

JOSEPH EVAN GRIFFITH.

BY THE LATE DR. FREDERICK LLOYD.

Of the more than three-quarters of one hundred thousand citizens of Iowa who took an active part in the Civil War many highly distinguished themselves, filling medalions in the memory of a grateful State, and none have left a record to disgrace it.

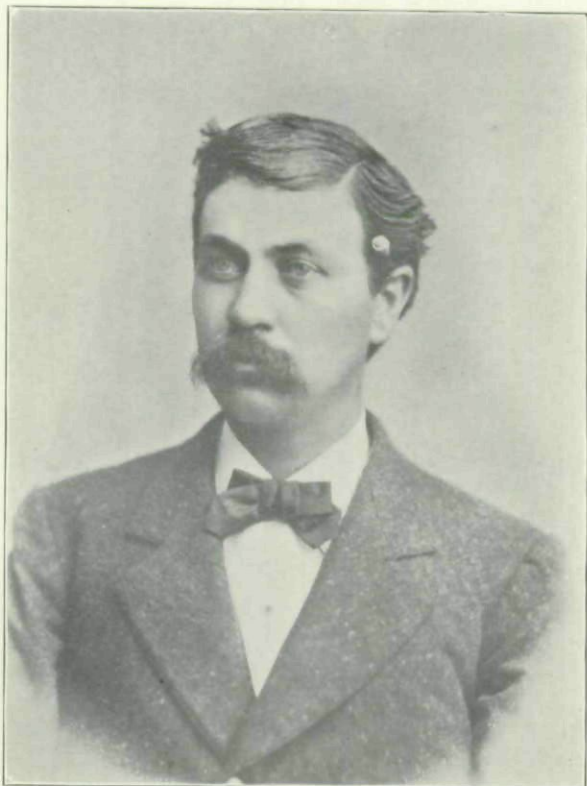
But, as there is always one mountain of a group higher than the rest, so, among prominent actors in a series of events, one will rise higher, and be visible farther and longer than any other.

Nor is it necessary, to give great distinctness that many great actions should be performed to secure the impress. A flash will impress an object upon the sensitive plate of public recognition as indelibly as a long exposure.

Joseph Evan Griffith was born in 1843, at Llanegryn, North Wales. His mother dying in his youth, he was brought to America by his father, a talented Congregational minister, whose family consisted of a daughter, now Mrs. Chas. Lewis, of Sheridan, Wyo., and a boy of whom we write.

The Griffiths emigrated to Wisconsin, but soon removed to Iowa, and settled in the old capitol county of Johnson, where the father became the pastor of the "Welsh Church," six miles west of Iowa City, whose white frame with rising steeple, standing in the midst of marble monuments, which mark its "God's Acre," has long been a landmark to guide the traveler over the uncertain ways of the diverging roads, and which has the distinction of having furnished through two different pastors cadets to the Military Academy at West Point.

In 1862, on the formation of the Twenty-second Iowa, mostly composed of Johnson county young men, Griffith enlisted in this regiment. He had a fine business education, was quick and intelligent, and prompt in decision, affable in manner, social in disposition and athletic in physical devel-



J. E. Griffith

LIEUT. JOSEPH EVAN GRIFFITH.

opment. He was methodical in habit, and kept a diary from his entrance into the ranks, in which he recorded the more important daily events touching himself and his comrades in camp or on the march.

The first service his regiment was called upon to perform after its organization at Camp Pope, in Iowa City, took it to the usual trial ground of Iowa troops, Missouri, in the neighborhood of Rolla, which movement absorbed the autumn and winter of 1862-3. It was, however, in the spring of 1863 deflected from its course by the exigencies of the campaign against Vicksburg and embarked on a Mississippi transport which conveyed it to Young's Point, Louisiana, where the army designed for the capture of Vicksburg was massing.

The romance of the great military adventure known as the "Vicksburg campaign"—running the rebel batteries in front of the stronghold with wooden transports laden with rations—canal digging—levee cutting—the march by Millikin's Bend—finally crossing the river on the riddled transports which had run the batteries—though always interesting is more than a twice-told tale, and it is unnecessary to rehearse it here more than to say that Griffith and the Twenty-second Iowa bore their share in it.

Griffith's quick intelligence had early secured his promotion to the rank of sergeant, so that when he crossed the Mississippi from Carthage to Hard Times Landing on the 30th of April, he carried this rank with him—his sole and only fortune—in his "baptism of blood" the next day at the battle of Port Gibson, the first in the series of actions in the rear of Vicksburg.

His regiment was attached to Lawler's brigade of Carr's division and in the Thirteenth army corps, and also bore a part at the rapidly recurring brilliant actions of Raymond, Jackson, Champion's Hill and Black River Bridge. I pass by these hurriedly, as being the property of history, written and re-written and not prominent in relation to the event I am hastening to as pre-eminent in this narrative.

It had been ordained, as we say by Fate, that the number of Griffith's regiment and the number of the day of the month should correspond when one of those great conjunctions of events should transpire to suddenly change the destiny of at least one of those obscure integers of the Twenty-second, who should emerge from the deadly conflict of that day with fame so bright as to dazzle the beholders even in the brilliancy of the illustrious commander himself.

This was Sergeant Joseph E. Griffith, who, as General Grant says in his official report, with eleven other comrades, all save one of whom were killed, was the only one of that army who actually entered a rebel post in the charge of the 22d of May, and brought out prisoners and delivered them to him.

In Greeley's "American Conflict," this episode of the charge is referred to as follows: "Rushing forward to the assault precisely at 10 a. m., Lawler's brigades had within fifteen minutes carried the ditch, slope and bastion of the fort they confronted, which was entered by Sergeant Griffith and eleven privates of the Twenty-second Iowa, all of whom fell in it but the sergeant, who brought away twelve rebels as prisoners."

In General Badeau's work, relating the same event, he bears this testimony: "Lawler's brigade in Carr's division, which had carried the *tete-de-pont* on the Big Black river, dashed forward with its old impetuosity, supported by Landrum's brigade of Smith's division, and in less than fifteen minutes a part of our brigade, the Twenty-second Iowa, succeeded in crossing the ditch and parapet of a rebel outwork, but not receiving the support of the rest of the column could not push further nor drive the enemy from the main work immediately in the rear. A hand-to-hand fight here ensued, lasting several minutes; hand grenades, also, were thrown by the rebels in the rear, while the national troops still commanded the outer parapet.

"Every man in the party but one was shot down. Sergeant Joseph Griffith of the Twenty-second Iowa fell at the

time with his comrades, stunned but not seriously hurt. On his recovery he found a rebel lieutenant and sixteen men lying in the outwork, still unwounded, though exposed to the fire of both friend and foe. He rose and bade them follow him out of the place, too hot for any man to stay and live. The rebels obeyed, and, calling to the troops outside to cease their firing, Griffith brought his prisoners over the parapet, under storm of rebel shot that killed four of those so willing to surrender.

“For this act of gallantry Griffith was next day promoted by Grant to a first lieutenancy, thus literally, like a knight of the middle ages, winning his spurs on the field. He was not twenty years old and shortly afterwards received an appointment to the Military Academy at West Point, where he was known as ‘Grant’s cadet,’ and graduated in 1867 fifth in his class.”

On his graduation Griffith was assigned to the engineer corps, to which his high standing in the class entitled him.

Immediately after leaving the academy he married Miss Belle, elder daughter of Dr. Thomas Rigg, of Iowa City. After a few years’ service he resigned from the army to accept a position as a civil engineer on the government canal near Keokuk, then in course of construction, to facilitate navigation on the Mississippi river. In a little while he relinquished this, too, to settle down in his old home at Iowa City where he engaged in commercial business, and where he suddenly died in July, 1877, leaving beside a widow, two daughters, Elizabeth, now Mrs. Clifford Coldren of Boston, and Madie, now Mrs. Wright of Council Bluffs, and one son, Lloyd E. Griffith, also of Council Bluffs.

Thus, at the early age of thirty-four, after brilliant feats of arms performed in war, and high achievements gained in the class room, which threw lustre upon the arms and scholarship of his adopted State, died the stalwart youth whose friends might well claim for him the title of “the hero of the Civil War from Iowa.”

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.