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STORMING OF CHAPULTEPEC

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FORGETTING CHAPULTEPEC

By ORA WILLIAMS

One hundred years ago on a drowsy summer day for Iowa a small group of men and boys loitering on the rough dock below the Flint hills watched a packet pull away on the up-journey to Galena. The hoarse blast that had called for full speed ahead had hardly been lost in the echoes when the attention of the idlers was called to a commotion in the court yard. A new excitement had appeared.

That hour was the commencement of a story of adventure and heroism that culminated in an Iowa man¹ carrying the flag of his country from the great fortress of Chapultepec into the capital of a conquered nation, an event that might well be a part of Iowa's joyous Centennial celebration in this anniversary year of 1946.

We are forgetting Chapultepec.

Our ears are attuned to the strident raspings from Hollywood, unmindful of the historic fact that but for Chapultepec the site of Hollywood might still be only the playground of a Mexican ranchero. Even in the old days there were those who wanted to forget Chapultepec. A newspaper scribbler set America afire with a suggestion that "manifest destiny" would compel the United

¹Benjamin Stone Roberts, born in Vermont 1811 and graduated from West Point 1835; came to Iowa and became adjutant at old Fort Des Moines; resigned and became railroad engineer in New York and assistant state geologist; was invited to help railroad construction in Russia but declined; came back to Iowa, practiced law at Fort Madison and was an officer in territorial militia; joined a mounted rifle regiment and went to Mexico where he distinguished himself at various places; was assigned by General Scott to raise the United States flag over the capitol of Mexico; was voted a sword by the General Assembly of Iowa; received a commission as major in the War of the Rebellion, performed military duty at a number of important places and became brigadier general of volunteers; remained with the regular army until 1870, and died at Washington Jan. 29, 1875. He also was two years professor of tactics at Yale university.

States to expand even to the cold mountains that had not revealed their gold. The boys playing at the Burlington water front thought of the Skunk river bottoms as "out west." Time plays havoc with ideas and ideals.

The summer had promised to be dull in the ambitious little city that had been seat of government for two territories that extended to nobody knew where. The territorial capital had been moved nearer to the Indian country, but the governor still kept his executive office close to his newspaper editorial sanctum. The knowing ones were already saying the capital would be moved over into the central valley now that statehood was a certainty.

The fussing about details of statehood would come to an end early in August when the matter would be clinched by a vote on the patched up Constitution of May. The compromisers had for once compromised on what was right. Iowa would be a free state. Florida had already come in as a slave state. The promise had been to divide Texas up into four states or more, if needed to make sure of the dominance of the slavery group at Washington. The administration of the crafty Tyler had come to an inglorious end. The pompous Tennessean, Mr. Polk, was looking for a chance to achieve glory. River traffic was good clear to St. Anthony's Falls. It was certain that salaries in the new state would not attract greedy men to state or local offices. There would be a little scramble for congressional honors. On the whole it was a quiet spring time in Iowa.

The commotion in the court yard commenced when a man tacked to the south front door a handbill that had been freshly run off at the local print shop. It bore the signature of the governor and his secretary. It was an official proclamation with fighting words. Some there were who gave a whoop of joy as they read it; others turned away in dismay. But the handbill dissi-

pated the summer stillness of a June day on the river front.

Men were wanted from Iowa to reinforce the regular army and help chastise Mexico for something or other. The call was for a regiment, ten companies, and privates should be "in years apparently not over forty-five or under eighteen." That gave considerable leeway in the matter of enlistments. The description would fit a good many men and boys who knew how to hit a squirrel at fifty yards. Enlistments were to be for a year or until the war "now existing" came to an end.

"The President," so ran the proclamation, "in thus offering us an opportunity of participating in the danger and glory of inflicting merited chastisement upon the invaders of our soil, has, I am confident, but anticipated the wishes of the great body of our people."

That settled it. There had been invasion of "our soil," so Pres. James K. Polk says. James Clarke, fellow townsman, editor and now governor, also says so, and Jesse Williams, territorial secretary added his signature. No need to ask questions. What mattered it if Congressman Abe Lincoln had asked embarrassing questions about what particular spot of "our soil" had been trampled on by the Mexicans! The moment's flurry among the big-wigs at Washington did not change the fact. Iowa had Gen. Augustus Caesar Dodge on guard at the national capital. The territorial governor had married into the same "Dodge dynasty." If there were explanations to be made they could furnish them later. Nobody in Iowa knew very much about Mexico, nor how to get there, but they were ready to start.

The first shock of the proclamation caused varying emotions. One man recalled how his father helped take in a bunch of tipsy Hessians at Trenton. Another had heard about the terrible suffering at Valley Forge. One had been in line at Lundy's Lane and lost a leg. The American republic was seventy years old and had fought

two wars for independence. Why bother about Mexico? Yet, someone whispered, "Remember the Alamo," and recall what they did to Davy Crockett. There had been some disagreement about a strip of cactus land and Gen. Santa Anna had been brought back home supposedly to start something. The Texas that had been a hopeful nation several years had taken refuge under the stars and stripes. Now "our soil" had been invaded.

PUZZLED OVER THE MEXICAN QUARREL

There were those who hinted that the fuss might mean more than control of a strip of desert land and a string of missions running up to the highlands. Far beyond lay California and Oregon. But the crowd that milled about the handbill could settle nothing and only argue. A bumptious Whig and belligerent Democrat nearly broke down the hitching rack in their argument. A boy shouted "Hooray for General Jackson." A fisherman passed that way and asked whether Mexico was a river or a town. There would be other meetings held, some in the office of Judge David Rorer, whose judgment was always good, and others, perhaps, in the newspaper office where the governor still had a desk.

The sudden disclosure that a state of war actually existed was not to disturb business, they all agreed, for the real fighting would be a long way off. The feverish land speculation would go on, and the eager search for homes would not be halted. Every packet from St. Genevieve or below unloaded a family or two. Boats from Wheeling to the falls were said to be crowded. Merchants were selling breaking-plows and broad-axes. All roads from the river towns to the flowered valleys of the Iowa, the Skunk and the Des Moines were heavy with dust or mud. The last of the Indians had been sent off to Kansas except a few in the west or north.

A full regiment was wanted from Iowa. That was ten companies. They were to be equipped as regulars, and they would get money to buy clothing. A recruiting

officer would come and swear them in as quickly as possible. The language of the proclamation was strong. Among other things it stated:

The President of the United States, under a law enacted at the present session of congress authorizing him to accept the services of fifty thousand volunteers to serve in the war now existing between Mexico and the United States, having made a requisition upon me, as Executive of the Territory, for the enrollment of one regiment of Infantry, to be mustered into service at such times as may be required, I hereby proclaim the fact to the citizen soldiery of Iowa, not doubting that they will respond to the call with the utmost alacrity and promptness.

It is due to the character of our territory and its inhabitants that the requisition be at once met by voluntary enlistment, and that it will be so met I have entire confidence. To insure this result, I recommend that active, efficient, and immediate steps be taken in the several counties of the territory to procure the enrollment, in good faith, of all who may be disposed to tender their services to their country, a report of the result to be transmitted to me at the earliest possible day. The aid of all good citizens—all lovers of their country—is invoked, and calculated on; and it is especially enjoined that on all officers holding military commissions that they be active and vigilant in their efforts to assist in raising the force called for by the president.

There was no mistaking the language. The man who stood on the top step and read aloud the handbill emphasized the "all lovers of their country."

These Iowa men were familiar with gold braid and clanging swords. Governor Lucas had seen service with Jackson and Governor Chambers had fought with Harrison. The latter pleaded age for not accepting command of the Iowa regiment. Then there were such men as Albert Lea, Atkinson, Allen, Greer, Boone, Gardiner and others. Stephen Kearny had orders to organize the Mormon battalion. Zachary Taylor, whose only licking was in boats and in sight of Iowa, was on his way to Texas. U. S. Grant, who had bought hides and hogs in Iowa, was getting ready, and so was Robert E. Lee, who had made reports on the Des Moines rapids. Winfield Scott, who directed the first land deal in Iowa, had his sword all polished. They had some sort of an organized

militia in the territory and James McGowan Morgan was at the head. He had picked up some legal learning in the office of "Old Bullion," Benton of Missouri, and had been in the territorial legislature. Then there was George Washington Bowie who had been active in the constitutional convention. Another of stout heart was Frederick D. Mills², who had joined with Eastman and Parvin in the fight to make Iowa boundaries right. Perhaps at some of the meetings they called in for consultation, Dr. William Salter, of the Iowa band. At Fort Madison there was Isaac W. Griffith³ and Benjamin Stone Roberts chafing to get into the fray. At up river points there was also great excitement as soon as the handbills appeared.

ALL READY AND NO PLACE TO GO

Only a day or two later the governor was embarrassed by the offer of a dozen companies: Des Moines county 2, Lee county 2, Van Buren 2, and one each in Muscatine, Washington, Louisa, Linn, Johnson and Dubuque. Then there was a hitch of some kind and delay and the Iowa regiment as such was never organized. After all Iowa was a territory and had no vote in congress.

The call for an Iowa regiment was dated June 1, 1846, but on Nov. 25, Governor Clarke received this word from William L. Marcy secretary of war:

I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your Excellency's letter of the 19th instant, stating that the regiment of Iowa volunteers are anxious to be called into active service, and to inform you that their patriotic wishes cannot now be gratified consistently with the claims of other states.

There was much disappointment. Hot words were bandied about, in fact so hot that they appear to have been burned and no copies kept. Governor Clarke was indignant. Delegate Dodge pounded the desk at the army

²Frederick D. Mills was a lawyer of Burlington, and was one of a small group who made the successful fight to defeat acceptance by Iowa of the reduced boundary lines fixed by congress. He was appointed by President Polk a major in the U. S. army March 3, 1847, and assigned to duty with the Fifteenth infantry. He was killed in battle at or near Churubusco Aug. 20, 1847, while leading a charge into the very ranks of the Mexican army.

office. The boys on the river front used some swear words. The frontier military spirit was not to be entirely smothered by the claims of other states. Withdrawal of the regulars from Ft. Atkinson encouraged the Winnebagoes on the neutral strip to become restless, James Morgan got authority to head a company of infantry to do police duty. They served from July to November. In September, James Parker came with a company of dragoons to help, but nearly all of Morgan's men re-enlisted into a company of mounted volunteers. But there were no Mexicans to fight on the neutral strip.

Men good and true served in these companies, organized to go to Mexico, but sent to watch Indians. For instance there was Elias Williams, a private, who became supreme judge; John McKenney, editor and sheriff of Des Moines county; David Wilson, state senator and of the *Miner's Express* at Dubuque; David Olmsted, first mayor of the city of St. Paul, Minn.; Dudley Williams, railroad promoter and last survivor of the companies; Thomas Cox, Jr., son of a prominent member of the general assembly; and a number who later served in the War of the Rebellion, some on one side and some on the other.

MORMON BATTALION ORGANIZED IN IOWA

A large number of Iowa men were not to be denied the opportunity for high adventure. General Kearny who had been at old Fort Des Moines, on the Mississippi river, and the second Fort Des Moines at the Raccoon forks, now being abandoned, wanted men to go with him by the southern route to California, and induced the secretary of war to authorize enlistment of a whole battalion for that purpose in Iowa. Capt. James Allen, who had been in command at the Raccoon forks was assigned to go to Kaneshville, or Council Bluffs, and make an offer to the Mormons who were anxious to go west. Later he enlisted nearly 500 of them and set out from Fort Leavenworth. Allen died after a few days out, but the Mormon battalion, organized in Iowa, went

through to California to find no fighting to do since all of the Pacific coast had been taken by the navy and the army. The battalion boys remained in the west and joined their families and friends. But it remains a fact that the largest single body of troops sent into the Mexican war, aside from the regulars, was composed of Iowa men.

Just why and how all this jockeying and fumbling occurred was probably never known to the Iowa men. The policing job in northeast Iowa was distasteful to men who had enlisted for a foreign war. Some Iowa men took the short cut and did really get into the war with Mexico. Most prominent among these was Frederick D. Mills², Burlington lawyer and political leader, who managed somehow to get from President Polk a commission in the regular army as a major and authority to do something about the slight to Iowa. He had been captain of the first company raised and offered. So Major Mills got his volunteers together and in due time they set off for New Orleans by boat from Fort Madison.

As Company D this bunch of Iowa volunteers was attached to the Fifteenth United States Infantry and in due time it landed at Vera Cruz where General Scott was preparing to climb the hills and go direct to the ancient capital. General Taylor could keep watch on the Rio Grande. The real victory was to be won in the high country. Company D, from Iowa, was pushed right to the front. It lost 40 per cent of its membership in battle, Major Mills lost his life at the front, and Iowa named a county in his honor. Edwin Guthrie, of Fort Madison, the captain, also gave his life. Isaac Griffith³ left an arm on the battlefield of Churubusco.

²Isaac W. Griffith, "Old Churubusco" to many Des Moines friends; born in Ohio 1820; removed to Lee county, Iowa, 1833; then came a most remarkable and varied career—served as a lieutenant in the border war with Missouri 1839; justice of the peace and coroner in Lee county; captain in the territorial militia; went to Mexico with General Scott as corporal in the 15th U. S. infantry; lost his right arm at Churubusco, but went on into Mexico; member of Iowa General Assembly and introduced the Iowa homestead exemption bill; served as deputy sheriff, assistant doorkeeper U. S. senate, registrar of the U. S. land office at Des Moines, sheriff of Polk county, in quartermaster department and U. S. marshal in Tennessee, bailiff Iowa supreme court, tollkeeper at bridge in Des Moines eighteen years and coroner of Polk county twenty years. Died January 27, 1897.

IOWAN CARRIES FLAG TO MEXICAN CAPITAL

Among the Iowa men who got into the regular army was Benjamin S. Roberts¹, of Fort Madison. He had been commissioned by the president to be a lieutenant and was assigned to duty with a regiment of mounted riflemen. He was given the rank of captain and then of lieutenant colonel. He lived to be brigadier general of volunteers in the war fifteen years later.

Was the work done by Iowa men merely for "honor and glory" as Governor Clarke had said in his proclamation? The record shows otherwise. A half hundred never returned to their homes but some of the men did and were held in high esteem.

There was honor, however, for history makes record of the fact that it was an Iowa soldier who carried the stars and stripes into the City of Mexico over the ramparts or whatever they had and his feat was recognized. In General Scott's report of how he got the American army into Mexico City he wrote of Ben Roberts, of Fort Madison, as follows:

Captain Roberts of the mounted rifle regiment, who had greatly distinguished himself on the preceding day in leading the advance company of the storming party at Chapultepec, was selected by me, to plant the national flag on the capitol.

Some time later, while Captain Roberts was out of the state he was presented, as the gift of the state of Iowa, by authority of the General Assembly, a sword on which these words were inscribed and the names of ten battles in which he had participated. The name of Chapultepec was on the list. The Iowa of 1850 did not forget. The war was denounced and avoided by the Whigs of the time and for years afterwards; but when there was fighting to be done, the pioneers who brought their long rifles with them did what seemed to them to be a patriotic duty.

Chapultepec was a fortress guarding the entrance to the City of Mexico. General Santa Anna, who after he had been brought back by the United States from exile

assumed command, relied upon it to save the capital. General Scott had arrived at Vera Cruz by sea and had taken Churubusco in a hard battle. With a small army he moved direct to Chapultepec and took the place. This virtually closed the war. He soon entered the capital city. As he stated in his order, he sent an Iowa soldier with the American flag to plant it inside the City of Mexico. A year or so later a treaty was made and a vast western empire was added to the United States. The march from Vera Cruz to Mexico City was one of the most brilliant achievements of American arms.

REUNION OF SIXTY YEARS AGO

Until a comparatively few years ago, so it seems, there was much vivid remembering of Chapultepec. However slow their steps might be the veterans of the Mexican war had good memories and strong voices. They had a national association and an Iowa association. One of the last great reunions was held in Des Moines in 1886. It was a colorful event. There was an enrollment of probably 250, representing a dozen states. They had a parade after the fashion of the day, good speaking at several meetings, songs and band music, and a banquet with the usual line of toasts and responses. There was a fine address of welcome by John Scott who had been lieutenant governor. Mayor J. H. Phillips extended the kind hand. Gov. William Larrabee extolled the work of the soldiers. It was reported that the national association had nearly 500 members. This was forty years after the march from Vera Cruz. A flag was presented to the organization making the best showing in attendance. It was noted that two Iowa men, Micah French and David Norris, were in attendance who had served in the War of 1812.

These Mexican war men had no controversy over who was entitled to greatest honor. By the lapse of time many had become "General" or "Colonel," but all were on a level at the camp fires and banquets. Conspicuous

was Gen. J. W. Denver, an Ohio congressman, who was national president. From Indiana came Generals McFaden, Ogg and Manson. The Iowa association elected Col. W. T. Shaw president. The real head of the local committee of arrangements was Gen. Josiah Given⁴, who had tried to get into the regular army as a drummer boy but later joined an Ohio regiment. Others of the committee were M. B. Priestley and T. J. Kennedy. A conspicuous figure was "Old Churubusco," as we called him, Isaac W. Griffith³, he who had hurried into the war from Fort Madison, and we elected him coronor many times. An Indiana man wore a sombrero taken from Gen. Santa Anna.

These men were remembering Chapultepec, Churubusco and Buena Vista, where they upheld the national honor at the rate of pay of seven dollars a month.

The surviving veterans were to be reminded of some things of national and world import about their short but sharp war. Governor Larrabee spoke out clearly and among other things said:

While we look back with pride to the deeds of our army during the war with Mexico, and while we now gratefully acknowledge the benefits which we derived from the successful termination of that contest, we cannot in the light of history close our eyes to the fact that the war commenced in the interest of southern supremacy and the institution of slavery, and that it was a war for conquest rather than one for principle; but, as the wisdom of Almighty God frequently turns the designs of evil thinking men into agencies for good, so proved this war; designed to extend the fetters of bondage over millions yet unborn, it proved the means of scattering the benefits of civilization over a territory almost as large as that of the thirteen original states of the union.

Perhaps that was one reason why there has been much forgetting of Chapultepec. But there was another angle

⁴Josiah Given, born in Pennsylvania in 1828 and helped in his father's blacksmith shop in Ohio; enlisted as drummer boy for service in the Mexican war; later got in as corporal in an Ohio company and went to Mexico; became prosecuting attorney in Holmes county; on outbreak of civil war he organized Co. K, 24th Ohio infantry and as colonel went through the Atlanta campaign; was postmaster for Congress and deputy internal revenue collector; elected district attorney at Des Moines; representative from Polk county; elected circuit court judge; elected district judge; appointed and elected to the supreme court; died in Des Moines Feb. 3, 1908.

to the contest. It was stated thus by Gov. John Scott:

Hitherto the great powers, the leading nations of Europe, had held our militia in supreme contempt. They had been weighed down with vast armies, and believed that education and habit were necessary to the successful conduct of a war. They were astounded when they found the farm, the workshop, the manufactory, the counting room of the merchant, and the desk of the banker, as well as the liberal professions, turn out in the twinkling of an eye hundreds of thousands who asked the honor of following "the old flag" to the field of battle.

The war was a short one. The regular United States army was small. The fighting was largely done by fresh volunteers. Colonel Mills², of Iowa, who lost his life on the campaign to take Chapultepec had been at the desk of his law office in Iowa only six months before. In May 1846 General Roberts of Fort Madison received a commission as lieutenant and little more than a year later he carried the stars and stripes into Mexico City.

The meeting of these veterans of the Mexican war from Iowa and other states, on August 20, 1886, practically marked the close of their social and patriotic events. The writer made report for the leading daily paper of Des Moines of their proceedings and came into close contact with many of them, and well recalls their unbounded enthusiasm and hearty show of mutual friendship. In the intervening sixty years we have done a lot of forgetting, but they who fought with Scott and Taylor and Kearny never offered apologies for their part in repulsing the enemy that had dared to invade our soil.

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