

SCV Learns of Copperhead Movement in the Civil War

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Heather Sheen was the speaker at the recent Sons of Confederate Veterans Camp 36 meeting in Greenville. Her topic was the Copperhead Movement in the Civil War. Though few know of the movement today, two of their federal senators were run out of town, a state legislature was shut down for 2 years, riots broke out across the United States, Northern states threatened secession...all because of this movement! The Copperheads wrote the Democratic party platform for the 1864 election. Lincoln called them "the fire in the rear" and at one time, feared them more than the Southern armies. Heather's talk covered the people, the issues and the badges of this influential American faction.

The issues the Copperheads raised sound hauntingly familiar today. The Copperheads wanted the Civil War to end but their biggest issue was to preserve the Constitution. They were concerned about presidential overreach as they watched Lincoln suspend habeas corpus, shut down dissenting newspapers, pursue emancipation in an unconstitutional way, and run dissenting federal legislators not only out of town but out of the country in the case of Clement Vallindigham. Other concerns of the Copperheads included the institution of a draft with its accompanying bureaucracy, the debasing of currency by taking it off the gold standard, the creation of an income tax for the first time, and the enactment of punishing tariffs that led to economic recession.

Copperheads felt that the issues dividing the states could and should be settled without war. Though they didn't want the Southern states to secede, they believed it was their right to do so.

The Copperhead movement gained traction as the war went on, but after the North began to have resounding victories in late 1864, Lincoln was reelected and the Copperhead movement (though not the issues) quietly died. The Copperhead name has been resurrected at times in history when a group or movement has once again arisen calling for a return to Constitutionalism. The TEA party, for instance, was called the historical successor to the Copperheads by leftists who feel the Constitution is a "living document" and should be ignored.

Heather Sheen is an avid history buff, a UDC and DAR member, and a Civil War reenactor with a BA in History. Heather's interest in political badges and movements was sparked by the research she did on secession cockades for the 2011 sesquicentennial of the Firing on Fort Sumter. Since then, she has become an international specialist on cockade history of all eras. She has frequently been invited to speak on the topic and her website contains fascinating stories and pictures of cockades of the past. You can read her blog at www.creativecockades.com.