

THE BATTLE OF ATHENS, MISSOURI.

BY D. C. BEAMAN.

To those not familiar with the situation it is necessary to state that the Des Moines river at Athens, Missouri, forms the boundary line between Missouri and Iowa. Athens is situated on a high hill which presents a face to the river of one-half or three-fourths of a mile in extent, the ground above and below the town being considerably lower. The town of Croton is on the Iowa side opposite Athens, but on much lower ground.

The Keokuk, Fort Des Moines & Minnesota railroad was at that time completed from Keokuk to Ottumwa. I was station agent at Croton, and also orderly sergeant of Captain Joe Faris's company, then just organized at Croton for service in the union army.

The first battle of Bull Run had been fought a few days before, resulting in a disastrous defeat of the union forces. The battle of Wilson's Creek, in Missouri, in which General Lyon was killed, was fought the same day as the battle of Athens, August 5, 1861, but as there was then no telegraph up the Des Moines river it was not known there for some days.

Colonel David Moore, with his unorganized regiment comprised of Missouri and Iowa unionists, some two or three hundred strong, was in recruiting camp at Athens.

Martin Green in command of an unorganized regiment of Missouri rebels, about five hundred strong, had been for some days marching from the neighborhood of Memphis, Missouri, to give battle to Colonel Moore's recruits at Athens. This was known by Colonel Moore, but he was unable to obtain reliable information as to Green's progress until the evening of August 4th, when he learned that the rebels were but a few miles away.

The Keokuk City Rifles, composed mostly of Keokuk

business men, and numbering about sixty had arrived at Croton from Keokuk the night of August 4th to reinforce Colonel Moore. W. W. Belknap, afterwards Secretary of War, was their captain.

I was at my home in Croton very early on the morning of August 5th when I heard a cannon shot on the Athens hill. I hurried to the depot where I met Captain Belknap, and while we were standing together and speculating on what the day would bring forth and what we should do, the battle was fairly opened by the discharge of small arms from both sides and other shots from the six-pound cannon which the rebels had with them.

Colonel Moore's men were mostly in line on the hill at Athens, but small outposts were near the river above and below the town to meet a flank attack by the rebels should one be made.

Captain Belknap rallied his City Rifles who were about the depot and they with H. W. Sample of Keokuk and myself went down to the river immediately opposite Colonel Moore's lower outpost which was in Ike Gray's maple grove just below Athens. We were stationed in a maple grove belonging to my father on the Iowa shore. In a few minutes a flanking party of rebels, probably fifty in number, appeared on the Missouri side of the river opposite us and began to drive in the union outpost. We immediately opened fire on them. H. W. Sample and I were close to each other, while the City Rifles were scattered through the grove, each behind a big maple tree.

Soon after we arrived at the river, and before we got the range, the rebel flanking party had routed the union outpost and they were retreating, some across the river and some back on to the Athens hill. It was here, I believe, that Captain Joe Dickey of Farmington was wounded.

The distance across the river was considerable and our first bullets struck the water near the opposite shore. But this enabled us to get the range readily and in a short time

we had the rebels dodging behind the trees in Ike Gray's grove. Then came a union reinforcement from Colonel Moore which put the rebels in the grove under a cross-fire; they retreated on the run down the river, and were soon out of sight, and by that time Moore had whipped the main body on the hill and they were also in full flight, but managed to take their cannon with them.

A rebel flanking party on the up-river side of the town had also been defeated at the same time and the battle was over.

I believe Sample was also captain of a Keokuk company which was there, but neither he nor Belknap attempted to get their men in line or march them to the river in order. They were lying promiscuously about the depot, resting after a night's ride from Keokuk, and awaiting word from Colonel Moore, when the fight began much earlier than was expected. Belknap and Sample ordered their men to make for the river, but by the time they reached it the fight was on between the rebel flankers opposite and the union outpost. It was impossible for us to wade the river, and any attempt to fight in line would have been disadvantageous, and there was nothing else or better to do than to fight from behind the trees, as we did.

We kept a stream of lead going across the river as long as there was a rebel in sight, and never knew what damage we did, but as the range was long and the rebels soon began to jump sideways and get behind the maple trees it is not likely that many were killed or wounded. They returned our fire for awhile but did us no damage, as a two-foot maple tree makes a pretty safe breastwork.

It was said at the time that Colonel Moore had two sons in Green's rebel regiment, and after considerable firing had been done by both sides, the main bodies of the opposing forces on the hill being several hundred yards apart, Colonel Moore gave the order to charge in loud tones, intending, no doubt, that the rebels should hear it. One of his sons, on

hearing the order, said to his comrades, "Boys, do you hear the old man? He means what he says, and they will be here in about a minute, and the old man won't be the last one either." The charge followed as predicted, and that ended the battle.

I believe the rebels fired only five solid shot—all they had—and a few loads of scrap iron. One of the shot went clear through a house on the hill and the hole remained unrepaired for many years after. Another shot* went over the heads of General Belknap and myself soon after we got to the depot. It whistled like a shell, the whistling being made by a sand hole in it, and struck in the hill on my father's farm back of Croton, where it was afterwards found. I presume it is the only rebel cannon ball fired during the war from a rebel state which lodged in a union one, certainly the only one which struck Iowa soil.

DENVER, COLORADO, September 10, 1903.

*This cannon ball was presented by Mr. Beaman, to the Historical Department and is now on exhibition in the museum. A flag carried by one of Green's companies during the battle, was also presented to the Department by Mr. Beaman. The 6-pound shot-hole through the house remains "unrepaired" to this day. It is the principal remaining relic of the battle in the hamlet of Athens.

BUFFALO HUNT.—Our friends in Pocahontas county have recently enjoyed the rare pleasure of a buffalo hunt. Some two weeks since, a large buffalo of the "male persuasion," was discovered on the prairie some mile or more from the court house, and a party consisting of Messrs. Hait, Struthers, Metcalf and Stickney immediately started on horseback in pursuit. After a hot chase of several miles, his bovine majesty was finally overtaken and compelled to "give up the ghost," by the reception of some twenty balls, fired from revolvers, pistols and shot guns. He proved to be one of the largest of his species and the weight of the carcass was estimated at over 1500 pounds.—*Ft. Dodge Republican, September 23, 1863.*

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