

Alexander Simplot—Artist

Alexander Simplot had been raised quite differently from Franc Wilkie. Born in Dubuque on January 5, 1837, Simplot was the son of one of the city's first aldermen, a wealthy merchant who did not want his son to become an artist. The Simplots were so wealthy that Alexander would remark that as a boy he was the only one in Dubuque with a drum that had been shipped up from St. Louis.

After graduating from Union College in New York, Alexander returned to Dubuque and began teaching school. Although he had spoken at his college commencement on "Plea for Artists," it probably had no effect on his parents, who had no wish for him to follow his natural aptitude for drawing.

When the first troops left from Dubuque for duty with the Union army, Simplot was at the levee to watch the steamboat *Alhambra* pull away with 200 soldiers aboard (and war correspondent Franc B. Wilkie of the *Dubuque Herald*). An estimated 3,000 people saw the steamboat leave, but Alexander Simplot also had his sketch pad and he drew the scene and then sent the sketch to *Harper's Weekly*, whose editors liked the picture.

They printed it and hired Simplot as "Special Artist" for their national illustrated weekly newspaper which reached a circulation of 115,000 during the Civil War and established itself as the foremost chronicler of the clash between the North and the South. He was commissioned to set up headquarters at Cairo, Illinois.

So Simplot became a Special Artist, one of a select group. The three illustrated weekly newspapers printed in the North depended on illustrations to fill their pages and show the people back home what the war was like.

William P. Campbell, Curator of Painting at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., has estimated that at any given time during the Civil War the number of special artists probably numbered no more than twelve, and that during the four years of the war they totaled only about thirty.

Simplot was forced to leave the war and his battle sketching in 1863 because of illness, but his two years of published sketches in *Harper's Weekly* still rank him thirteenth among the 28 special artists to whom 10 or more published drawings can be credited. His 51 published sketches of the war in Missouri and along the rivers of Mid-America abound in the pages of *Harper's*. Simplot proved to be a wise choice to cover the war on the rivers, however, because he had always been fascinated by the Mississippi River at

Dubuque, where he was born, and by the steamboats that would soon be serving as troop transports and converted warships. As a lad, he had often loitered at the Dubuque levee to watch the steamboats come in. In his later years Simplot recalled these happy days:

We seldom missed a boat during the early hours of the night, although, perforce, we had to in daylight. I know of nothing which struck my imagination more vividly than the appearance of one of our large steamers, and they were large in those days, approaching you at night with bows heading directly for you, and that was the way they made for the landing after turning out of the inner slough. The steamer with its two large furnaces, one on each side, like huge fiery eyes, and the thick black smoke surging from the chimneys, with the bellowing cough of the escaping steam, as she advanced rapidly towards you, grew bodily so large in size that she loomed up all aglow at the landing, as some base monster darting out of the darkness.

Simplot had always had a good eye for seeing things along the river, and it would now be valuable to him as an artist. Most of Simplot's sketches during the Civil War were done in pencil and probably were sent off to *Harper's* main offices in New York as quickly as possible. The illustrated weeklies thought it extraordinarily fast time if they could print a picture of a battle within two weeks of the fighting. Photography was still in its infancy in 1861; it required too much equipment and too much time for shooting and develop-

ing the picture. The artist needed only his pad of paper and a pencil.

Simplot would soon be observing new and different activities along the Mississippi River. They would be just as interesting as the steamboats he had watched, as a boy, land at Dubuque, but they would be much more dangerous. As Simplot later recalled:

At night the bright spark of the fuse, turning with the revolving shell high in the air, could be seen circling the heavens almost to the time of its explosion, three miles away.

The Iowan, unknowingly, made another contribution to our knowledge of the Civil War. Apparently young and eager for adventure, he was impressed with the carefree, Bohemian life of the war correspondents. He was probably the only artist to draw pictures of the correspondents at work and at play, and to keep notes on them. He was also probably the only combat artist who ever had a commanding officer offer to halt a march of 3,000 men so that Simplot could sketch it. It all happened while Simplot was traveling with General Sam Sturgis on a Missouri campaign:

General Sturges (sic) brigade consisted of some 3,000 men, embracing cavalry, infantry, and artillery and at times the summons line terminating with the army wagons bearing the impedimenta of the army, here and there crowning an elevation in the distance, was a peculiar and wonderful sight to see upon the rolling prairies of Mis-

souri. So much did it effect the general that, hailing me from the ambulance, which with his bodyguard headed the line, he called my attention to the sight, and proposed halting the army then and there, so as to permit me to sketch it in that position.

Unfortunately, there is no record of whether Simplot accepted the offer to halt 3,000 men for a drawing.

Simplot's other expeditions included a dinner party at a home in rebel territory. When the owner of the home discovered that Simplot was an artist for *Harper's*, "He was especially desirous that I should represent his home and have it published in *Harper's* as 'A Home of a Notorious Rebel.'" Guaranteed safe conduct, but with a pistol tucked under his belt nevertheless, Simplot rode off to the party and returned convinced that he had eaten in the home of a Confederate with Rebel officers in civilian clothes.

At another time during the campaign in Missouri, he participated in a midnight ride outside Union lines. It was in Warsaw, Missouri, that Simplot went on a raid at a home where it was believed that Confederate arms and ammunition were being hidden. They were met at the door by the elderly owner of the home and his two daughters. They explained that all they had were a few trunks left with them by a merchant in Warsaw who fled before the troops arrived in the area. The elderly householder invited Simplot and the

"invading" Yankees into his home. He served his guests coffee and sandwiches, notwithstanding the late hour of the evening, and his daughters played the piano for the visitors.

But when all the entertainment was over, the lieutenant in charge of the raiding party said he would like to check the trunks which the merchant had left behind for safekeeping. The trunks were forced open and found to contain silk goods. But under the silks were found "many boxes of caps, sundry firearms and other munitions of war." The host expressed great surprise at this discovery, claiming that the trunks had only been left with him for safekeeping. He also expressed surprise when muskets were found hidden in the Negro quarters.

Perhaps the coffee and sandwiches had left their mark, because the lieutenant who led the raid was very understanding. Chivalry was not dead. The lieutenant agreed to confiscate only the war goods and leave the silk. The elderly homeowner and his daughters were grateful for their kind treatment and presented the "raiders" with presents before they left. Simplot received three silk dress patterns as his present, and the Federal raiding party rode back to its camp.

The early war in Missouri was slow-moving and sometimes boring, and it was during this period that the newspapermen and artists covering the war began to call themselves the "Bohemian

Brigade" because of the wild and carefree life they led. To Simplot, this gay life appeared exciting and adventuresome, and as a result he was the only artist to sketch some of the scenes and leave a record of the life of a Civil War "war correspondent." The correspondents sat up until late into the night, holding long philosophical discussions, drinking heavily, and generally having a "good time." The discussions usually ended in some sort of a pitched battle and it was an unlucky hotel indeed that the correspondents and artists selected for their home. A typical discussion among the correspondents was described by one newspaperman and shows that Simplot was often in the middle of the battle. The name of the news organ represented by each of the participants was substituted for their real names.

. . . the "Commercial" threw a haversack which hit "Harper" (Simplot) in the bread basket and doubled him into a folio — knocking him against the "World," who, toppling from his center of gravity, was poising a plethoric bed thick with dire intent when the upturned legs of a chair caught and tore it open, scattering the feathers through the surging atmosphere. In falling, he capsized the table, spilling the ink, wrecking several literary books, extinguishing the "brief candle" that had faintly revealed the sanguinary fray, thus abruptly terminating hostilities, but leaving the panting heroes still defiant and undismayed.

Simplot made several sketches of these pitched battles and of the correspondents at work.

It is difficult to ascertain just how good an artist Simplot really was. The pencil drawings he sent back to *Harper's* in New York — like all other drawings for that magazine — were transformed into wood engravings. Much, if not all, of the artist's style was lost in this process. Since Simplot was the only Civil War artist who had not had previous special or professional training, his skills were somewhat limited. His Civil War sketches seldom showed people or action; more often they were scenes of activity along the Mississippi River, or army camps, or overall events.

W. Fletcher Thompson, Jr., in his book, "The Image of War," called Simplot the "unluckiest" artist of the Civil War. Simplot seemed to miss the major battles, although it was admittedly almost impossible for a man to determine what the major battles would be before they had developed. Simplot, however, was not without his moments of glory. He was proud of the fact that he was the first to send a genuine Confederate flag back to Dubuque. One of his artistic triumphs was his series of sketches made at the Battle of Memphis when Union ironclads defeated a Confederate fleet and captured the Tennessee city. Simplot was the only artist at the battle and his sketches of the river battle and the subsequent raising of the Union flag over the Post Office are the only real pictorial records of that important engagement.

After the battle of Memphis, Simplot became

ill. He had been plagued with dysentery during the course of the war and he finally left the army for the last time in the early part of 1863. Sketching the battles of the Civil War had not been "profitable" for Alexander Simplot. His notebooks show that he was paid from ten to twenty-five dollars for each sketch accepted by *Harper's*. On the basis of 50 known sketches which have been positively identified as Simplot's in *Harper's*, it would appear that the most he could have been paid was \$1,250 for almost two years work.

Simplot returned to Dubuque where he had taught school before the Civil War. In 1866, he married a former pupil, Virginia Knapp. She was eighteen years old and he was twenty-nine. Simplot engaged in several business ventures. He went into the dry goods business with two of his brothers in Dubuque but soon turned to engraving and sketching. The former Special Artist made many views of the city of Dubuque and the surrounding area. Many of these paintings and engravings are highly prized by Iowans today.

Alexander Simplot had never been poor. His father had come to Dubuque, in 1836, when there were only four main streets and seven cross streets. The elder Simplot made his fortune in the mercantile business and later expanded into pork packing and the buying and selling of grain. The grain market proved to be the financial undoing of Alexander Simplot. According to members of the

family, the artist once lost \$100,000 in speculation on the market. He never again had the money he had been accustomed to, but he was remembered as aristocratic and a fastidious dresser.

His sketches of the Civil War — highly valued now by historians — have been saved only by the purest chance. One of his sons recalled that, as a boy, he often used Simplot's Civil War sketch books to draw pictures on. Some members of the family have saved the drawings, but since Simplot's death on October 21, 1914 — when he was believed to be the oldest native-born Iowan in the State — most of his Civil War sketches have been lost, and with them has gone a priceless record of the Civil War.