

VOTING WITH THE SOLDIERS IN 1864.

BY CHARLES ALDRICH.

Happening to visit Des Moines in the early autumn of 1864, I met Gov. William M. Stone, and had a brief but very pleasant visit with him. During our conversation he suggested that if I would like to go to an Iowa regiment to take the vote of the soldiers, he would appoint me one of the commissioners for that purpose. A company had gone from Ft. Dodge, with many of the members of which I was acquainted, to the Army of the Potomac. The theory in the formation of the regiment at the start was to make it a composite affair comprising one company from each of a certain number of states; but the effort failed to materialize, the Adjutant General not being authorized to organize such regiments; and when the command was finally mustered in it was christened the 11th Pennsylvania Cavalry, with a dashing soldier, Samuel P. Spear, as its colonel. The Ft. Dodge Company was composed of very excellent men. Franklin A. Stratton was elected captain. He had been educated as a civil engineer and naturally took to soldiering. His record in the army was very creditable. He took part in many actions, and was almost continuously on duty. He was finally promoted to the rank of colonel and mustered out as brevet-brigadier general. He did not return to Ft. Dodge, and died somewhere in the east many years ago. I have always believed him to have been a most excellent gentleman in every respect, high-minded, honorable, and brave, efficient and accomplished as a soldier. I am glad even at this late day to be able to pay a tribute to his memory.

I do not go into this matter of enumerating the officers to any farther extent for the reason that an article elsewhere in this number details minutely the services of the Company and presents its full roster, showing the killed and wounded, as well as the few in the command at its muster out. I am

not aware that this matter has ever been published in the State aside from the old official reports, and it is but simple justice that this gallant command should be placed permanently in our records. I trust that its appearance in these pages will accomplish that purpose.

I reported to the Secretary of State at Des Moines, where I received my instructions, with the poll books, blanks, etc. I also carried tickets provided by each of the political parties. The journey to Washington was without any special incident. I applied at the War Department for permission to visit Gen. Grant's command in my official capacity as "army vote commissioner," and was referred to Maj. Henry Clay Wood (who, I believe, if living, must be a gray-haired colonel by this time), an assistant adjutant general. I found him an exceedingly affable and pleasant gentleman. He gave me the necessary permit, limiting my stay to a certain number of days—five or six. I took the first steamer down the Potomac and up the James, and in due time landed on the point at the junction of the latter stream with the Appomattox. I was not long in finding Charles A. Sherman of Ft. Dodge, who had been promoted to first lieutenant and assistant quarter-master, and had been detailed for duty at the headquarters of Gen. August V. Kautz, the distinguished cavalry leader. "Charlie" was an old political and personal friend, and gave me a most cordial welcome to his tent and mess table. He wanted to vote, and proffered to go out with me the next day to the point where the men were stationed, doing picket duty, far in front.

We were up in the morning very early, leaving camp on horseback as soon as we had taken our breakfast. We crossed the James at Deep Bottom, on a pontoon bridge, and started off in the direction of Richmond, following the old road. This road led across the locality where Gen. Birney's famous charge with his Black Brigade had taken place not many weeks before. This was the charge about which Gen. B. F. Butler so often spoke with his grandest eloquence

Two long lines of breastworks extended from north to south, crossing a little valley in a diagonal sort of way. These breastworks were about four feet high—logs laid up squarely in front with heavy embankments of yellow clay filled in behind. In front of the first line and parallel with it ran a close abattis made of small pines firmly set in the ground; the limbs pointing toward the "Yanks" had been sharpened. Both lines of breastworks were lined with confederates. But Gen. Butler ordered Birney to charge them at daybreak. It seemed a most hazardous undertaking, but everything was in readiness and the black warriors went in with a wild yell. The enemy was ready for them and poured in a hot fire long before the colored soldiers reached the abattis. On reaching this obstruction, the line halted until the ax-men could cut their passage through it, which was very quickly done. The negroes then went forward and the confederates not only fled from their first line of breastworks, but from the second also. It always delighted Gen. Butler to tell how they ran.

But the colored soldiers paid dearly for this terrible charge and its resulting success. The ground on either side of the abattis was thickly strewn with shallow graves, not yet flattened down by the autumnal rains. Here and there one had been dug out—doubtless those of the white officers who had fallen, but whose bodies had been taken to their distant homes.

We took this all in as we jogged along in the pleasant November morning. From this point we now struck into "the Long Bridge road," which led off through thick, grand old pine woods toward Richmond. This was an ancient and very narrow road, which had never been used very much, or had been long abandoned. It was very crooked, and at many points nearly choked up with briars and brush. But it was lined with our pickets. These men were stationed at such frequent intervals that each could see the one next ahead. They were all mounted, sitting motionless and mute

with their carbines cocked—the very impersonation of alertness and vigilance. It certainly looked very much like war to see these grim soldiers peering into the woods, as if in momentary expectation of seeing the approaching enemy. But we finally reached the most advanced picket post, where we found Col. Spear and a company of cavalrymen. Lieut. Sherman introduced me to the colonel, stating the errand upon which I had come. After a hearty and most cordial greeting, I waited a moment to hear what the colonel might say. He spoke in an instant, about as follows:

“Well, young man, if you are going to do anything here you had better get about it — quick! You don’t know the peril you are in at this very moment! That line of trees over yonder (across a meadow or pasture, and not more than 40 or 50 rods away) is full of ‘Johnnies,’ and they may open fire upon us at any minute!”

“All right, colonel! Here goes!”

An election board was quickly appointed “by the commissioner” from the soldiers (as the law stipulated), and a cigar box fitted up for a ballot box. The men were brought in as quietly as possible, and in less time than one can imagine our votes were all in and canvassed. We were not disposed to linger an instant, and Lieut. Sherman and I mounted our horses and started for the rear. A very young second lieutenant by the name of Oscar Matthews, from Dickinson county, returned with us. He was a pleasant, handsome boy. He had been in many battles, and the little black horse which he rode had not yet recovered from an ugly bullet wound in the side—and had other scars besides. He was very attentive to us and showed us many interesting objects along our route. At the battle of Five Forks the poor fellow was shot dead while leading his men in a charge.

The sky was cloudy on our return past the long line of pickets, and the air seemed full of the portents of battle: At one place we passed an old corral, on a low hillside, about which there had been many camp fires. Later in the

day a skirmish occurred here (as Lieut. Sherman informed me afterward), in which several men were killed on either side. Our route out and back also crossed another battle field—that of the second Malvern Hill. Here there was an open field of probably fifteen acres, mostly covered by an apple orchard, and a decayed farm house stood on the east side. A ravine ran along the north and east sides of the field. It seemed that the confederates occupied the field, and that a hard struggle had taken place for its possession. Our forces had fought their way out of the ravine, digging rifle-pits in a zig-zag sort of way up the steep incline. The great pines in the adjacent woods showed hundreds of the scars made by shot and shell. Some had been felled by cannon balls, and others splintered as from a stroke of lightning. In the midst of the orchard several Union soldiers had been buried. But how? They had simply been laid together on the ground, a rubber blanket spread over them, upon which six or eight inches of dirt had been hastily piled! Two or three skulls had been rooted out by swine, and some of the feet also protruded. The flesh, had, however, disappeared, and we only saw the bleaching bones. As we went down into the ravine the young lieutenant requested us to turn out a few steps into the brush. Here a cavalry corporal had fallen, and been left without burial. The cap was still upon the fleshless skull, the visor down over the eyeless sockets. He fell upon his back, and had never been disturbed. The hogs had not found the body.

But we pressed rapidly forward and reached camp a little after noon. (The polls did not keep open until 6 o'clock at that election, however explicit the general law may have been.) I was informed that we were within less than eight miles of Richmond, the spires of which could be plainly seen from a point quite near by. I have always supposed that "my election" was held nearer the front, and in closer proximity to actual peril, than that organized by any other army vote commissioner. Meeting my pleasant, white-haired

friend, Sherman (lieutenant and A. Q. M.), not long since, brought all these circumstances freshly to my mind, and I determined to write out my recollections of the election of 1864.

My permit gave me still several days to remain. I improved them by seeing as much as possible of camps and operations of the great army which finally captured Richmond. We rode along the lines out toward Petersburg, and visited the Dutch Gap canal, which Gen. Butler was then excavating. At several of these batteries the great guns were booming—throwing shells in the direction of the enemy. Inside of our breastworks there were many bomb-proofs, which looked to me as though they would be very safe retreats in the face of a hot artillery fire. Many of the divisions had erected their winter quarters. These consisted of houses or cabins made of pine logs from 6 to 12 inches in diameter with half a foot of Virginia clay piled on the roof to keep out the rain. All had a most cozy, comfortable appearance—especially the better quarters erected for the officers. In that region, owing to the great amount of rainfall, and the impervious character of the soil, the land is plowed with “dead-furrows” about every ten feet to allow the water to run off. Often a field, completely exhausted by tobacco culture, had been abandoned, with these “dead-furrows” remaining. I was surprised to see many such old fields given back to the forest, and densely covered with tall pines, a foot in diameter, the “dead-furrows” as distinct as though the land had been plowed into ridges the day before! It was certainly a novel feature of the forest to one from a prairie state. But “dead-furrows” in that tenacious clay would doubtless last as long as if they had been carved out of some of our softer rocks. The army was then very quiet, and it seemed to me that after so much hard fighting in getting into its position, both officers and men were making themselves very comfortable.

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