H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Russell L. Johnson. *Warriors into Workers: The Civil War and the Formation of Urban-Industrial Society in a Northern City.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2003. xii + 388 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-2269-8.

Reviewed by Bruce E. Baker (Department of History, Royal Holloway, University of London)
Published on H-CivWar (September, 2006)

Hawkeyes in War and Industry

Russell L. Johnson's meticulously researched study is a very successful blend of two, or perhaps three, "new" kinds of history: the new military history, the new labor history, and the new social history. All of these "new" fields, of course, are as old as Johnson himself, but *Warriors into Workers* is one of the few monographs that attempts to bring these subfields together. By taking a detailed look at a city–Dubuque, Iowa–that was on the verge of major industrialization when the Civil War came along, Johnson examines the extent to which the experience of military service affected the transition of society from one based on farming, some mining, and commerce to one that would be increasingly dominated by industry in the postwar decades. The task he sets himself is to "[trace] the connection between the industrial workplace and the other great centralized, stratified, and authoritarian institution of the nineteenth century, the Union army" (p. 5). Using sophisticated analysis of the 1860 and 1870 censuses and thorough combing of local newspapers and a variety of local records, Johnson is able to present a fine-grained account of how Dubuque changed and how the war changed its veterans.

Dubuque originated in the 1830s, after the Black Hawk War, as a lead-mining town, across the river from Galena, Illinois. By 1855, several railroads had made the city their western terminus, stimulating a brief but powerful commercial boom. The reason for that boom's brevity was the Panic of 1857, which brought Dubuque levels of business failure disproportionate to its size. The business collapse led to concerns about social decay and corruption, but also to increased interest in building Dubuque's economy on manufacturing rather than the caprices of trade. Johnson carefully examines the social landscape in these years before the war, explaining the differences in property ownership between the business class and the working class, the structure of working-class families and the role of sons in those household economies, and the political landscape. The conclusion here is that unskilled workers at the beginning of the 1860s faced a precarious existence in Dubuque.

Johnson's second chapter covers the mobilization of soldiers from Dubuque. The threat of a draft hung over the city for most of the war and was an important factor in motivating recruits and manipulating the terms under which they entered the military. Although manufacturing increased quickly due to federal excise taxes on production, the inflation of this period hurt the working class more than the improved wages helped them. The third chapter looks at the social origins of enlistees. Johnson draws an important distinction here between "soldier sons" who were dependents in someone else's household when they enlisted and "independent soliders" who were not. "Those most likely to enlist," Johnson concludes, "were sons living in low-nonmanual and artisan households and independent men among the city's artisans and independent workers" (p. 104). For the soldier sons, this was a continuation of prewar family strategies which relied on their income to get by. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Johnson finds that the poorer the soldier, the more likely he was to re-enlist.

The second part of the book examines the military experience and its impact. Before the war, workers in Dubuque were overwhelmingly artisanal, experiencing a certain degree of independence, as Herbert Gutman, Sean Wilentz, and any number of labor historians have argued. Johnson's argument in this and the next chapter relies on an analogy: the experience of military life was very much like the experience of living in an urban-industrial situation in many important ways. The analogy is not exact, and Johnson never claims it is, but it is powerful nonetheless. The insights in these two chapters breathe life back into the study after the statistically heavy (but interesting) chapters analyzing Dubuque and the soldiers before the war. Like industry, the army was functionally differentiated, and soldiers specialized as infantry, cavalry, or artillery. They became members of a large force

with limited scope for individual initiative. Their time and their daily routine were no longer their own. Johnson gives several pages to describing marching and the exhaustion that it created–no afternoon breaks for beer for these soon-to-be industrial workers. Military service, like life in large factories, involved a lot of smoke and noise, factors that these farmers and artisans would have had little experience with. The supervisory structure in the military was hierarchical, of course, in a way that would be replicated in civilian industry, and there was little rank mobility for soldiers, with the army reinforcing existing civilian class boundaries. The fifth chapter compares Union army life to urban life. While Johnson's discussion of an oppositional enlisted man's subculture as analogous to urban, working-class subculture seems less convincing than his other points, there is no arguing with his observation that crowding and inadequate shelter, leading to epidemic disease, were features common to both the army camp and the industrial city. Officers stayed healthier by avoiding the conditions enlisted men lived in, as the urban middle class would come to shun working-class slums. Johnson examines courts martial of NCOs as a way of understanding the structure of military discipline, making the case that NCOs occupied a position quite similar to that of skilled factory foremen in early industry, in between workers and managers.

Johnson turns, in chapter 6, to the home front in Dubuque, and specifically the experiences of the families the soldiers left behind. The Panic of 1857 had created considerable poverty in Dubuque, and the city's leaders had not really figured out an adequate way of dealing with it, blaming poverty on individual failure rather than on the inadequacy of economic, political, and social structures. Indoor relief, on a very limited scale, was all that was available, and wartime relief fell quickly into this pattern. Those most vulnerable to poverty were the families of unskilled workers and female heads of households; when soldiers left *en masse* in spring 1861, many of the families they left fit both of those categories. Town fathers set up a Volunteer Fund Board to help the families of volunteers, but it was not built for the long-term and closed by January 1862. At that point, the Ladies Aid Society formed, but they tended to focus their efforts on the soldiers at the front. Soldiers' families, the city decided, would be treated just like any other poor, leaving them with less sympathy and less charity than the soldiers themselves enjoyed. Adding to the problem, delays in soldiers getting their pay at the front and the rickety mechanisms for sending that pay home kept families in Dubuqe in bad shape.

Johnson's last chapter examines the reintegration of veterans into Dubuque society, using the 1870 census as a bookend. Here Johnson is fighting some common but careless generalizations. We have assumed that veterans tended to be footloose or that they had the same social mobility as nonveterans. In other words, they exemplified the inverse relationship between geographic mobility and social mobility. If prospects were not improving, then they picked up stakes and went somewhere with more opportunities. All this turns out to be wrong when it comes to Dubuque's veterans. The wide-open days of the 1850s had vanished, replaced by the more predictable and steady opportunities of industrial employment in things like furniture or wagon manufacturing. Artisans had moved from independent shops to the factory floor, and that role with its greater structure and deskilling would have seemed familiar to men who had spent the previous years in the army ranks. Johnson's analysis of the mobility, or lack of it, of Dubuque veterans is quite intricate and difficult to summarize in detail in a review, but the key was that Dubuque veterans who stayed in the city until 1870–and that was half of the returning veterans–had a stable social position. They did not rise much, but likewise they did not fall far. And they stayed in Dubuque at higher rates than nonveterans from equivalent backgrounds. Johnson suggests that this might be because soldiers had gotten their fill of foreign climes during the war and had concluded that nowhere could compare to Dubuque.

Warriors into Workers has two main strengths. First, it poses a very worthwhile question and attempts to answer it by bringing together subfields of disciplines that have all too rarely engaged one another's questions. Second, it takes a well-chosen example and builds its arguments on sophisticated analysis of an exhaustive body of evidence. One could hardly ask for more. The linchpin of the monograph is the analogy between the army and the industrial workplace. I suppose that some readers might not be persuaded by the aptness of the analogy, but the two key chapters where Johnson compares them are so full of insights and careful observations that these disgruntled readers will be few in number. At times, Johnson probably provides a bit more information about Dubuque than anyone outside Iowa needs, such as an extensive discussion of pro-war and anti-war politics in the chapter on mobilization that seemed to do little to advance the main argument. For those who want to lift the hood and see how it all works, Johnson provides dozens of tables and graphs to back up his claims. It is also worth noting that for a volume built largely on some detailed number-crunching, Johnson's book reads very well, better than many histories that do not face such obstacles; moreover, the Fordham University Press editorial team has served the manuscript well.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Bruce E. Baker. Review of Johnson, Russell L., *Warriors into Workers: The Civil War and the Formation of Urban-Industrial Society in a Northern City*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. September, 2006.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12331

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.