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Curiosity of the day:

Cincinnati

“I know what Cincinnati is!” you say. “It’s a city in Ohio, on the big Ohio River.”

That’s true enough. But do you know why they called it Cincinnati, and not Losantiville, which is what the first settlers called it?

We have to go back fifteen hundred years, to the year 458 B. C. The scene is a very small farm near the city of Rome. An old man is strapped to a plow. In those days, a farmer would harness himself to a team of two oxen in front of him, and to a plow which he gripped and directed with his hands. The plow was not a big machine. It was a long wooden pole with a hooked iron plowshare at the bottom. When the oxen rumbled forward, they would drag the pole along, which the man would have to keep steady, forcing it down into the earth to plow up the dirt, in a straight furrow. It was extremely hard work.

His name was Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus. He wasn’t rich, but his city, Rome, was in trouble. Their neighbors, the Aequi, were on the attack, and the Senate thought that Cincinnatus was the only

man who could save them. So they sent some messengers to him to ask him to put on his toga – the robe that the rich senators wore – and come to the city, to receive his commission. Cincinnatus

was surprised by that, because he was not a popular man, but he went, and there the Senate made him *dictator*, giving him complete command of the armies.

You mustn’t think that Cincinnatus could then do whatever he wanted. The dictator served for six months, and during that time he led the army and everyone had to obey him, but after the six months were over, he had to resign, and then face the people and the Senate, who would put him on

trial if he had done anything illegal. But Cincinnatus didn’t need the six months. It took him only a week or two to surprise the Aequi and defeat them utterly. The Senate then voted to give Cincinnatus a “triumph.” That meant that he could parade into the city with all his soldiers. First came the enemy commanders with their flags, then came the Roman army with all the spoils they had taken from the Aequi, and finally, Cincinnatus, crowned with a wreath for his victory. The Roman people



spread their tables with food, so that any of the soldiers could drop in and have something to eat while they sang and told jokes and marched through the city.

Cincinnatus didn't want power, and he wasn't interested in wealth. He had six months to be dictator, but he resigned after fifteen days, once his job was done. Then he returned to his modest farm, and worked the land again.

Ever since then, the Romans held Cincinnatus in honor. They thought, even when they had become the rulers of the greatest empire in the world, that it was really better to be Cincinnatus, than to be a rich and lazy senator surrounded with slaves and rich food, without any good hard work to do. That didn't mean that they lived as Cincinnatus did. But the example was a powerful one.

Many years later, another general who owned a farm left his land, which he did not really want to do, in order to lead a poor and outnumbered army, to win freedom for his people. That man's name was George Washington. After the war that set the American colonies free from Great Britain, many people would have been happy if Washington had become their king, but he wanted none of that. He returned to his farm at Mount Vernon. Years later, the American people called him from his farm

again, to become the first President of the United States. And again, Washington could have become president for the rest of his life, but he was not interested in power, and he did not believe that such an example would be good for the country he loved. After he served two terms, he returned – to his farm, and to the work he loved to do.

George Washington was called the Cincinnatus of his country. A group of men who honored Washington and who had fought in the war formed a group of their own, called the Society of the Cincinnati (it's one Cincinnatus, in Latin, and two Cincinnati). The Society still exists; the first born son of a member of the Cincinnati becomes a member when his father dies. They do a lot of charitable work, and they house many documents, uniforms, paintings, badges, weapons, and other materials that date back to the Revolutionary War.

And it was they, the Society of the Cincinnati, who gave the name to the new city on the Ohio River. So the example of a heroic man lives on – because of a far more heroic man, George Washington.



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