

## War on the Rivers

During the winter of 1861-62, the Civil War in the West changed rapidly. There was no more marching across the dusty plains and hills of Missouri; the scene of action switched to the rivers. Both Alexander Simplot and Franc Wilkie headed for Cairo, Illinois, at the junction of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. A good system of roads and railways made Cairo the "jumping off" place for any invasion of the South. Wilkie liked the idea of watching a battle from a steamboat. He was tired of trudging across Missouri on the back of a mule:

It was for me the beginning of an aquatic career which was immensely desirable in that it involved no saddle contusions, nor any of the annoyances connected with equestrian expeditions.

The shift in scene of battle was also good news for Alexander Simplot. The river was something he knew about and steamboats were something that he loved to draw. He could draw and tell the readers of *Harper's Weekly* about the strange type of boats which would soon be so prominent in the war. In a short article accompanying one of his sketches, he described how mortar boats were being constructed:



The boats are practically rafts, consisting of three or four layers of heavy timbers laid crosswise of each other, which, when supplied with their armament — a massive mortar, throwing a 10-inch shell weighing 200 pounds — were but slightly elevated above the water. Boiler iron, with port holes and embrasures to afford means of defense in case of attack, about eight feet in height, surrounded the upper part of the float for the protection of the crew. A covered opening in the floor of the float answered the purposes of a magazine, while the 10-inch shells lay conveniently within range.

But while the Federal troops were waiting to board their boats for the attack, there was actually very little for the correspondents and artists to do. Hordes of newspapermen were gathering to prepare to report the upcoming battles. For Franc Wilkie, this was a source of irritation. He wrote:

. . . You meet newspaper men at every step; they block up the approaches to headquarters; one of them is attached to the button of every officer; they are constantly demanding passes, horses, saddles, blankets, news, copies of official papers, a look into private correspondence, and things whose use and extent are only appreciated by omniscience.

And there was a new commander now. General Ulysses S. Grant of Galena, Illinois, was to be in charge of the operation. Simplot had an "in." The Iowan had a letter of introduction to Grant from the General's former employer in a tannery business in Galena, and better than that, Simplot had been a classmate of Capt. John Rawlins of Galena, who was now Grant's adjutant general. Simplot



and Rawlins had both attended Rock River Seminary at Mt. Morris, Illinois. As soon as he arrived at Cairo, Simplot went to call at Grant's headquarters:

This was established in the second story of a three-story building fronting the levee and showed a series of unpainted desks and benches in a long store room. I found General Grant and Captain Rawlins both in, and on the presentation of my letter and recalling myself to the captain was pleasantly received. . .

Franc Wilkie was not introduced to General Grant so formally:

The first time I ever saw Grant was in an expedition out of Cairo, during which, in a narrow and muddy road in a swamp, I was nearly run over and very badly mud-splashed by a short man with a stoop in his shoulders, who rode by me like a hurricane, followed by an escort of cavalry. I was finally introduced to him by his adjutant-general, John A. Rawlins . . . At the introduction Grant shook my hand heartily, pulled on the stump of an immense cigar, and said nothing.

Wilkie remarked that Grant was a man of few words and claimed that in the two years in which he campaigned with Grant, the General never once said a single word to him, although they were in close contact.

Simplot drew a picture of Grant, perhaps one of the few done of the General during the Civil War, but it remained for Franc Wilkie to give a vivid word description of Grant. Later, in June of 1863,



while Grant's forces were beseiging Vicksburg, Wilkie wrote:

Almost at any time one can see a small but compactly built man, of about forty-five years of age, walking through the camps. He moves with his shoulders thrown a little in front of the perpendicular, his left hand in the pocket of his trousers, an unlighted cigar in his mouth, his eyes thrown straight forward, which, from the haze of abstraction which veils them, and a countenance ploughed into furrows of thought, would seem to indicate that he is intensely preoccupied. The soldiers observe him coming, and rising to their feet, gather on each side of the way to see him pass; they do not salute him, they only watch him curiously, with a certain sort of reverence. . . . A plain blue suit without scarf, sword, or trappings of any sort, save the double-starred shoulderstraps, an indifferently good Kossuth hat, or slouch, with the crown battered in close to his head, full beard between light and "sandy," a square-cut face whose lines and contour indicate extreme endurance and determination, complete the external appearance of this small man, as one sees him passing along, turning and chewing restlessly the end of his unlighted cigar. On horseback he loses all the awkwardness which distinguishes him as he moves about on foot. Erect and graceful, he seems a portion of his steed, without which the full effect would be incomplete.

The plan of the Union forces called for gaining control of the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers, and to do this it was necessary for Grant and Commodore Andrew Foote, the flag officer in charge of the Mississippi squadron, to capture two Confederate strongholds — Fort Henry on the



Tennessee and Fort Donelson on the Cumberland.

For the attack on Fort Henry, the first step, both Simplot and Wilkie elected to go with the river forces. It turned out to be a wise choice. Early that February, Union troops were moved up to below Fort Henry and the gunboats began their attack. Before the foot soldiers could even move in to attack, Fort Henry surrendered to the gunboats on February 6. In touring the captured fort, Wilkie noticed that the Federal mortar boats had sent in shells that penetrated a distance of 24 feet through earthworks. Simplot made several excellent sketches of the bombardment. When he toured the fort and saw the prisoners, he had another surprise:

Among the fifty-six prisoners captured with the fort were two old school mates from my home in Iowa (Dubuque), whose sympathies for the rebel cause led them to fight in its service.

Fort Henry was to provide another surprising item. When Franc Wilkie was poking through the wreckage, something caught his eye. It was a violin which belonged to George Jones, one of the sons of George Wallace Jones of Dubuque, one of Iowa's first two United States Senators. The young man had fled to the South at the outbreak of the war. His father agreed with the young man's views and said he would join the South "if required to fight at all." Later, Franc Wilkie would make another startling discovery on an-



other battlefield about another son of George Wallace Jones.

Most of the Confederates at Fort Henry had left before the Union attack began and were now firmly entrenched at Fort Donelson. Taking Donelson would not be such an easy task. Once again, Commodore Foote's gunboats were sent into action, but the heavy guns of Fort Donelson treated them roughly and the battle was left to the ground troops. Grant moved his forces up and the sharpshooters on both sides began to go into action. The Confederates were firmly entrenched and the attacking Federal forces found that there were plenty of trees to hide behind. Franc Wilkie couldn't resist taking part in what he called the "exchange of compliments."

I tried my hand at the target practice. Something like one hundred and fifty yards in front was a little mound of earth revealing a rifle-pit, with the customary logs on its top. From this point there came frequent bullets, none of which ever went very wide of the mark. I selected a large tree, and crouching close to its roots I drew a bead on the little opening in the log, and began blazing away at the smoke when it appeared. This lasted for a few minutes, when suddenly there was a quick reply to my shot which struck the bark of the tree about three feet over my head. I fired again a little later, and instantly got a response which cut the bark some six inches lower than the other. A third bullet from the Confederate dropped within a foot of my head, and thereupon I withdrew. I saw that he was slowly getting my range, and that the next bullet, or the second one, for certain, would go through my head.



After a vigorous battle, the Confederates surrendered and the North went crazy with joy. Two Confederate generals and 12,000 troops had been captured, and Grant's famous demand of "unconditional surrender" caught the imagination of the North. From then on, he was "Unconditional Grant." Simplot had stayed too long at Fort Henry and missed the action at Donelson, but he arrived on the day of the surrender and was able to recreate sketches of the battle scene, Grant's headquarters, and the hospital. Such practices were not uncommon for the "Special Artists" who seldom had advance warning of what battle was going to be important and what battle was going to be a minor skirmish.

Wilkie and Simplot both returned to Dubuque for a short vacation after the fall of Donelson, but in March of 1862 they were back on the river, this time at Island No. 10, a now non-existent 2 1/2 mile long island in a loop of the Mississippi River just below the Missouri border in Tennessee. There was little excitement, seven iron-plated gunboats and a fleet of barges mounted with mortars lay siege to the island and a month-long duel between the boats and the batteries began. Both Wilkie and Simplot were able to watch the barrages from the comfort of a boat deck. Wilkie later recalled:

The correspondents had a fine view of the frequent duels between the gunboats and the batteries. There was



a stretch of river straight and unbroken for miles above the defenses, and along this the fleet was extended. From any one of the gunboats, one could see every shot fired from the Confederate guns, and watch the approach of the missiles as they curved through the air.

In watching the barrage and its aftermath, Simplot recalled one rather strange shot which struck the flagship of the Union squadron:

One of their shots penetrated the upper deck, dropped, its velocity spent, into an inner drawer of Commodore Foote's washstand, and when I saw it, still laying where it had fallen, a curiosity of the war.

Island No. 10 was eventually cut off by land from all hope of reinforcement and so surrendered. Both Wilkie and Simplot stayed to witness the surrender, and in doing so missed one of the most famous battles of the Civil War. Wilkie had returned to Cairo when he heard the news of the battle of Shiloh. Shortly after dawn on April 6, the Confederates had smashed in the pickets of Grant's forces at Pittsburg Landing and a bloody two-day battle was fought in which Union forces just managed to hold on. When Simplot arrived at the battlefield on the Tennessee River, a full six days after the fighting had ended, the first person he saw was Wilkie:

On reaching our destination, which was lined with steamers, among the first on shore I set eyes on was F. B. Wilkie, my old tent mate of Missouri experiences. He was mounted upon a small Missouri mule, which was



waddling almost knee deep through the mud, at times barely clearing the soles of Wilkie's long rubber boots from the sticky substance. He reported the roads a mass of mud and the weather a breeder of malaria and advised us to go with him and brace up against the effects.

They went to medical detachment headquarters and took a tablespoon of quinine and liquor from a sarsaparilla bottle.

About 3,500 men had been killed in the battle of Shiloh and many more would die from their wounds. Although he had not been present at the battle itself, Wilkie found that the landscape told the story:

Nature never wrote on her tablet-rocks her history more plainly than the battle of Shiloh is written on the ravines, trees, and hillsides that extend for miles back of the river. The fierce hurricane of war that swept over the ground has rolled up the graveside billows till they lie thicker than the waves of a stormy ocean. Underbrush is mowed off by the acre as completely as if done by the scythe. Huge trees are splintered as if riven by thunderbolts. Everything, even to the smallest bush, is scarred and torn by shells and bullets.

Simplot sketched the hospital and recreated a scene of the battle as best he could from descriptions by the soldiers and correspondents. He had been proud of his pictures of the surrender of Island No. 10, but he realized now that in staying to sketch the surrender, he had missed Shiloh.

Although Wilkie had missed the battle, in searching the battlefield, he was to discover a let-



ter which would throw Iowa and Dubuque into a rage of conversation. After the battle of Fort Henry, a violin had been discovered which belonged to George Jones, one of the two sons of ex-Senator George Wallace Jones. Amidst the litter left on the battlefield of Shiloh, Franc Wilkie found a letter left behind by the Confederates. It was dated at Dubuque on July 1, 1861, and addressed to Capt. S. E. Hunter, Hunter's Rifles, Clinton, Louisiana and read as follows:

DEAR HUNTER, — By this I introduce to you my friend, Daniel O. C. Quigley, of this town, and bespeak your kindness and attention toward him. I believe he will prove himself worthy of your friendship. With every wish for your prosperity and happiness,

Your Friend,  
CHARLES D. JONES

Although George Jones had left at the start of the Civil War and joined the Confederate Army, his brother Charles had stayed in Dubuque. It was now apparent that he was "recruiting" soldiers in Dubuque for the Confederacy and sending them off with his blessing. Wilkie immediately sent the letter to the *New York Times* for publication. He later wrote:

. . . Charles, a handsome, petted young fellow, was . . . Southern in his proclivities, but being rather disinclined to action, he undertook the politic rôle and remained at home in Dubuque, and claimed to be rather inclined to be loyal. He was getting along nicely as a loyalist when



I found this letter at Shiloh. I was malicious enough to send it to "The New York Times" for publication. The reception of a copy at Dubuque sent young "Charley" in post haste southward. He became private secretary of the Confederate President and remained in the South till the close of the war.

George Wallace Jones, a pioneer in both Michigan and Wisconsin Territories and a United States Senator from Iowa for 12 years, had always been an out-spoken friend of Jefferson Davis. After the Civil War, Wilkie went to interview Jones and was told:

I have known Jeff Davis since 1823 and I love the ground on which he walks. . . He was not at heart a secessionist; he was forced into disunion by the action of his state, and he was made president against his will.

The battlefield at Shiloh was the source of several other stories by Wilkie, one of them about another Iowan. The wife of Col. William Hall of Davenport, Commander of the 11th Iowa Infantry, had been in her tent with her husband when the early Sunday morning attack began.

"Is it true," Wilkie asked her, "that you were surprised?"

"Well, you can perhaps judge as well as I can as to that. We were in our tent and not prepared to receive company . . . when a big cannonshot tore through the tent. A caller at that early hour, considering its unexpectedness, and our condition, may possibly be regarded as a surprise . . ."



Wilkie went on to report that the lady calmly finished dressing before leaving for shelter, and her dress was later found to be struck in 29 places by bullets and fragments of shell.

After Shiloh, General Henry Halleck was placed in command of Union forces in that area. His advance against the withdrawing Confederate forces was so slow that when he reached Corinth, Mississippi, the Confederates were already gone. So was Franc Wilkie. In an argument with General Halleck over the right of correspondents to travel wherever they pleased to report the news, he was advised to leave within 24 hours or be put to work "cleaning up things in the camp." Wilkie not only left, he resigned his post with the *New York Times* in disgust and joined the *Chicago Times* in July 1862, as its Washington correspondent.

Although Halleck had now ordered all newspapermen out of the lines of his army, Alexander Simplot slipped back in, disguised as a sutler. By July, Halleck had been called to Washington as general-in-chief and Simplot followed the army of General William S. Rosecrans in a fierce engagement at Iuka, an outpost east of Corinth. He also went on a river expedition against Fort Pillow on the Tennessee side of the Mississippi River. Then it was on to Memphis where a Union naval force of river steamboats easily defeated eight lightly-armed and armored Confederate boats which



came out to do battle. The citizens of Memphis watched from the bluffs as their city was rendered defenseless. Although Simplot's location did not afford him "the opportunity to witness the detail of the battle," the Iowan made a sketch of the destruction of the Confederate fleet. Since he was the only artist with the Union forces, his drawings of the battle and the subsequent surrender of the town were "scoops."

For Alexander Simplot, the end of his Civil War coverage had now come. About the time of Shiloh, Simplot had contracted a chronic case of diarrhea which he could not cure, and early in 1863 he left the armies for the last time and returned to Dubuque.

Life as a Washington correspondent proved too dull for Franc Wilkie. When he heard in the autumn of 1862 that Grant would be leading an attack on Vicksburg, Wilkie re-joined the *New York Times* and was put in charge of their operations west of the Alleghenies. He followed the campaign until almost the conclusion of the long siege which finally resulted in Union victory on July 4, 1863. Then, convinced that there would be no more major battles in the western part of the country, Wilkie resigned again.

He became one of the country's top-notch newspapermen, working for the *Chicago Times*. While overseas as a correspondent, Wilkie scored a world-wide scoop by being the first reporter to get



a copy of the then new King James version of the Bible. But in his later books, Wilkie went back to reminiscing about the Civil War.

Wilkie, with his pen, and Alexander Simplot, with his sketchbook, have left later generations a view of the Civil War that is unique — intimate glimpses of army camp and battlefield by two Iowans of outstanding ability and unimpeachable integrity.