

Wilkie's Letter

Full particulars of the Battle of Springfield. Complete list of the honored dead, and a correct list of the wounded.

ARMY CORRESPONDENCE.

SPRINGFIELD, Mo.,
Aug. 10, 1861.

Ere this you have probably received by telegraph the outlines of the battle of Springfield or Wilson's creek—a battle the bloodiest in proportion to the forces engaged, ever fought upon American soil. Its details will give birth to both pride and deadly sorrow in our State—pride at the gallantry displayed by her sons, sorrow at the numbers who sealed their devotion to their country by their blood. Iowa will weep as she learns how many of her children were swept down by the terrible missiles of the field, yet she can reflect with a thrill on the charge, but upon retreating one fellow drove a bayonet into his thigh, while another knocked him from his horse with the butt of his musket. The next morning however we found him, and he is now in a fair way to be able to repay his injuries with interest, at some future time.

That night there was no more fighting or alarm, owing both to the retreat of the enemy and the extraordinary care taken by Gen. Lyon to secure the camp against surprise.

Early the next day we resumed the march, proceeding slowly to give the cavalry time to examine the country. About a mile from the battle field we came to a house in which were thirteen of the wounded Secessionists, and a little farther at another house we found five more wounded and one dead man. This house was singularly horrible to one unaccustomed to scenes of blood. The whole house resembled a slaughter-house—bed, pillows, sheets, floor, walls, ceiling, stairway, chairs, everything was stained or clotted with blood or bore it in dark hideous pools. There was a living spring near the house, and the rivulet that bubbled away to hide itself in the green undergrowth and whisper its soft music to the wild flowers on its bank, bore on its bosom the same hideous stain. It was perfectly a stream of blood, and following it up to ascertain the cause, I found a poor horse standing weakly in the pond lapping up feebly its own life-blood that trickled from a ghastly wound upon one side of its head. A grape shot had torn away nearly half the head. I turned away in pity, regretting that I had not a revolver with which to mercifully end its miseries.

From the wounded we learned that the force of the enemy amounted to about ten thousand men—the main body being encamped on Cane Creek, a few miles below. Not a thing in the house was disturbed—an example which I hope will be of use to the Secessionists. One of the wounded men had received a ball in the hip, another was shot through the shoulder, and both were fine looking intelligent men. The Surgeon had run off and left them to obtain such care as they could get from each other.

Some two or three miles from here we came upon the brow of a wide, deep ravine. The road crossed the ravine by winding around some promontory-like eminences, and ascended straight up the hill opposite. The other side was densely timbered, and we could only judge where the road was.



Newspaper vendors did considerable business in army camps. The sign on this cart advertises Philadelphia, New York, and Baltimore papers.

Franc Wilkie, Embedded Reporter

Iowan Franc B. Wilkie was one of more than 200 correspondents who covered the Civil War. Wilkie wrote for the Dubuque Herald and the New York Times. These excerpts begin in April 1861 as Wilkie and the 1st Iowa head south down the Mississippi. His opening scene of soldierly camaraderie on the steamboat is followed by his equally evocative and realistic descriptions of what entertained and what exhausted the troops, as experienced by one who traveled with them.

—The Editor

"Profound silence soon covered the whole boat, till suddenly some 'rough' on the floor gave a tremendous 'Baa!' Another at the other end responded, then the chorus was taken up in all parts, and in three seconds the whole crowd was Baa-ing with the force of a thousand calf-power. So it went till day-light. There were cat voices, sheep voices, and coon voices. There were goslings and crowings. There were fellows there who could bet any jackass on a bray, and give him fifty. In short there were more noises than ever were made or ever will be again,

unless all the jackasses, mules, gobblers, roosters, cats, coons, and cattle in creation are assembled for a grand concert. Nobody slept; some laughed a little, others swore a great deal, and thus wore away the night."

"Sunday morning, 2,000 muskets arrived here from St. Louis. . . . I think it would be a master stroke of policy to allow the secessionists to steal them. They are the 'old-fashioned . . .' kind that are infinitely more dangerous to friend than enemy—will kick further than they will shoot."

CLIPPINGS FROM DUBUQUE EXPRESS; PHOTO FROM LIBRARY OF CONGRESS; VIRGINIA, NOVEMBER 1863

"Last night, our first in camp, was somewhat a melancholy one to those of us to whom the experiment was wholly new. Notwithstanding the thousand men in the camp, it seemed lonely, with nothing but thin cotton between one and the great sky. It produced a sense of isolation and loneliness that was not lightened by the mellow strains of a violin that stole tenderly through the night air from a distant part of the camp."

"The men lay 'heads and points' [in their tents] and are packed in like a good many hogs in a very small pen."

"In one tent . . . they have adopted a rule that whoever swears shall read aloud a chapter in the Bible. . . . Truth compels me to say that one can scarcely pass the tent day or night without hearing some one reading a selection of Scriptures."

"Incessant drilling, guard mounting, either beneath a broiling sun or in a drenching rain storm, sleeping seven in a tent, washing greasy dishes, scouring rusty knives and forks . . . all these and a hundred other circumstances incident to camp life, will very speedily take the romance out of the whole matter. . . . [Yet] at a distance, white tents are beautiful, nestling like a flock of huge swans upon the green prairie."

"[The men are] marching ahead amid clouds of dust and beneath a sun that would broil a mackerel . . . limping wearily along at the rate of three miles an hour. . . . None of your play soldiers in clean shirts; but a vast concourse of solemn men armed for deadly war, swarthy, sunburnt, with real guns on their shoulders loaded with leaden bullets."

"It is now the 'holy Sabbath eve.' I sit writing on a board in the midst of grass higher than my head; at a little distance an amphitheatre of ragged timber; the air full of bugs of ten

thousand nameless sorts; everywhere soldiers, wagons, tents, mules, horses, noise, smoke, mosquitoes, wood-ticks, dirty shirts, unclean, unshaven countenances, and Heaven only knows what else besides. Just imagine anything you please, which is most exactly unlike the quiet evening that you are all now enjoying at home (like good Christians as you are)."

"Among the prominent attractions in camp is that of music. . . . We have any quantity of singers. Singers who sing in good English and bad English, in French, German, Low Dutch and other dialects too numerous to mention."

"The individual, whose tearful emotions while writing to his wife I mentioned in my last [letter] is now sprawled out at full length in front of the tent, and along with half a dozen other loungers, is engaged in the pleasant occupation of looking out for and making artistic comments upon each neatly turned ankle that passes along."

"Some of the boys write every day, and one bereft young gentleman has even sent as many as two messages per diem to a lorn damsel. . . . Two letters a day! Whew! There's affection for you."

"All of the men are squalid, ragged, and filthy. . . . Two hundred and fifty of them are utterly unfitted for travel from the want of shoes; some are entirely barefooted."

"[There is a] wide-spread, universal determination to steal. Men, with the Commissary's Department full to bursting, run down pigs and chickens under the very noses of their officers, without reprimand or scarcely a notice. . . . They steal everything, from a peach to a piano, and carry articles of plunder to their tents without a word of reproof. The desire for stealing has become so intense that, for the sake of

stealing, men will take things not the slightest possible use to themselves or anybody else."

"Stealing is a disease too deeply rooted, in both armies, to be eradicated by any such simple process as an agreement between Frémont and Price. . . . The need of such a remedy can be seen everywhere here, to the barren fields and empty granaries of the country, and the ragged bodies, shoeless feet and broken-spirited expression of the people. Not merely is the evil present, but it reaches far into the future. Their grain is taken, they have none for the winter; their horses, mules and wagons are taken, they cannot prepare a crop for the coming year; and thus nothing is left them but starvation."

"With only two hours of sleep the night previous, the men were in the worst possible condition. . . . For the first few hours [of the march] a number of cheery choruses rang out through the wood and enlivened the march, but these finally grew fainter and less frequent, till midnight, when we plodded on in a silence unbroken save by here and there a savage oath as some man tumbled over a rock or into a hole, and the grinding of the artillery wheels as they passed over the rocky ledges, or the splashing of the horses as they forded some rapid stream. Minutes became hours, the weaker of the soldiers dropped in their places and refused to move an inch farther. . . . When the column halted, that the heavy cannon might be extricated from the muddy grasp of some slough, regiments of men fell to the ground as instantly as if felled by lightning, and were sound asleep before they reached the ground. . . . I saw men who would suddenly stop and stand perfectly still, and who, as we approached, were found to be fast asleep. A ton of lead seemed resting on each eyelid."

For the complete set of letters, see *Missouri in 1861: The Civil War Letters of Franc B. Wilkie Newspaper Correspondent*, edited by Michael E. Banaski (Iowa City: Camp Pope Bookshop, 2001).