the grasshopper plague in Iowa in conjunction with the greater history of the Midwest demonstrated how individuals, social groups, and governments reacted to disaster in the 1870s. There was a chain of steps which one followed in order to receive relief. First, the newspapers had to report the specifics of the disaster: how it happened and what supplies were needed to aid the survivors. Second, a man of charity and authority had to further alert the citizens of the state as well as the state and federal governments while taking charge in trying to get immediate relief through donors near the location of the event. Third, once the state and federal governments received information, they began the long process of deciding if aid were necessary, created a committee to investigate to understand the situation better, and if they found enough evidence, a bill was written and eventually proposed and voted upon. After this long process, there was most likely a long period before any appropriated funds could be doled out. Similar situations occurred in Kansas, Nebraska, Minnesota, and the Dakotas.<sup>4</sup>

Whatever conclusions can be drawn from this episode, it is clear that General Nathaniel B. Baker received the call of “His Boys” and for eighteen months made his duties as Adjutant General and his own health secondary to the mission of relief. In a desperate time that called for civic duty and charity, Baker rose above the other relief organizers. His altruistic attitude during this situation forced him to help the people whom he held in the greatest affinity even if he had to compromise his own well-being on their behalf. Although

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<sup>4</sup> For further information on the grasshopper plagues in states surrounding Iowa see Everett Dick, *Sod-House Frontier, 1854-1890* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1937), 202-212; Robert M. Manley, “In the Wake of the Grasshoppers: Public Relief in Nebraska, 1874-1875.” *Nebraska History* 44 (December 1963): 255-275; Walter N. Trewerry, “The Minnesota Legislator and the Grasshopper, 1873-77.” *Minnesota History*, 36 (1958): 54-61; and Annette Atkins, *Harvest of Grief: Grasshopper Plagues and Public Assistance in Minnesota, 1873-78* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota History Society Press, 1984).

his actions during the Civil War probably rank higher, Baker's efforts during the grasshopper plagues that tormented northwest Iowa should not be forgotten.

## ABBREVIATIONS

*ISR*

*Iowa State Register*

*SCJ*

*Sioux City Daily Journal*

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