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EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

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Franc Wilkie—War Correspondent

Today one can pick up hundreds of books, pamphlets, and illustrations about the Civil War and learn just what happened. But it was not that easy a century ago when Iowans wanted to learn how their sons were faring in the war between the North and the South. There was no television, no radio, no up-to-date news bulletins, no movies or photos of battles.

The task of reporting the battles went to a select group of hard-riding, tough-minded newspaper reporters. Showing the "folks back home" what the war looked like was the task of an even smaller group of "Special Artists." These men drew pictures of supply trains, the camps of the army, and the battle scenes. Between the two types of individuals — the reporter with his word accounts and the special artist with his drawings — the people back home learned about the Civil War, mostly through their local newspapers and the national press and illustrated weekly newspapers of the day.

Iowa had the distinction of providing the Civil War with two of the more important reporters — one a writer, the other an artist. Franc B. Wilkie, a Dubuque newspaperman (formerly of Davenport), became one of the most famous war correspondents of the Civil War. Alexander Simplot, a Dubuque schoolteacher, was unique among the handful of artists that covered the war for the national press in that he was the only man without formal training in art to become one of the select group of special artists.

The Civil War was only the beginning of Franc B. Wilkie's career in journalism. Wilkie left Dubuque in 1861 to cover the activities of two companies of Dubuque soldiers for the *Dubuque Herald*. He never returned after the war to live in Iowa.

Wilkie was born on July 2, 1832, in West Charlton, New York. He ran away from home at 13 for two years but returned to work for farmers while attending school. At 18, Wilkie worked as a blacksmith and continued his studies so that when he entered Union College, Schenectady, New York, in 1855, he was enrolled as a sophomore and completed the prescribed course. Curiously, Alexander Simplot graduated from Union College in 1858.

From a job on the *Schenectady Star*, Wilkie moved to Davenport where he helped establish the *Davenport Daily News*, a paper destined to become a victim of the financial crisis of 1857. One

of Wilkie's schoolmates at Union College had been George C. Harrington, the son of an Illinois farmer. Harrington's brother, John, a successful steamboat man who lived in Davenport, offered to share his money with his brother. Harrington agreed with Wilkie that he should provide the capital and Wilkie run the paper. The first issue of the *Daily Evening News* was printed on September 20, 1856, but by early 1857 the paper was in financial difficulty. Additional trouble occurred when Harrington's "rich" brother bet \$2,000 that John C. Fremont would defeat James Buchanan in the election of 1856. The money he lost had been planned for the newspaper.

When the *Daily Evening News* was sold, Wilkie was left without a cent. He stayed in Davenport and spent three months writing a book printed under the title of *Davenport Past and Present* in 1858. Believing that he was still financially liable from the sale of the *Daily Evening News*, Wilkie signed over the rights to his book, and as a result, never received a cent for it, except for about \$45 in expenses he was given while writing it. Sold originally for \$3 a copy, the publisher made, Wilkie claimed, \$7,000 on the sale of the book.

Wilkie had married in the spring of 1857 and now sent his wife home to her father, John Morse, a well-to-do lumber man in Elgin, Illinois. Meanwhile, Wilkie traveled around the Midwest on

several different jobs, finally going to Elgin to put out a campaign paper for Stephen A. Douglas in his race against Lincoln. While in Elgin, Wilkie studied shorthand and attained a speed of 100 words per minute, a talent that would help him as a war correspondent.

In November 1858, Wilkie wrote to several newspapers asking for work and received only one answer — from the *Dubuque Herald*. He boarded an Illinois Central train on a free pass, but discovered the pass was only good as far as Freeport, Illinois. At Freeport, he talked the conductor into giving him free passage to Dubuque, which the conductor agreed to since he was a Dubuque man.

Wilkie took the job at the *Dubuque Herald* for \$10 a week and boarded with the family of editor Joseph B. Dorr. He worked hard from nine in the morning until the paper was printed at two the following morning. When the Civil War began in 1861, the *Herald* dispatched Wilkie to travel with the first two Dubuque companies of soldiers who had answered Abraham Lincoln's call for 75,000 volunteers. His pay was to be \$10 a week, out of which Wilkie was to pay all his expenses. Wilkie never had to worry about stretching that \$10 a week because the *Herald* never got around to paying it.

The Dubuque newspaperman's aggressive reporting soon brought him to the attention of the

New York Times, which hired him as its war correspondent for the western area. His pay was now \$7.50 for each column of type he produced in the *Times*, plus all necessary expenses. One of his exploits, turning himself over to the Confederates at Lexington, Missouri, in order to get the story from the other side rated a half-column editorial in the *Times* which called his adventure "unparalleled in the history of journalism."

In 1863, Franc Wilkie, believing that most of the war was over in the Western section, and being somewhat bored, took a job as an editorial writer for the *Chicago Times*. He became one of the most famous of Chicago newspapermen and was the first president of the Chicago Press Club.

Before he died on August 13, 1892, Wilkie wrote more than 15 books, ranging in subject material from the Civil War, to fiction, to sketches of Chicago lawyers, to a full length book — *A Life of Christopher Columbus*.

His books most concerned with the Civil War are *Pen and Powder*, *Walks About Chicago*, *Personal Reminiscences of Thirty-Five Years of Journalism*, and *The Iowa First, Letters From the War*. The latter book, much sought by students of the Civil War and early Americana, is merely a collection of the articles he wrote for the *Dubuque Herald* during the first months of the war.

When Wilkie left the Civil War, he had intended to become a historian and write the his-

tories of the troops of the various states. His job with the *Chicago Times* put an end to those plans. Wilkie's sarcastic and biting style of writing made his column, "Walks About Chicago," a favorite with the public. In 1871, he was sent to London to establish a European bureau for the *Chicago Times*, the first such move by a newspaper west of the Alleghenies.

There are few records to indicate that Wilkie, the Civil War newspaperman, and Alexander Simplot, the Civil War artist, were good friends. Although both had been in Union College in New York at the same time, and both left Dubuque to cover the Civil War, they were not alike. The two men campaigned together during the Civil War, each doing his duty, but Wilkie was a hard-driving, hard-drinking newspaperman and Simplot was a quiet schoolteacher. Franc B. Wilkie was often bored and cynical with the Civil War, but Alexander Simplot found it exciting.