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AN IOWAN IN THE MEXICAN WAR
*Edited by George S. May**

Iowa was not yet a state when the Mexican War began in May, 1846. When President James K. Polk issued a call for 50,000 volunteers at the start of the war, the Territory of Iowa was asked to furnish one regiment. More than enough volunteers to comprise such a force offered their services, but the group was not called into action. Instead, three Iowa companies served various lengths of time at Fort Atkinson, relieving the regular army forces for action in Mexico. In February, 1847, Congress enacted legislation calling for the enlistment of ten regiments of regular army infantry to serve for the duration of the war. The Fifteenth Regiment, commanded by Colonel G. W. Morgan, was recruited in Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Iowa. Company K was raised in Iowa and was the only Iowa company to see active service in Mexico. Enlisted in southeastern Iowa in April, Company K assembled at Fort Madison and left by steamboat for New Orleans at once, without joining the rest of the regiment at Newport Barracks, Kentucky. At New Orleans, Company K was shortly transferred to an ocean vessel which took it to Vera Cruz. Thus, within less than two months after enlistment, the men found themselves in the midst of military action. They suffered heavily in the ensuing months, although not primarily as the result of enemy shell fire. When they were mustered out at Covington, Kentucky, on August 4, 1848, only 51 of the 113 officers and men who had initially comprised the company were still available for discharge. Eight had been discharged earlier because of wounds or sickness; five others had been killed in battle. The remaining 49 who were missing from the ranks had died from the diseases that struck down one out of every ten men in the American ranks.¹

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¹ Cyril B. Upham, "The Mexican War," *Iowa and War* (24 nos., Iowa City, 1917-1919), 12:2-18; Justin H. Smith, *The War with Mexico* (2 vols., New York, 1919), 2:74-6, 363; Jean B. Kern, "Warden and Warrior," *The Palimpsest*, 29:191-2 (June, 1948); *Roster and Record of Iowa Soldiers in the War of the Rebellion . . .* (6 vols., Des Moines, 1908-1911), 6:809, 822.

The war between the United States and Mexico, from 1846 to 1848, is remembered chiefly for its results rather than for the fighting which it involved. By the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexico gave up all claims to Texas north of the Rio Grande, and ceded to the United States a huge area which included all of the present states of California and New Mexico, and parts of Arizona, Nevada, Utah, and Colorado. In spite of these gains, the war was one of the least popular in which the United States has ever been engaged. Northern antislavery forces were especially critical of American entry into the war because of their fear that it was only a means of obtaining new slave territory for the South. The necessity of organizing the land acquired by the treaty was the principal cause of the momentous political controversy which ended in the Compromise of 1850.

The details of the war itself, however, are of interest aside from the non-military consequences of the conflict. In a very real sense the Mexican War constituted for the American army a military rehearsal for the far greater Civil War of the 1860's. Lee, Grant, Sherman, McClellan, Meade, Jackson, Longstreet, Beauregard, the Johnstons, and many other of the principal commanding officers of the Northern and Southern armies between 1861 and 1865 gained their practical battle experience as junior officers in the Mexican campaigns. Fighting over strange and difficult terrain, usually opposed by numerically superior but poorly led enemy armies, handicapped by inadequate means of transportation and communication, and receiving less than unanimous support from home, these officers and their men did not have an easy time of it. About 100,000 men fought in the war, many of them six or twelve-month volunteers. Of this force, 1,721 were killed or died of their wounds, 4,102 were wounded, and 11,155 died of disease.

The two principal campaigns of the war by American forces were the invasion of northeastern Mexico by land from Texas by troops under General Zachary Taylor, and the sea-borne invasion of central Mexico from the Gulf port of Vera Cruz to the capital of Mexico City under the leadership of General Winfield Scott. Taylor's successes, from the battle of Palo Alto in May, 1846, to the great victory of Buena Vista in February, 1847, won him great popularity in the United States, but did not convince his superior, Scott, that the war could be won in the north. Late in 1846 Scott persuaded President James K. Polk that the quickest way to victory was an invasion of the heart of Mexico, aimed at its capital. In a remarkable campaign lasting from March to September, 1847, and with an army never

numbering over 10,000 men, Scott forced the Mexicans to sue for peace.

The following document is the recollections of a member of Company K of the Fifteenth Regiment which fought with Scott in this central Mexico campaign, Fabian Brydolf. He was born in Sweden in 1819. After studying to be a landscape painter he came to the United States in 1841. Finding little demand for his artistic services, Brydolf became a journeyman house and sign painter, working principally in Ohio and Michigan. In 1846 he came to Iowa, as he relates in the account below. In addition to serving in the Mexican War, Brydolf later fought in the Civil War, enlisting as a captain of Company I of the Sixth Iowa. He lost his right arm at the Battle of Shiloh in April, 1862. In September of that year he was promoted to lieutenant colonel of the Twenty-fifth Iowa Infantry Regiment. About a month before the capture of Vicksburg in 1863 he resigned but was shortly appointed lieutenant colonel of the Second Regiment of the Veteran Reserve Corps. Following the war Colonel Brydolf engaged in business in Burlington. Late in life he taught himself to paint with his left hand and won considerable praise for his landscape paintings. He died in 1897.²

Colonel Brydolf's account of his Mexican War experiences was given to the State Historical Society of Iowa by Miss Wilma D. Haynes, director of the department of physical education at Stephens College, Columbia, Missouri. It was one of several reminiscences which came to her father, Eugene C. Haynes of Centerville, Iowa, in connection with the writing of the history of the Sixth Regiment. This history had been begun in 1898 by General Henry H. Wright after he had been chosen regimental historian. Upon his death in 1905, the completed manuscript, together with his notes and sources, was placed in the hands of Haynes. The history was eventually published by the State Historical Society of Iowa in 1923.

General Wright was assisted in writing his history by regimental survivors, several of whom wrote their wartime reminiscences. Presumably Colonel Brydolf's account of his Mexican War experiences dates from this period. Whether he also wrote of his Civil War experiences is not known; this manuscript is the only one found. The document, written in pencil, is reproduced here with the spelling and punctuation exactly as found in the original.

² *Biographical Review of Des Moines County, Iowa . . .* (Chicago, 1905), 901-902. For Civil War record, see *Roster and Record of Iowa Soldiers in the War of the Rebellion . . .*, 1:808, 3:918.

FABIAN BRYDOLF'S REMINISCENCES OF THE MEXICAN WAR

The undersigned left the City of Marshall [Michigan] the spring of 1846 for the City of Detroit, worked that summer at my trade, early in the fall I joined a Band on a Steamer bound for Buffalo, when the Steamer was about leaving for the upper lakes and the Band was playing on the Hurrikan Deck I got into a quarrel with the Leader. I picked up my instruments and things and went a shore and to work at painting, while thus employed a Company of Emigrants from Sweden landed at Buffalo. Amongst these people happened to be an old School mate of mine. they were bound for Iowa. I was persuaded to join them as an Interpreter, they to pay me the same wages I received at Buffalo besides my passage. Well I preformed my duty in this respect with some succes, we went to the Ohio River by Canal from Erie down the Ohio and up the Missisippy and finally landed at Keokuk. Helpt them to enter Land west of wher now the City of Des Moines is situated. When this was accomplished I went to the City of Burlington

At that time B—— was a small place but I liked it, situated on the West Bank of the Missisippy River. the Town is built on Three Hills with a valley betwin, the scenery is rather nice.

I was received very kindly by the young men of the place, plaid in a small Band, attended Balls and dansing School during the Winter of 46 & 47 in fact had a jolly time, of cours I worked at my trade during this time.

In the Spring of 1847 — 10 Regiments of Regulars were inlisted for during the Mexican War, One Company of these troops was raised in Iowa, I joined this Co., and started for New Orleans the 1st of May 1847 Remained in that City about a week and then prosided on a Sailing Vessel for Vera Cruze — This City had been Captured by Gen. Scott,³ here the Regiment got together — Our Camping ground the Beach of the Gulf of Mexico, sand very deap and the weather extremely hot. We remained here som little time troops arriving daly. Finally the march towards the City of Mexico 300 Miles distant was begun⁴

³ General Winfield Scott, general-in-chief of the United States Army, landed south of Vera Cruz with some 10,000 men on March 9, 1847, and captured Vera Cruz on March 29. He then pushed inland, won the Battle of Cerro Gordo on April 18, and by mid-May had occupied Puebla, about two-thirds of the distance to his objective, Mexico City. Here Scott had to wait for reinforcements from the states. Smith, *War with Mexico*, 2:17-74.

⁴ The Fifteenth Regiment was attached to the brigade of Brigadier General Franklin Pierce, the future United States President. Pierce's main force did not leave the coast to join Scott's forces at Puebla until mid-July. Some units had left earlier,

The first 2 or 3 days march was hard through deep sand, and the heat intolerable, but gradually we came to higher ground when the heat was not so great and we got along better. At the National Bridge we had a considerable fight. The Mexicans had 2 forts one on each side of the Bridge on very high ground, the nature of the ground was such, that these forts could not be taken except after crossing the Bridge, consequently our troops had to run the Gauntlet under heavy fire from both forts this was done, and the Mexicans driven out of their fortifications. I was wondering at the time why they did not plant Artillery to rake the Bridge and prevent us from crossing without great loss of life. The march was continued we entered the City of Halappa [Jalapa] without opposition continuing the march we came to Cero Gordo at this place Gen. Scott had a great Battle (it is to be understood that Gen. Scott and his army had preceded us, we were coming to reinforce him.) it is also to be noted that during this march we were continually harassed by Mexican Irregular Troops, a sort of Banditti in one of these fights our Capt was wounded in the leg and brought on a litter to the Castle of Perote, where we now arrived. The Capt would not have his leg amputated mortification followed and he died.⁵ Finally we arrived at the City of Puebla where Genl. Scott's Army was waiting for us.

The Army remained in Puebla for several weeks, being drilled and instructed, which was needed, as at least 10 Regiments were raw recruits. I liked this life and took considerable pride in it. I had been promoted to Sergeant and was helping to drill the Company. I was provided with Military Books and soon became proficient in both Company and Battalion drill.

When General Scott got ready we started for the City of Mexico. The first Battle was "Contreras" a fortification of considerable strength had been constructed at this place, the American Genl. wanted to get in the rear of this place, and in order to do so 3000 Troops were ordered to cross however. Brydolf's company apparently marched with Brigadier General George Cadwalader, who left Vera Cruz on June 8 and reached Puebla by July 8 after several engagements with guerrillas along the way. Scott had not enough troops to keep a line of communications open with the coast, which made it necessary for the reinforcements to fight their way through to him. *Ibid.*, 2:77, 171; N. C. Brooks, *A Complete History of the Mexican War . . .* (Philadelphia, 1849), 445-52.

⁵ Brydolf's Captain was Edwin Guthrie who had come to Iowa from New York in about 1840. He became warden of the Fort Madison penitentiary. He helped organize Company K and was elected as its captain. He was wounded at La Hoya Pass on June 20, 1847, and died a month later at Perote. Guthrie County, Iowa, is named in his honor. Jacob A. Swisher, *Iowa in Times of War* (Iowa City, 1943), 326-7; Kern, "Warden and Warrior," 182-92.

what was called "the pedrigal" ground this consisted of a heap of Rocks almost impassable for infantry and totally so for Artillery and Cavalry our Regiment the 15th where amongst these Troops well we got over at last to find ourselves confronted by a Mexican force estimated at 10,000 men under Santa Anna they had 7000 in the fort; now this was very comfortable I thought, 17000 against 3000 the enemy supplied with Artillery and Cavalry we without either. They were strong enough to destroy us — Well did they do it? We shall see We were formed in line of Battle confronting Santa Anna the Enemy made considerable noise with Trumpets, drums &c but did not attack us, it was now getting late. at dark rain set in rained all night in morning Santa Anna had disappeared and Contreras was taken in 15 minutes.⁶ I myself got inside the fortifications Barefooted, my Shoes where some were large and stuck in the mud It was impossible for me to get along without Boots or Shoes so I hunted round and found a dead Mexican officer with a splendid pair of Boots on, I reasend somewhat in this way My Friend you are dead and do really not need these Boots I still live and can not get along without them, I am sure you will excuse me if I take them, well I pulled the Boots from the dead officers feet and put them on mine, and they fitted me to perfection. Such is War.

We pursued the enemy and soon struck the fortification of Charubusco [Churubusco] here we had a harder fight. our regiment was on the left of the Army consequently did not attack the fortification in front but were posted to obstruct their retreat and we took a great many Prisoners.⁷

In this Battle I was wounded in the Head just how this occurred I do not exactly know I was loading my Musket had the rammer down to Ram home the Ball when I was struck, it knocked me down, but in a moment I was up again, still holding my musket in my left hand. I looked around for the Rammer but it was gone, the supposition is the Ball struck the Rammer & the Rammer struck me above the Right Eye it was but a slight wound but it Bled considerably.

By this time the Battle was about over the enemy was in full retreat towards the City of Mexico and the Dragoons were getting ready to pursue

Our Major (Mills was his name) came riding up "hellow Sergeant are

⁶ Scott began leaving Puebla on August 7. The battle of Contreras was fought on August 19 and 20. Smith, *War with Mexico*, 2:92, 104-110.

⁷ The battle of Churubusco was fought on August 20, following the victory at Contreras. *Ibid.*, 110-19.

you wounded" only a skrach Major well take a drop out of my flask, thank you major I don't care if I do, I was quiet a favorit of the Major, I am going to join the Dragoons in persuet, will you allow me to say one word, sertenly, do not do it, You have done your duty, let the Dragoons attend to theirs, stay with the Regiment. No I am bound to go! the major was not a very good Horseman and I new it, besides his horse was rather vicious, well he went, but he never returnd, and I was probably the last Man that ever spoak to him⁸

We could have taken the City of Mexico at this time without any trouble, but an armistice was concluded with the expectation of Peace, it failed and in a short time the fighting was renewed. The next Battle was Molina Del Re [Molino del Rey]. our Regiment was not in this Battle we came just as it was over we helpt to pick up the dead and take care of the wounded and held the ground taken,⁹ we were continually fired upon from the Castle of Chapultepec. Batteries were erected to Bombard this Castel and heavy fiering continued for a couple of days with little result. The Castle was finaly ordered to be taken by storm. We had to pass over level ground for a considerable distance which was done on a run, we drove the Mexicans before us scaled the walls and took the Castle, the dead Mexicans lay so thick around that you could have walked on their boddys without touching the ground. I with others had the pleasure of houling down the Mexican flagg and raising ours on the top of the Castel. Our regiment was formed on the parade ground and General Scott rode up and made a speech to us and ordered us to remain and garrison the Castle of Chapultepec.¹⁰

⁸ Major Frederick Mills of the Fifteenth Regiment was a graduate of Yale in 1840. He came to Burlington, Iowa, in 1841 as a law partner of J. C. Hall. He and two fellow Democrats, Theodore S. Parvin and Enoch W. Eastman, opposed the efforts of their party to secure the adoption of the 1844 Iowa Constitution because it would cut the entire Missouri slope from the Territory of Iowa. Mills County, Iowa, was named in his honor. Benjamin F. Gue, *History of Iowa . . .* (4 vols., New York, 1903), 4:193-4; Robert Selph Henry, *The Story of the Mexican War* (Indianapolis, 1950), 342.

⁹ The armistice to which Brydolf refers lasted from August 24 to September 7, 1847. The battle of Molino del Rey was fought on September 8. Smith, *War with Mexico*, 2:140-47.

¹⁰ The decisive battle of Chapultepec was fought on September 13 with the Fifteenth Regiment in the midst of the hardest fighting. Justin Smith describes the scene as Scott congratulated his victorious troops. "The men pressed round him. He told them how glad he was, and how proud of them; and how proud their country, their wives, their sisters and their sweethearts would be; and it seemed as if such cheering had never been heard, anywhere in the world, before." The following day,

while the Fifteenth Regiment held the Castle of Chapultepec and guarded the prisoners, the rest of Scott's army pressed on and occupied Mexico City, an action which virtually ended the war. *Ibid.*, 2:147-64. Among the leaders of the assault on the Castle of Chapultepec was Capt. Benjamin Stone Roberts of Fort Madison. A member of the Mounted Rifle Regiment, Capt. Roberts became Iowa's best-known Mexican War hero, for to him was given the honor, on September 14, 1847, of raising the American flag over the National Palace in Mexico City. Ruth A. Gallaher, "Benjamin Stone Roberts," *The Palimpsest*, 1:78-9 (September, 1920).