

## Army Life in Iowa

The Civil War actually began for Alexander Simplot and Franc B. Wilkie on a rainy April day in 1861. It was also the beginning of the war for Iowa. The steamboat *Alhambra* was drawn up at the Dubuque levee to receive two companies of Dubuque soldiers—the first group of three-month volunteers which Dubuque would send to the war. The two companies were the Governor's Greys and the Jackson Guards, the latter made up of so many German-speaking men that it was necessary later to have the oath of service translated to them.

There was at least one extra man aboard the steamboat. That was Franc B. Wilkie, the 28-year-old city editor of the *Dubuque Herald*, who was being sent to report on the activities of the two Dubuque companies.

Alexander Simplot, a young Dubuque school-teacher, sketched the *Alhambra* as the troops embarked. He sent his sketch to *Harper's Weekly* which printed it in the May 25 issue. Believing the war was likely to begin in the West, *Harper's* hired Simplot as its "Special Artist" for that area and told him to set up headquarters at Cairo, Illinois, the jumping-off point for any invasion of the South.

And so Iowa and Dubuque provided the Civil War with two reporters — Wilkie the writer, and Simplot the artist. They were destined to play an important rôle in telling the story of the great conflict.

There was little for Alexander Simplot to do at first, except to go to Cairo and wait for developments. Franc Wilkie, on the other hand, was to get a taste of army life as he traveled with the two Dubuque companies. He was to leave behind a fascinating record of the beginning of Civil War hysteria in eastern Iowa.

The *Alhambra* landed at the Davenport levee, 80 miles to the south, at eight o'clock on the morning of April 24, 1861. The new arrivals were housed in the third story of Fejervary's Block. The food consisted of beef, bread, potatoes, coffee, and butter. The companies awoke at five in the morning, had breakfast at six, were dismissed for two hours, then drilled for two hours. Then, after lunch, there was another two-hour drill beginning at two o'clock. Davenport was caught in the fever of the Civil War. Wilkie wrote:

The war excitement is progressing rapidly, if it be that it has not arrived at a state where further progression is impossible. Every third man you meet is in uniform, or else a certain stiffness in his vertebral column indicates that he is a recruit. Flags — every star there — fly from all the principal buildings — decorate cart horses — are stuck up in every window — are seen everywhere. Patriotism is boiling over — nothing is dreamed of but battles.

The arrival of the Dubuque companies brought to five the number of contingents in Davenport. Each consisted of about one hundred men. In addition to the Governor's Greys and Jackson Guards, there was Capt. Wentz's Company, a Davenport unit made up of men nearly all the same height, the Davenport City Guards, commanded by Capt. R. M. Littler, who had drawn the men from the ranks of firemen and raftsmen, and the Davenport City Artillery.

In his "Army Correspondence" to the *Dubuque Herald*, Franc Wilkie never failed to play up the probable heroism of each man and unit, but after the war he reflected again on the quality of those first troops:

I knew the young men who responded to the call, — knew them by the hundreds. They were clerks on small salaries; they were lawyers with insufficient business; they were young men with no occupation and anxious for employment; they were farmers' boys disgusted with the drudgery of the soil, and anxious to visit the wonderful world beyond them. To these were added husbands tired of the bickerings of domestic life, lovers disappointed in their affections, and ambitious elements who saw in the organization of men opportunities for command. Others, differing but little from the last named, scented political preferment, and joined the popular movement.

Physicians with limited practice were early and numerous in their applications for permission to enter the service; clergymen with unappreciative parishes, small incomes, and unsympathetic social environments, came to the front and proffered their assistance. Young men, well to do,

with virile physiques, anxious for adventure, with their hot blood thrilling in response to the sullen clamors of the drum and the shrill invocations of the fife, thronged with eagerness the recruiting stations and wrote their names in bold characters on the lists.

There was not one man in a hundred that believed there would be any war or fighting.

And for a while it was to appear, to the Iowa companies, at least, that there would be no fighting for them.

On May 6, 1861, Franc Wilkie was penning his dispatches from Keokuk, the move having been accomplished aboard the steamboat *Hawkeye State* despite a heavy rainstorm. In addition to two Dubuque companies, Capt. Wentz's Davenport company was now also on its way to war. The First Regiment Iowa Volunteer Infantry was soon to take shape, although Wilkie wondered what use it would be since it had neither artillery or cavalry or arms of any kind. Soon, however, all the troops were assembled which were to make up the First Iowa. There were two companies from Dubuque, two from Muscatine, one from Davenport, two from Burlington, and one each from Mt. Pleasant, Iowa City, and Cedar Rapids.

Soon 2,000 muskets arrived from St. Louis, but they were of such inferior quality that the troops found little to rejoice at. Noting that a guard of twelve men was placed around the warehouse on the Keokuk levee where the muskets were being stored, Wilkie wrote:

I think it would be a master stroke of policy to allow the secessionists to steal them. They are the "old-fashioned-brass-mounted-and-of-such-is-the-kingdom-of-Heaven" kind that are infinitely more dangerous to friend than enemy — will kick further than they will shoot, and are appropriately known from their awkward peculiarities in this and other respects, among our Germans as *Kuh-fuss* — "Cow-foot." They were brought hither by Col. [Samuel Ryan] Curtis for the use of the 2nd Regiment but were stopped by Lieut. Chambers, and by some happy arrangement between him and Curtis, 1000 of them have been retained here for the use of the 1st Regiment. Their appearance creates intense disgust in the mind of every recruit.

The Iowa soldiers were quartered at Camp Ellsworth, a beautiful spot about a mile north of Keokuk and about half a mile from the Mississippi River. The camp covered from two to three hundred acres and was separated from the river by a grove of trees. Although there only slightly more than a month, the boredom was to be almost too much for the Iowa troops. Writing from Camp Ellsworth on June 2, 1861, Franc B. Wilkie reported:

The details, both regular and irregular of camp life are varied, and to most of us, amusing and full of interest, all of which will probably wear off after a week's familiarity with its duties. 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, the almost State's-prison-like confinement of the soldiers; all these, and a hundred other cir-

cumstances incident to camp life, will very speedily take the romance out of the whole matter. . . . Theoretically camp life is desirable as a first class situation in Paradise or in the innermost heart of a pretty woman; practically — well “I’d rather be a dog and bay the Moon” than be a soldier liable to camp duty.

Other troops were beginning to arrive. The Second Regiment was to be made up of two companies from Davenport and one each from Keokuk, Des Moines, Fairfield, Keosauqua, Bloomfield, Washington, Lyons, and Ottumwa. The Third Regiment would have one company each from Dubuque, Knoxville, McGregor, Decorah, Nevada, Fayette, Indianola, Oskaloosa, Clarksville, and Cedar Falls.

Wilkie told the folks back home how an average day went for the new Iowa soldiers at Camp Ellsworth.

At 4:30 each morning, “Drummer’s Call” was sounded and the Drum Band assembled in front of the tents of the sleeping soldiers. At the call of “Reveille,” fifteen minutes later, the band played half a dozen tunes as it marched up and down the whole length of the tents. At 6 a.m. it was “Police Call” when every scrap of paper, bit of straw, etc., must be picked up from the area. At 6:30 there was “Surgeon’s Call” and those who were ill were marched off to be examined by the doctor. Breakfast was at 7 a.m., and at 7:30 drill began. At noon a dinner call was sounded and at 4 p.m. there

was a drill call for a company parade. At 6 p.m., "Assembly" was blown and a dress parade for all companies was staged. At 9 p.m., "Tattoo" was sounded by the band playing several musical selections and "Taps" at 9:30 meant that the lights in all privates' tents must be extinguished. The lights in captains' tents were allowed until 11 o'clock.

Franc Wilkie reported that life was boring and that singing was the chief diversion of the troops. There was one other interesting daily event in the camp:

About the only object of interest in the streets now is the drill of the Davenport City Guards — Capt. Bob Littler's somewhat famous company of firemen and raftsmen. They remind me very much of the Fire Zouaves of Washington. Their dress is black pants with a greyish stripe, grey shirts, and a grey fatigue cap. One of their amusements is to come up from supper, break into a double quick march, and continue it for a length of time that would tire an ordinary walker. Last night they ran without stopping *over four miles*, and upon reaching their quarters, instead of "laying up," they "broke out" in a gymnastic spot (sic), greatly to the wonderment of spindle-shanked clerks and narrow chested spectators. . . . In running they go company front, in single or double files, by platoons or sections, wheel flank, oblique, and thus perform all the evolutions without slackening their pace, and in just as good order as though in the ordinary step. Independent of all these immense physical advantages, the Guards have other features of value — they are sober, gentlemanly, quiet, and are fast getting to be the lions of the town.

But the Iowans were discovering that the life of a soldier was not exciting — yet. Wilkie himself slept by spreading a blanket on a gun box in his tent, then pulling another blanket over him and using a carpet sack or a coat for a pillow. He reported on another of the “diversions” in the camp, this one by one of the Dubuque companies:

In one tent of the Gov. Greys they have adopted a rule that whoever swears shall read aloud a chapter in the Bible — the book being kept constantly open for that purpose. Truth compels me to say that one can scarcely pass the tent day or night without hearing some one reading a selection of Scriptures. Among others who are thus being benefited, I may mention my handsome young friend Charley ———, who, within the last week has read all of Genesis and Exodus, and is this morning well into Leviticus, and there is a fine prospect of his finishing the entire Old Testament before the end of the three months.

But the boredom and Bible reading were soon to end. Although the three-month term of service of the First Iowa was almost over, they would soon get their taste of battle. Newspaperman Wilkie was with them when they boarded the steamboat *Jennie Deans* at Keokuk on June 13, 1861, and headed for Hannibal, Missouri.