

Comment by the Editor

FRANC B. WILKIE

The climax in the career of Franc B. Wilkie, amateur historian and professional journalist, occurred in August, 1861, when his dramatic story of the battle of Wilson's Creek was published in the *Dubuque Herald*. That vivid narrative, like Alexander Hamilton's brilliant description of the typhoon which he witnessed as a boy in the West Indies, was the particular incident that determined the course of future events. It not only established the fame of the First Iowa Infantry, but it won for the author a reputation as a war correspondent which plunged him into metropolitan journalism for the rest of his life.

Even in 1861 Wilkie was an experienced newspaper man when he accompanied the first regiment of Iowa volunteers as army correspondent in the Missouri campaign. While a student at Union College in Schenectady, New York, he had managed the "literary" department of a local newspaper for more than a year, and in September, 1856, had joined George C. Harrington in establishing the ill-fated Davenport *Daily Evening News*. But the panic of 1857 ruined the enterprise, so that in less than a year Wilkie found himself adrift without a dollar. In this extremity he had a bright idea of

writing a history of *Davenport: Past and Present*, but the publishers cheated him out of all of the profits. For three months' work he received \$65 in depreciated currency. After travelling a short time with a bankrupt panorama depicting the rise of Mormonism, he finally sought refuge at the home of his father-in-law where he quite outstayed his welcome. At last, however, he got a job late in 1858 as "local" editor on the Dubuque *Herald*, a position he held until the war began.

In his preface to *The Iowa First*, his collected "Letters from the War" to the Dubuque *Herald*, Wilkie disclaimed any literary distinction, stating that they were "written carelessly and hastily — penned on desk and saddle, in woods and prairie, and generally under circumstances that prevented any style beyond that of the plainest narrative." Perhaps the simple, flowing style was the chief merit of his correspondence; but his stories of camp life, the arduous march across Missouri, and the bloody fight at Wilson's Creek were vivid, full of particulars, bubbling with humor, and, above all, dramatic. When the New York *Times* offered him \$7.50 a column and necessary expenses as a special war correspondent he was as astonished as if a "thunderbolt had exploded under his feet". Nevertheless he hastened to accept the position.

During the following two years he wrote for the *Times* over the signature "Galway". He was present in most of the western campaigns from Wilson's

Creek until two months after the fall of Vicksburg. Once, when some Union forces were besieged, he surrendered to the Confederate commander, witnessed the operations, and wrote an exclusive account for his paper — an exploit which the editor of the *Times* described as “unparalleled in the history of journalism”. The principal incidents, adventures, and labors during his career as an army correspondent were later published in two volumes: *Army and Miscellaneous Sketches*, 1869, and *Pen and Powder*, 1887.

After leaving the army, Wilkie conceived the idea of writing the history of the volunteer regiments of the various States. But before arrangements for publication were consummated, an invitation to join the editorial staff of a Democratic newspaper in Chicago completely altered his plans. From September, 1863, until he died on April 12, 1892, Wilkie was connected with the Chicago *Times*. During that generation the newspaper business developed from the rather itinerant trade of the printer to a reputable profession, editors learned how to be forceful without resorting to vituperation, hand presses gave way to titanic rotary sextuples, typewriters displaced sputtering pens and Horace Greeley copy, and direct telegraphic communication brought the daily news from the ends of the earth to every man's breakfast table. Of all of this Franc B. Wilkie was a part, and much of it he has told in his *Personal Reminiscences of Thirty-five Years of Journalism*.

J. E. B.