

## The Relief Expedition

The following extracts are from Serg. Harris Hoover's account in the *Hamilton Freeman* of August 20, 27, 1857 [Editor].

Being ready armed and equipped, we left Webster City at one o'clock March 23d, and arrived that evening at Fort Dodge, where we were received by a large and enthusiastic meeting of the citizens of that county, who were already organized under the respective command of Captains Charles B. Richards and John F. Duncombe, and known as companies A and B. It now remained for us to form Company C, which we did, by electing the following gentlemen our officers: J. C. Johnson captain, John N. Maxwell first lieutenant, F. R. Mason second lieutenant, H. Hoover orderly sergeant, A. N. Hathaway corporal.

We now numbered near a hundred strong, efficient men; but as we were principally young, and inexperienced in the art of war, it appeared necessary that we be enrolled under the command of a chief officer, whose age and experience might qualify him to assume the position. "Old men for council and young men for war." The veteran Maj. Wm. Williams was unanimously conceded to be the man. The Major, though afflicted with rheumatism, and the frosts of seventy winters whitening his brow, resolutely set forward at our head.

We left Fort Dodge March 24th; but owing to our baggage-wagons being detained we did not proceed far, but encamped at Beaver creek. We now began to realize that we were soldiers, for our appetites (true to nature) admonished us that we must prepare something to sustain the inner man. To this end we built three large campfires,



and began (to most of us) the novel procedure of preparing our own refreshments. It was quite amusing to see the boys mix up meal, bake slapjacks, fry meat, wash dishes, and act the housewife generally; but it is said "practice makes perfect," and the truth of the adage was substantiated in the case under consideration, for before our return some of the boys became quite expert in the handicraft above mentioned. One of our lieutenants — a jolly good fellow by the way — averred that he could throw a "griddle-cake" out of the roof of a log-cabin, which he temporarily occupied, and while it performed divers circumgyrations in mid air, could run out and catch it "t'other side up," on the spider.

That night we were fortunate enough to secure a bed beside a haystack. In the morning, Wednesday, 25th, we resumed our march. The only incident of the day was the crossing of the east fork of the Des Moines. This was not attended with much difficulty, as the stream was not as yet much swollen. We encamped for the night at Dakota City.

Thursday, 26th. As we proceeded on our journey the trail became more and more obscure, and the snow apparently deeper. Some places the snow was so hard as to require breaking down before our teams could possibly pass. In other places it had drifted into the ravines to the depth of eight or ten feet. The water had drained off the prairies into these hollows, converting the snow into slush, and rendering it almost impossible to pass them.

Those of us who were "green hands" had now an excellent opportunity of learning the definition of the term "actual service;" for it soon became evident that the only practicable mode of proceeding was to wade through, stack arms, return and unhitch the teams, and attach ropes to them and draw them through. This done, we performed a similar operation on the wagons; then rigged up, broke roads to the next slough, and amused ourselves with a



repetition of the aforesaid interesting performances. In this manner we were two days in reaching McKnight's Point, on the west bank of the Des Moines, twelve miles from Dakota City. In this region the snow was about two feet deep, hard on the top, and soft beneath: too weak to support the weight of a man, thus making the traveling very tiresome. Our guides had gone on ahead to select the most practicable route; they were followed by the "foot," and the rear was brought up by the baggage-wagons.

Under all this complication of difficulties, the conduct of our gallant commander, Major Williams, was deserving of the highest praise, and worthy of the emulation of those of greater physical strength and fewer years. He was always upon the alert, as from the reports we knew not what moment might find us in a savage ambushade. Frequently he was on foot, wading through the ice and snow at the head of his men, by his voice and example cheering and inspiring them on their weary way, and proving himself alike entitled to the name of an experienced soldier and high toned gentleman.

It was Friday, the 27th, that we arrived at McKnight's Point. Here we found our guides, Capt. Duncombe and Lieut. Maxwell, who had succeeded, through almost superhuman exertions, in reaching the point the night before. Capt. Duncombe suffered greatly from the severe labor and exposure of the trip, and was assisted to reach the settlement, where he arrived benumbed with cold and almost insensible. The next morning he was again on duty, and notwithstanding his recent exhaustion, and the advice of his friends to remain behind, like a true soldier resumed his command and nobly persevered in its toilsome labors.

On Saturday morning, the 28th, for reasons best known to themselves, some eight or nine of the party — I blush to relate it — came to the conclusion that a "peep at the



elephant" was sufficient, so they "just naturally backed out," and struck a "bee-line" for home. The cause of this singular escapade was at the time a mystery to me, but the supposition was entertained that they believed "discretion to be the better part of valor." . . . We made no objection — thinking it better to let the "chaff blow off." Therefore, renewing our march, we reached the mouth of the Cylinder creek that night.

Sunday, 29th. We reached the Irish colony, twelve miles above. Here were a number of persons from a settlement in Minnesota, who had left their homes on account of the Indian troubles. These, together with other accessions, brought our number up to 125 strong.

Monday, 30th, left our teams, which were pretty much exhausted, and having supplied ourselves with fresh ones we proceeded onward. When about five or six miles from the settlement, our advanced guard met what they supposed to be Indians, but upon a nearer approach they proved to be a party of fugitive men, women, and children flying from the scene of bloodshed and butchery which they had just escaped.

Tuesday, the 31st, reached Big Island Grove, where we encamped to reconnoiter, as we expected to find the Indians in that vicinity. We were disappointed, although comparatively recent signs were visible. We found an ox which had been killed, his horns cut off, and the hide laid open along his back, a little innocent amusement of the savages. But "nary red" skin was to be seen.

April 1st. This morning, when a short distance on our way, an amusing incident occurred. The Major had sent forward a party of scouts, with orders not to fire a gun unless they encountered Indians. . . .

Proceeding on our way we reached G. Granger's on the river near the Minnesota line. Here very unwelcome news awaited us. We learned that the Indians had left the



place five days in advance of our arrival, and that a detachment of United States troops, sixty in number, were then quartered at Springfield. . . .

Upon inquiring, we learned that the United States troops from Fort Ridgley had arrived the next day after the Indians had left, and that a few of them had followed the Indians a short distance, and discovered where they had encamped the night before, and from the number of their tepees computed them to number about forty warriors. On the way they found various articles of clothing and other materials cast away by the Indians on account of the great amount of plunder with which they were burdened. But those ferocious "dogs of war," after being set on a warm scent, and having their prey almost within their grasp, suffered them to escape unscathed. Our position at this time was rather a perplexing one. Anticipated by the United States troops, the Indians five or six days in advance of us, and our provisions almost exhausted, it soon became apparent that the only alternative left was the painful one of abandoning the pursuit, paying the last tribute of respect to the remains of the unfortunate settlers, and returning home.

Accordingly, on the morning of April 2d, a company of twenty-five men were selected and placed under the command of Capt. J. C. Johnson, with orders to proceed to Spirit Lake and bury the dead, while the residue were to return to the Irish colony. I was prevented from joining, . . . but the following are . . . furnished me by a friend:

#### *Burial of the Dead*

Two of our number were mounted on horseback and carried provisions. On arriving at the river it was found that the horses could not be taken across, so the provision was distributed among us, and the horsemen returned. About 3 o'clock that day, we arrived at the house of Mr. Thatcher. The door being shut, we opened it and entered



the house. Within we found everything in utter confusion. Hearing an exclamation of surprise outside, I went out and there beheld the bodies of two men lying side by side, brutally murdered by numerous shots in the breast (where the brave invariably receive the missiles of death). This sight convinced us that we had at least a painful duty to perform, if we did not encounter the infamous villains who perpetrated this cruel deed. We proceeded to bury them immediately. Our captain appointed two to dig the grave, while the remainder (except the guard) proceeded to the house of Mr. Howe, about a mile beyond. Here the door was also closed; on opening it, a sight met our eyes which sent a shudder through our veins and fired our minds with thoughts of vengeance and dire retribution upon the cowardly assassins. It was such a sight as a sensitive person might well avoid encountering, and which for humanity's sake we would gladly have erased from our memories. But there it confronted us in all the tragic horror of a fearful reality. There lay before us, in an incongruous heap, the mangled forms of seven human beings, from the aged grandmother down to the prattling child of tender years, who alike fell victims to the merciless savages' inordinate thirst for human blood. After covering the bodies we returned to our companies and buried the two first found, also a little daughter of Mr. Thatcher.

Next morning returned, found another body a few rods from the house, and buried them all in one grave. We next proceeded to Granger's, about three miles distant. Here we found one man lying in front of the house brutally murdered, his face literally chopped to pieces, and several marks of a tomahawk in the breast; a large bulldog was lying by his side, which probably died in valiantly defending his master. This house was also completely ransacked. . . .



We then visited the house of Mr. Mattock, about a half mile further on, just across an arm of the lake and situated in a grove of heavy timber. We found one man and three or four head of cattle lying on the ice. As soon as we entered the grove we could see the bodies of men, women, children, and cattle scattered promiscuously about and mutilated in the most shocking manner. From all appearances here had been the struggle for life. Here was where the white and red man met in mortal combat and closed in the fearful death-struggle: the one for life, home, wife, and children, the dearest ties that bind souls to earth; the other to gratify the most fiendish passions which human nature in its most degraded and degenerate forms is heir to: revenge, malice, hatred, envy, and covetousness, and above all, an inherent "penchant" to signalize themselves by imbuing their hands in the blood of the palefaces, irrespective of age, sex, or condition. The battle had evidently been fierce and hotly contested, but the whites, overpowered by numbers, sank like Leonidas's band, covered with wounds and heirs to immortal fame. The house was burnt, and in one corner the charred remains of a human body was found. Here we buried eleven. This was near the Indian camp.

At the house of Mr. Gardner we found six dead bodies, one in the house and the remainder just outside the door. We buried them all together about fifty yards from the house, on a spot designated by a daughter of Mr. Gardner, whom we met on our way up as a fugitive from Springfield. We buried twenty-nine in all. Several were missing, among whom were Mrs. Thatcher, Mrs. Marble, Mrs. Noble, and Miss Gardner, who were supposed to have been carried away captives by the Indians. Our melancholy task being done, we took supper and repaired to rest. Sleep coming to our aid we were soon oblivious of the past. In the morning we were very much refreshed,



and taking a hasty meal of potatoes we bid adieu to Spirit Lake, the scene of this dreadful massacre, the thoughts of which filled our minds with an utter abhorrence of the whole Indian nation, and turned to join our companions in their homeward march.

April 3d. Reached the Irish colony. The following morning, April 4th, was very disagreeable, rainy, and cold; but as our provisions were daily diminishing in quantity and deteriorating in quality, it was deemed prudent to resume our march. About one o'clock we reached the banks of Cylinder creek, which, owing to a recent rain and the melting of the snow, was impassable. . . .

We now found ourselves in rather an unenviable situation, a prospect of drowning if we proceeded, a prospect of starving if we remained where we were, and ditto if we returned. Various plans were proposed only to be decided impracticable. However, it was determined that the teams should return to the settlement. Accordingly the Major with the wounded settlers and a few others returned. The balance of us concluded to provide for ourselves. . . .

Sunday, April 4th. Returned to the creek to look for our companions. As there were no signs of life to be seen, the conviction forced itself upon us that our fears were realized and that they were all frozen to death. The stream was by this time all frozen over except the channel. Capt. C. B. Richards in particular deserves praise for his noble efforts in behalf of the sufferers. He worked two hours in the severe cold, attempting to crawl over the ice to reach the shore, but notwithstanding the captain's warm heart the intense cold overcame him, and he was obliged to abandon his philanthropic project without accomplishing his object. In justice to him and Capt. Duncombe, I must say that they did all that under such circumstances could be done to relieve their men. Some of



us tried to break a way across for the boat, but the effort proved futile and we were obliged to abandon the idea of reaching the place where we had left our companions, so we returned to the house to await further developments.

Monday, April 6th. Again proceeded to the creek and found the ice strong enough to carry a horse. Crossed over and with joy and surprise found our companions all alive. They were piled up like so many flour-bags "in the most approved style," under a tent constructed of a wagon-cover, and with a quantity of bedding which they fortunately had on hand were enabled to keep from freezing; and now they crossed on the ice . . . after lying in this position over forty hours *without food or fire on the open prairie*.

But great as were their privations and sufferings, they were exceeded by those of our party who left Spirit Lake on Sunday to cross the prairie to the Irish settlement. They left Spirit Lake Saturday, April 4th, and traveled in a southeast direction, intending to reach, if possible, the Irish colony that day; but, owing to the many deep sloughs which they were obliged to cross, they failed in accomplishing their object. Towards evening their clothes began to freeze to their bodies and to impede their progress. Some of the party still continued to plunge in and wade through, while others deemed it prudent to evade them as much as possible in order to avoid having their clothes frozen stiff upon them. The necessary consequence was, they became separated, some traveling in one direction, and some in another. The main body, however, with W. K. Laughlin as guide, kept a nearly direct course. Just before dark they passed a small lake skirted by a few trees. Some proposed to stop and pass the night, but the voice of the majority was in favor of traveling all night, to escape being frozen to death; but overtasked and exhausted nature will assert her rights.



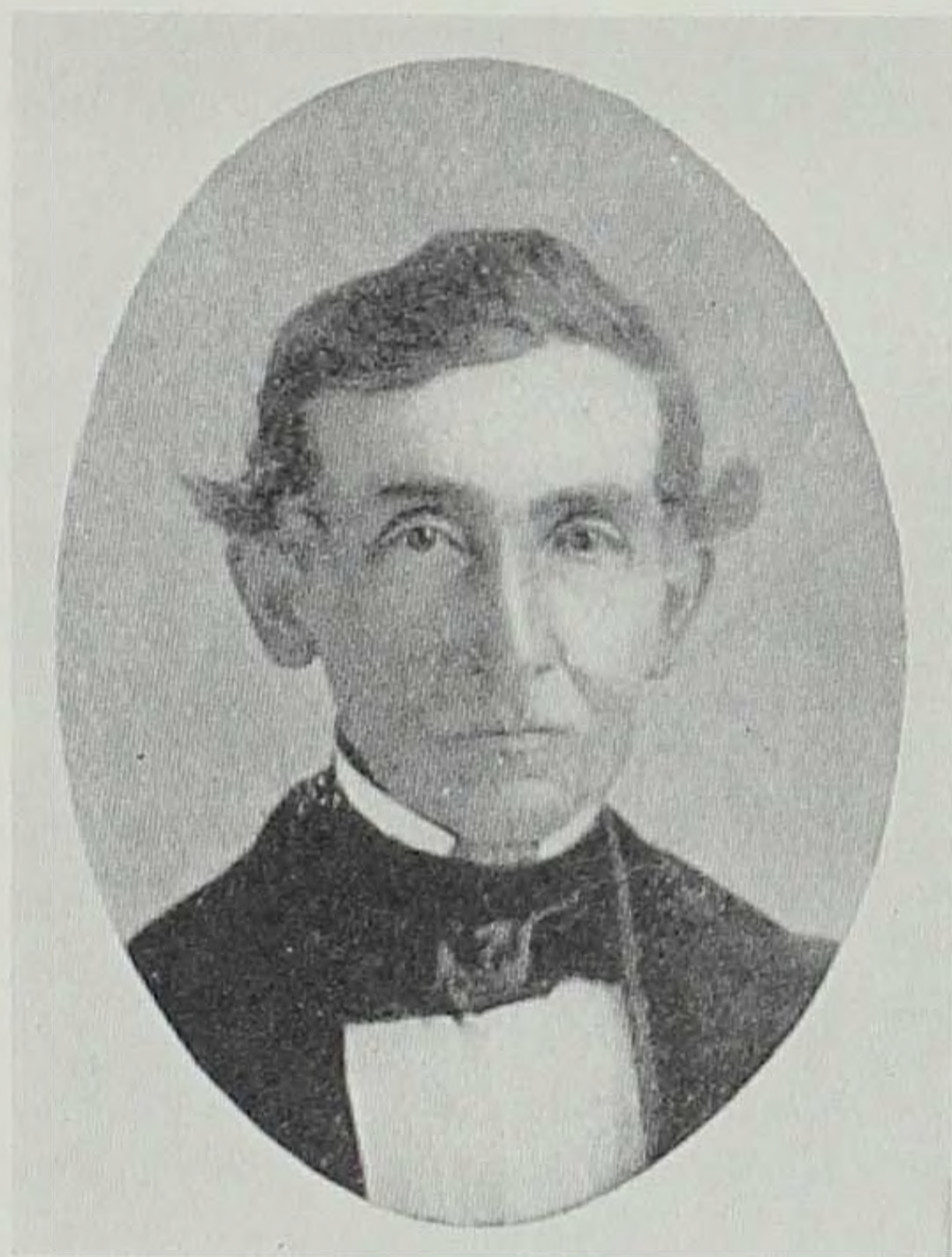
About eight o'clock at night they were overcome by hunger, cold, and fatigue, and being unable to proceed any further lay down on the open prairie, exposed to the merciless wind which swept past like a tornado, their clothes frozen stiff as a coat of mail. Without food, fire, or protection of any kind, they spent a sleepless night. . . . In the morning they found themselves in sight of timber on the Des Moines river, and roused their last remaining energies to reach it. Those who had drawn off their boots were unable to get them on again so they were compelled to cut up their blankets and wrap their feet in them.

In this manner they reached the settlement on Sunday, April 5th, where they all ultimately arrived except two. These were Capt. J. C. Johnson, of Webster City, and William Burkholder, of Ft. Dodge. They were last seen about five o'clock Saturday, two miles distant from their companions, and traveling in a southerly direction. It was confidently hoped that they might have strayed down the river and found a lodging-place. Every effort was made to ascertain their whereabouts, but without success.

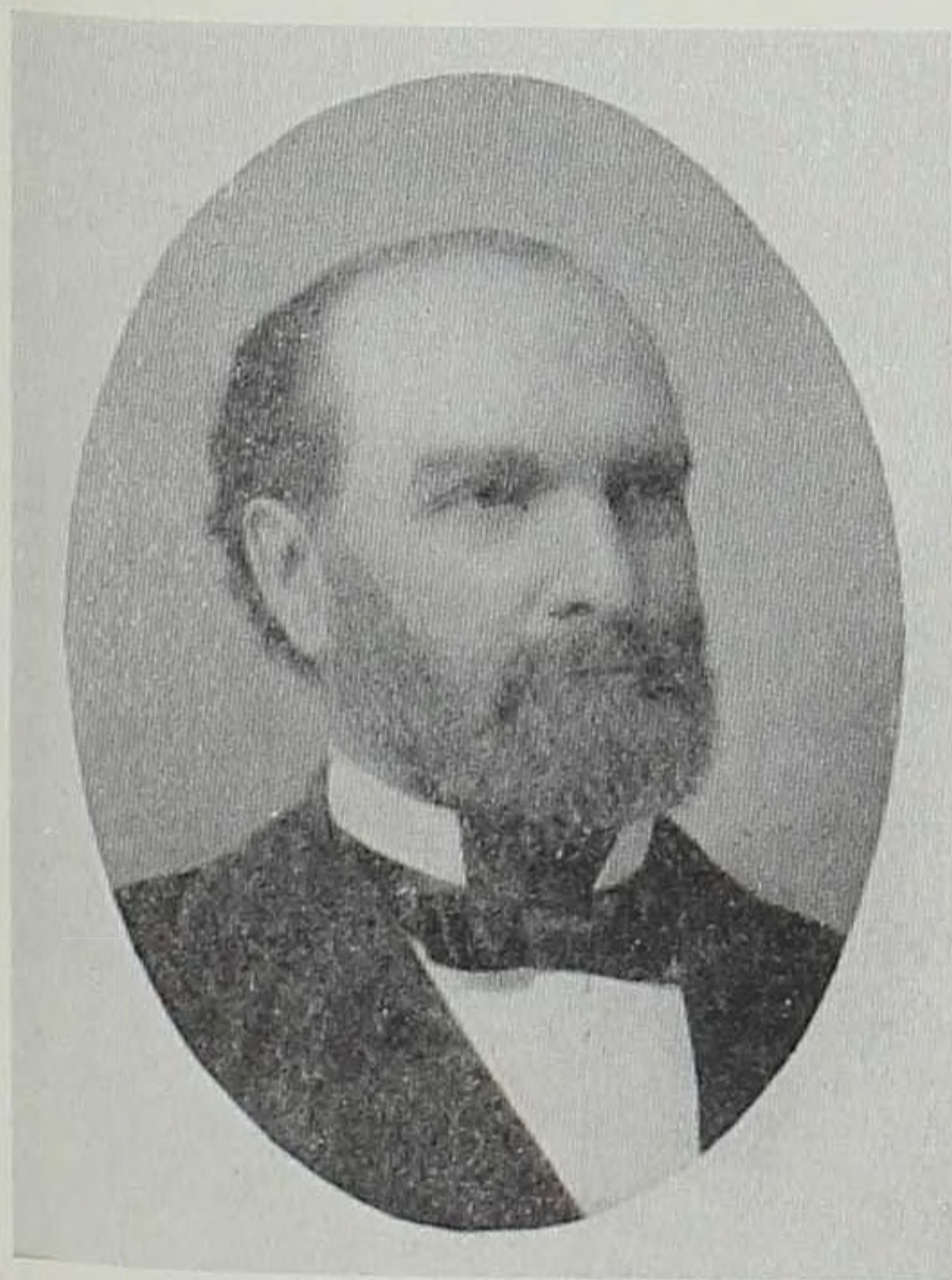
Monday, April 6th. Those of us who had succeeded in crossing the Cylinder now thought best to reach home as soon as possible, as we were out of provisions altogether. After paying our bills *to the last farthing* where we stopped over Sunday, we departed "every man to his tent" and arrived home in three or four days, weary, worn and wasted. We met with a hearty welcome from our friends, who were gratified to see us return alive. Although some of us were pretty badly frozen, we considered ourselves extremely fortunate in having escaped the fate of our comrades. Thus ended the disastrous Spirit Lake Expedition, a second edition (on a small scale) of Bonaparte's expedition *to Moscow*.



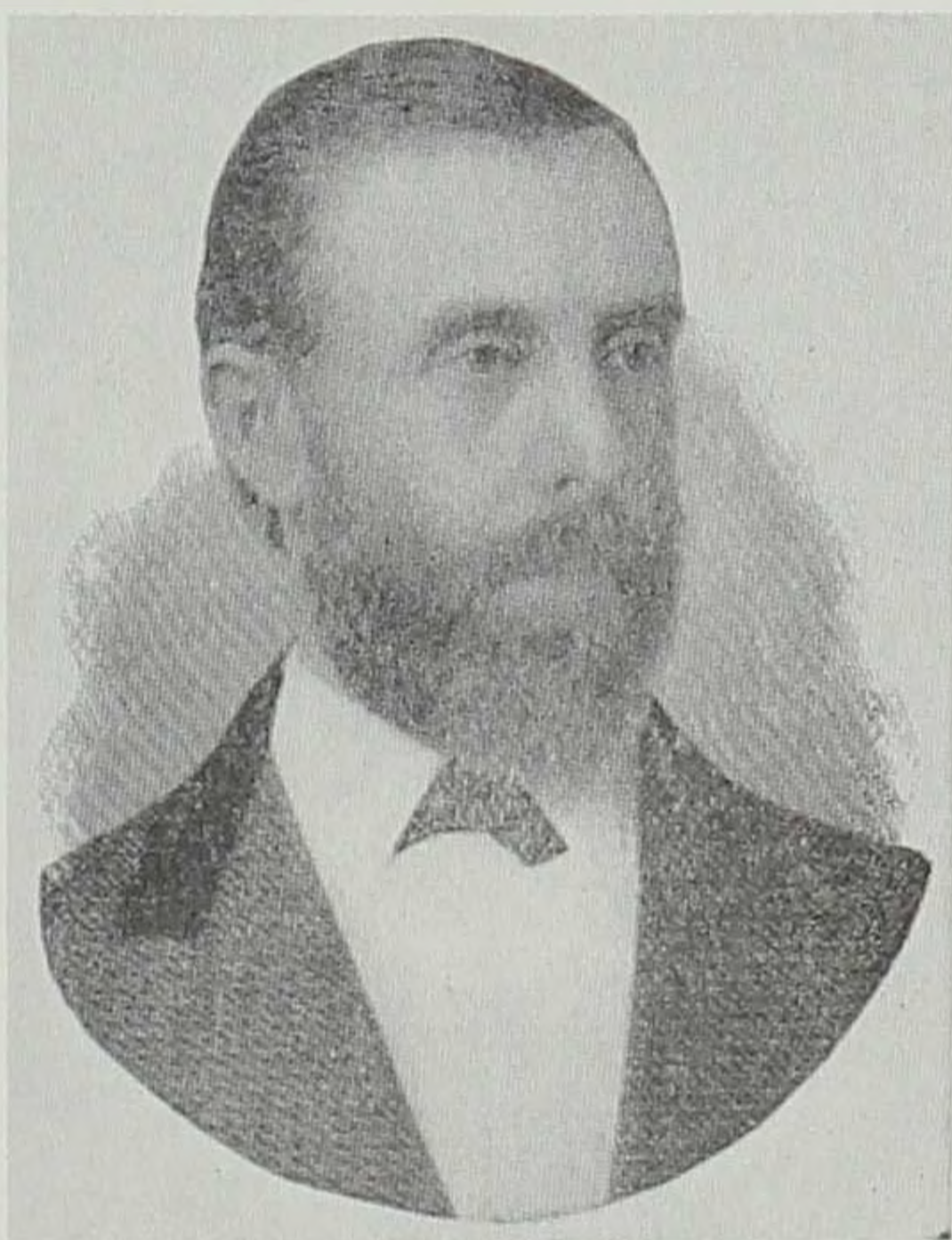
OFFICERS OF THE RELIEF EXPEDITION — 1857



MAJOR WILLIAM WILLIAMS



CAPT. J. F. DUNCOMBE



CAPT. C. B. RICHARDS



# ROSTER OF THE RELIEF EXPEDITION

Names on West Tablet, Spirit Lake Massacre Monument

MAJOR WILLIAM WILLIAMS, commanding

## *Company A*

C. B. Richards, Capt.  
F. A. Stratton, 1st Lt.  
L. K. Wright, Sergt.  
Solan Mason, Corp.

## *Privates*

W. E. Burkholder  
G. W. Brazee  
C. C. Carpenter  
L. D. Crawford  
Julius Conrad  
Henry Carse  
—— Chatterton  
Wm. Defore  
J. W. Dawson  
Wm. Ford  
John Farney  
John Gales  
Andrew Hood  
Angus McBane  
Wm. McCauley  
Michael Maher  
E. Mahan  
W. P. Pollock  
W. F. Porter  
B. F. Parmenter  
L. B. Ridgeway  
Winton Smith  
R. A. Smith  
G. P. Smith  
O. S. Spencer  
C. Stebbins  
Silas Vancleave  
R. U. Wheelock  
D. Westerfield

## *Company B*

J. F. Duncombe, Capt.  
James Linn, 1st Lt.  
S. C. Stevens, 2nd Lt.  
W. N. Koons, Sergt.  
Thos. Callagan, Corp.

## *Privates*

Jessie Addington  
A. Burch  
Hiram Benjamin  
D. H. Baker  
Orlando Bice  
Richard Carter  
A. E. Crouse  
R. F. Carter  
Michael Cavenough  
Jer. Evans  
John Hefley  
O. C. Howe  
D. F. Howell  
A. S. Johnson  
Jonas Murray  
Daniel Morrisey  
G. F. McClure  
A. H. Malcombe  
Michael McCarty  
J. N. McFarland  
Robt. McCormick  
John O'Laughlin  
Daniel Okeson  
Guernsey Smith  
J. M. Thatcher  
W. Searles  
John White  
W. R. Wilson  
Washington Williams  
Reuben Whetstone

## *Company C*

J. C. Johnson, Capt.  
J. N. Maxwell, 1st Lt.  
F. R. Mason, 2nd Lt.  
Harris Hoover, Sergt.  
A. N. Hathway, Corp.

## *Privates*

Thos. Anderson  
James Brainard  
T. B. Bonebright  
Sherman Cassady  
W. L. Church  
Patrick Conlan  
H. E. Dalley  
John Erie  
John Gates  
E. W. Gates  
Josiah Griffith  
James Hickey  
H. C. Hillock  
M. W. Howland  
E. D. Kellogg  
W. K. Laughlin  
A. S. Leonard  
W. V. Lucas  
F. R. Moody  
John Nowland  
J. C. Pemberton  
Alonzo Richardson  
Michael Sweeney  
Patrick Stafford  
A. K. Tullis  
——  
G. R. Bissell, Surg.  
G. B. Sherman, Com'y