



Legislative Services Agency

State Capitol, 1007 E. Grand Avenue, Des Moines, Iowa 50319, 515.281.3566

Legislative Information Office

Pieces of Iowa's Past

Pieces of Iowa's Past, published by Iowa Legislative Information Office monthly, features historical facts about Iowa, the Capitol, and the early workings of state government. All italicized text/block quotes in this document are taken directly from historical publications with the actual spelling, punctuation, and grammar retained.

The 1909 Army Tournament

September 2026

In September 1909, Des Moines was the location for the largest peacetime gathering of United States Army troops the country had ever seen. The event, formally called the National Tournament of the United States Army, took place September 20 through 25, 1909.

By mid-September, Des Moines was preparing for an event "well worth the expense." The Des Moines Tribune reports the city "bright with national colors, awaits the president." Des Moines businessmen had spent thousands of dollars to guarantee the tournament would be properly advertised. Admission fees were charged, and after all expenses were paid, the profits would go to funds maintained by the troops for the relief of the enlisted men. General admission was 50 cents, reserved seats were 75 cents, and boxes were \$6 and \$10.

The Inauguration and Parade

President William H. Taft's train pulled into Union Station just before 8:30 a.m. Monday, September 20. He was met there by a committee of prominent Iowans, including Harry H. Polk, Charles A. Rawson, Governor Beryl F. Carroll, Senator Jonathan P. Dolliver, and Senator Albert B. Cummins. The party was taken by automobile to the Cummins home, where breakfast — "crisp waffles and fine beefsteak" — was served to more than a score of guests, following a procession route north from the depot on Sixth Avenue to Walnut Street, west to 12th Street, north to Grand Avenue, and west on Grand Avenue to Terrace Drive.



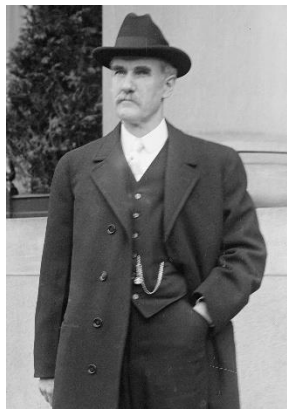
President William H. Taft



Senator Albert B. Cummins



Harry H. Polk



Governor Beryl F. Carroll



Senator Jonathan P. Dolliver

After breakfast, the parade reformed and moved to the Capitol. The south side of the State Capitol grounds was an ideal location for the tournament inauguration. An estimated crowd of 20,000 people and 600 dignitaries were flooded around the base of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument. Taft reviewed the approximately 5,200 troops stretching over three miles and took a full hour to pass the stand. Congressman J.A.T. Hull presided over the review, with Dolliver and Cummins on the platform alongside roughly 150 newspapermen — named honorary vice presidents for the day — and representatives of 20 state labor organizations.



Army Tournament Inauguration at the [Iowa Soldiers and Sailors Monument](#) on Monday, September 20, 1909.

Taft's remarks highlighted matters facing the next Congress: railway rates, interstate commerce, labor, and law enforcement legislation.

The President was then hurried back to Union Station, where a crowd of 4,000 cheered his endorsement of Congressman Walter I. Smith's candidacy. It hadn't been his only speech of the morning — he had addressed a Japanese trade commission at a luncheon in Minneapolis before his train departed for Iowa. From Des Moines, the president continued on, stopping briefly in Council Bluffs and on to Omaha, Nebraska.

The Tournament

One hundred thirty-five acres on and adjoining the fairgrounds were turned into a military camp for the occasion, housing 6,000 soldiers and 3,000 horses. Every branch of the service was represented: cavalry, infantry, engineers, signal corps, etc., and every detail of warfare was demonstrated inside the racetrack arena and in plain view of the grandstand of the seating of 20,000 people.

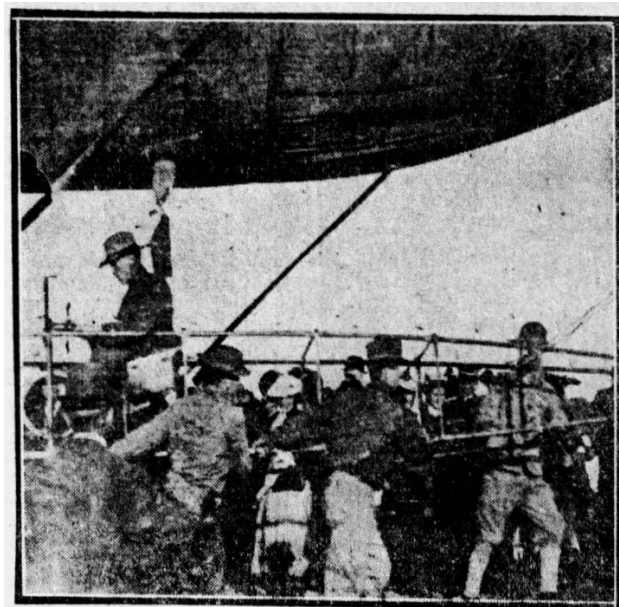
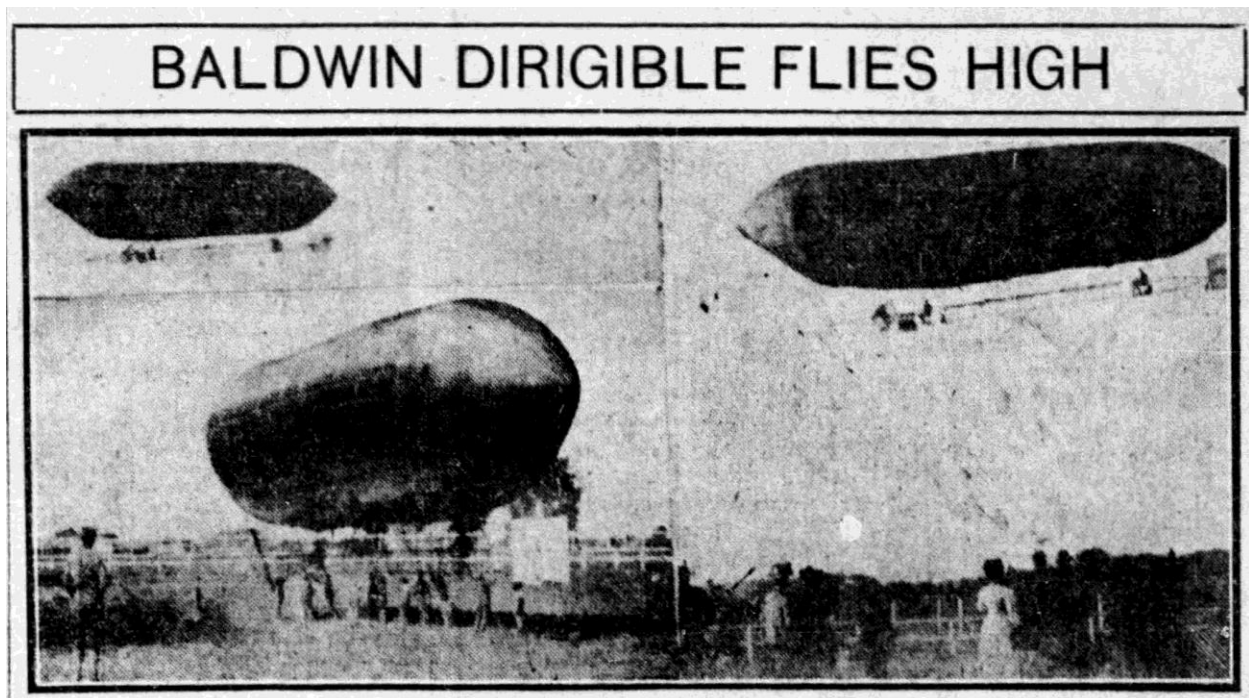
Once the tournament opened, the program promised a full slate of "war time demonstrations." The engineering corps competed in a bridge-building competition, constructing a three-span bridge over "water," marched a wagon train across it, and then blew up the structure in as little as seven minutes. The musical saber drill mounted 1,200 cavalymen executing an entire drill without a single spoken word.

The aircraft will make daily flights, circling above imaginary camps and improvised fortifications, reporting their strength by signal and by wireless telegraph, and upon command will swoop down upon them and drop high explosives to demonstrate the possibilities of the aircraft in warfare. The artillery batteries will engage in daily drills and offensive and defensive operations against a hostile enemy. With them will be cavalry and infantry doing their part, exemplification of the use of field batteries, of the field hospital work, etc. There will be imaginary streams to cross and at a signal bridge trains will dash into the arena and throw either spar or pontoon bridges across the streams to permit of the crossing of the troops. Sappers will follow, who will destroy the bridges to prevent pursuit. In the great camp will be field bakeries in operation and baking the bread used by this army, great portable kitchens preparing the rations for the troops, etc.

The Daily Gate, September 13, 1909.

Overhead, the daily program included a captive balloon crew, under the command of Lieutenant Frank P. Lahm, manning the Army's Baldwin dirigible, the first aircraft the United

States military had ever purchased. Barely reaching 20 miles per hour, the Baldwin dirigible was a new airship enveloped in 20,000 cubic feet of silk lined with vulcanized rubber that was stretched over a 93-foot frame. Suspended beneath the gas bag was an open, skeletal, and triangular wooden gondola for the crew and engine.



SNAPSHOTS TAKEN AT CAMP CORSE YESTERDAY WHEN DIRIGIBLE BALLOON MADE ITS FIRST FLIGHT.

The Des Moines Tribune, September 24, 1909.