

THE PALIMPSEST

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Off to the War

During the summer of 1861 loyal citizens realized that the southern rebellion could not be easily suppressed. In the name of national defense thousands of Iowa men volunteered for three years of military service and marched off to the war with patriotic fervor. This account of the enlistment of Benjamin F. Thomas is based upon his Civil War diary and adapted for THE PALIMPSEST from his recollections of Soldier Life as privately published in 1907.—
The Editor.

I was not inclined to soldiering; but now it seemed to me it would be necessary for all young men situated as I was to enlist. Early in September William H. Stivers, a young attorney of Toledo, received a commission to recruit a company in Tama County. In the latter part of September, 1861, he held a meeting at Buckingham in the Scotch settlement to raise recruits. John Gaston, Peter Wilson, and I had been talking of this matter for some days and now decided we would enlist. I wrote my name first, then Wilson, and

then Gaston. After each one wrote his name the crowd cheered loudly. It was indeed a very exciting time. A few days later John R. Felter and John E. McKune enlisted, also Robert and Matthew Clark who lived just north of Six Mile Grove.

We remained at home till the twenty-second day of October when we went to Toledo to join the company. A number of our Buckingham friends went with us that far. When we arrived at Toledo the streets were full of people and they cheered us lustily and shook hands with us vigorously. After a time the company was formed in line and marched to what was then the new Baptist church, where the ladies of Toledo had spread for us and our friends a bountiful dinner. Being soldiers, and very new soldiers at that, we assayed to demolish that dinner. But lo! we were filled full and the half had not disappeared. It is said "The way to a man's heart is down his throat" and I believe it for certainly those ladies won our warmest regards by that generous dinner.

From Toledo we went in lumber wagons to Marengo, which was then the nearest railroad station. The first night out we stopped at Irving. This was the home of a number of our boys. There were about fifty of us all told, and we were distributed among the citizens for lodging.

Had breakfast at half past four and at daylight were off for Marengo, where we arrived about eleven o'clock the same morning. There was much enthusiasm manifested here as there was wherever we went. Great cheering and much hand shaking. We took dinner at the two hotels and some private houses. After dinner we marched out to the depot which was half a mile from town, and were ready to take the cars as soon as they came.

Soon we were on the train and off for Davenport. Slow the train seemed to move and the trip was tedious indeed. Just before dark Captain Stivers handed out a large, mysterious looking box, and upon its being opened we found it filled with "goodies" from the dinner table the ladies had furnished at Toledo. Our stomachs were again replenished and our hearts again softened and some eyes were dimmed by the memory of the kindness of those we had left behind.

Finally we arrived at Davenport. Cheering, cheering, cheering on every side. Two other companies who came from the western part of the State were on the train with us. We were all dismounted from the cars and formed into line, and, headed by a brass band, marched out to Camp McClellan. This was a new camp about two miles from Davenport on the bank of the Mississippi.

After a time we were assigned to a barrack. These barracks were about seventy feet long and twenty-four feet wide; boarded up and down with rough boards; cracks battened; shingle roof; no ceiling; no plastering. In each end there were two doors situated at the corners. There was a passage along each side from door to door four feet in width; a partition through the center of the building from end to end; and then tiers of bunks one above the other with heads next the partition and feet next the passage.

This was our parlor, sitting room, and dormitory. Our dining room was as big as all out-of-doors. The table was made by driving stakes into the ground; on top of these were nailed cross pieces and on these three boards were laid side by side and extending as long as the barrack. The heavens were above and the earth beneath. No chairs nor stools of any kind. The cattle of Iowa, today, have far warmer quarters than we had then, and fully as good feeding troughs.

On the morning of October 24th the boom of the morning gun aroused us and we rushed out of the barracks to see what was the matter. We found the older companies all in line and the Orderly Sergeants calling the roll. As soon as the roll-call was over the companies were marched to the river to wash and then marched back to

their tables and had their breakfast. We were hungry at once; but our table was bare. When our Captain went to the Commissary for rations he was told that we were not legally known there and that we must report to headquarters down in the city. So Captain Stivers went to the city to give in his report. When it was received at headquarters he was given an order on the Quartermaster for rations for his men. When he found the Quartermaster, that officer in turn gave him an order on the Commissary. The Commissary being found issued the rations but there was no means of transporting them to camp. So Captain Stivers again found the Quartermaster and from him got an order on the Wagon Master for a wagon and team to transport the goods. Finally the government teamster drove into camp with his government mules hitched to his government wagon loaded with government rations for the government troops. The consequence was we were ready for breakfast just as the other companies were served their dinner. This was our first meal in Camp McClellan. We received our coffee in tin cups; our beef, beans, or potatoes in tin plates; had white bread, but no cream for our coffee nor butter for our bread.

The rules of the camp were for us to arise at six o'clock A. M., answer to roll-call, then march

down to the river and wash our hands and faces in the mighty Mississippi. Just think of it, the Father of Waters for a wash bowl! Return to camp. Breakfast call. After breakfast, sick call and guard mount and then company drill for two hours. Then squad drill for another two hours. By this time we were ready for dinner. After dinner was company drill again, and at sunset dress parade.

Every man able to saw a board or drive a nail was called a carpenter and set to work building more barracks. The weather was quite cold, especially the mornings. Ice frequently formed on still water. Many of the boys had severe colds and I could hardly see how we were to improve while in such open barracks. We had straw in our bunks and a double blanket each, so by sleeping two together we had one blanket below and three above us. We hoped to move south soon.

October 29th. The day was quite cold with drizzling rain and sharp gusts of wind. We huddled together as best we could to keep warm, for we had no stove in the barracks. Just as it began growing dark a more severe gust of wind blew the roof off the barracks in which the Benton County boys were. We called them into our barracks and shared our roof, our bunks, and our blankets with them.

The company in the barracks next ours was mustered into the United States service and two of their men refused to take the oath of allegiance. They were ordered to be drummed out of the camp. Thirty of their comrades formed a hollow square with the two men within. A martial band followed playing the "Rogue's March". They marched through the principal streets of our camp and to the main entrance. Then the officer in charge gave each of the "Rogues" a lusty kick and bade them "be gone". Poor fellows! The band then returned to their quarters playing "Yankee Doodle" with all the vim their instruments were capable of.

November 2nd. Captain Stivers told us to get ready to be sworn into the United States service. So we went, every man, Captain, cook and all, but when we got to the place where we were to be mustered the Adjutant ordered us to return to our quarters because we had not men enough to fill the company to the minimum required. When we returned to the barracks some of our men said if we were not sworn into the Thirteenth Regiment they would return home. Others were willing to abide till the number could be secured. Captain Stivers came again and ordered us to march back to the parade ground. He said we were to be sworn in at once. We understood he had by

some means got more men. So back we went to the parade ground and stayed there all forenoon. By this means we drew no rations for the day, for rations are issued in the morning.

About noon we were examined by the surgeons. There were four of them. They stood two on each side of the parade and we marched singly between them; holding our hands above our heads and moving our fingers. This was all the physical examination we ever had. I am told that in most camps they strip the soldier naked and carefully examine him in every respect. Four of our men were rejected. We now had but seventy-two men. Finally, however, we were sworn into the United States service on Saturday, November 2, 1861, to serve for the term of three years or during the war.

Each regiment that was fully organized had dress parade by itself. But all the companies not included in these had dress parade together. Sometimes there were fifteen or twenty companies in this line, but very few of them had men enough to organize a full company. Sometimes several of these companies joined together, as we did some days ago, and formed one company. There had to be not less than 83 men nor more than 101 men in a company. As soon as ten companies had enough men to organize they were formed into a regiment

and the other companies and squads formed the nucleus for a new regiment. It was in this way we were supposed to belong to the Thirteenth Regiment and were dropped into the Fourteenth where we were still striving to hold our own.

Thursday, November 7th. The Eleventh Regiment commanded by Colonel Abraham M. Hare marched down to Davenport and paraded the principal streets and returned to camp at noon. It was one of the grandest sights I ever saw. Near a thousand men, all dressed exactly alike, in light blue uniforms, their hats with feathers flowing, bright brass trimmings on their hats, shoulders and belts, bright guns on their shoulders reflecting the refulgent rays of the sun. This with the music from ten fifes, ten snare drums, and one bass drum, the field officers on their horses dressed in what seemed the most gorgeous uniforms, and the silk flag and banner flying in the breeze, taken all together as a first view of real military life it sent a thrill through our nerves that we will never forget. Since this I have seen many regiments and armies of men, but never since have I felt the joy I did in seeing this my first regiment. And as I look back it seems to me they were the noblest looking men I ever saw.

Captain Stivers left for home again this evening. He was after more recruits. Before going

he told us that any of us that wanted to could have a furlough for a few days. So next morning John Gaston, Peter Wilson, and I got furloughs and started for Long Grove where Wilson had an uncle, Mr. McCosh. It was very pleasant to us to sit at table again for our meals with our hats off and nice, clean, white dishes filled with wholesome food. Golden butter and rich cream. We did not wipe our plates with our hands before putting our food upon them as we had fallen into the habit of doing in camp.

Stayed several days at McCosh's. Helped him finish corn picking and also attended a "Corn picking Bee" to help a preacher named Hartsell pick his corn. Mr. Hartsell thought we were doing wrong in going to war because all war was wrong. Had a party at McCosh's the evening before we went away and had a very pleasant time.

"General" Wood of Buckingham had visited the boys during our absence and brought a letter for me from home. Just then I longed very much for a letter from a friend who lived near my home. She had given me a small Bible when I came away and I had sent her one in return from Davenport when I arrived there.

Monday, November 18th. This morning we began drawing our uniforms and clothing. We

each drew coats, hats, pants, shirts, drawers, socks and shoes. We did not get clothing here as at home. Our names were called, we stepped up to the desk and signed a receipt, and the Quartermaster handed us each of the above named articles. Any one of the articles might be too large or too small. Therefore if the coats, pants, etc., were any one of them a misfit we went to trading with some one who might have the size we wanted. One would call out, "A pair of pants to trade 'sight-unseen'." This challenge might be accepted by a big man who would get the smallest sized pants, and his plight created much merriment. Sometimes it took several days to get the proper garments and men together. Occasionally it was necessary to make over some of the clothing in order to get a fit, but generally by judicious "swapping" all were suited.

A company of the Thirteenth Iowa Regiment that came from Benton County was in the barrack just across the street from us. To this company belonged Buren R. Sherman and Ward Sherman, his brother, and some other boys we know well. They had a space in their barrack large enough to dance in and frequently had us over there to dance with them. A boy with a handkerchief tied around his arm represented a girl. One of our boys from Toledo, Josiah Luke, was about the best violinist

I ever heard. He frequently made the music for us. Card playing was the principal pastime for the boys, but I did not play.

November 20th. Our first episode of real military life occurred last night. The Thirteenth Regiment was ordered to march today. Many of their men took the opportunity to run the guards and spend the night in a carousal in Davenport. Captain Stivers was officer of the day, which fact gave him command of the camp. When he learned of the boys escaping to the city he thought he would have some fun. He came to our barrack about eleven o'clock and called ten of us to go with him and arrest everyone we could find. The Captain took us to a place where he expected to find some of the boys. In a large room several girls finely attired were playing cards or chatting with a number of soldiers and citizens. We compelled the soldiers to show their passes which everyone did. From there we went to many other places of like character. At one house as we entered we saw some soldiers run up the stairs. Eleazar Stoakes and I followed them and when we got to the top of the stairs they ran into two of the bed rooms. I followed one and caught him. Stoakes lost his man but when he thrust his gun under a bed the man called out that he would surrender. About this time my prisoner got mad and

swore at us in a terrible manner. But he had to go just the same. These, with some the other boys caught, were marched back to camp and placed in the guard house.

Letters from home were quite abundant but not the one I most wanted. We were now fully fitted out with our uniforms so we packed our citizen's clothing and sent it home.

We had been organized into a regiment, or part of one, for some days. We had but seven companies. A, B, and C of our regiment were the three companies sent to Fort Randall some time before. We had the other seven companies, and we were Company G of the Fourteenth Regiment Iowa Volunteers. Colonel William T. Shaw of Anamosa was our Colonel. He had served in the Mexican War, and seemed to be an old man. Was crippled so he walked quite lame. Swore like a sailor. The Lieutenant Colonel was Edward W. Lucas from Iowa City, brother-in-law to Governor Kirkwood. Our Major's name was Hiram Leonard, but we knew nothing of him except that he was also related to the Governor. Our Adjutant was N. N. Tyner of Davenport; Surgeon, George M. Staples of Dubuque; Chaplain, Rev. Heber. One Lieutenant of Company K, William W. Kirkwood, was a nephew of the Governor. We were called "Kirkwood's pets".

November 26th. N. B. Baker, who was Adjutant General of the State, drove through the camp and told us to bank up the barracks and make them comfortable for we would remain here all winter. He said the Government at Washington had ordered him to send no more troops till further orders. This made us feel blue. To think of spending the winter here when we might as well be doing some good at the front.

November 27th. This evening I was lying in my bunk reading when the Captain came to the door and called for me. I sprang to the floor and passed to the door when I was greatly surprised to meet John Hopkins. I was truly very glad to see him. He had heard that we were about to move down the river and came down from Wilton Junction to see us before we went. And he was just in time. For yesterday we had been told by the highest military authority in the State that we would remain in this camp till spring. Now, to-day, we received orders from Washington to be ready to march at once.

We were to leave at three o'clock P. M. on the steamer *Jennie Whipple*. Four companies of our regiment, including ours, were marched down to Davenport to take the boat to St. Louis. When we arrived at the wharf the captain of the boat decided he would take only three companies, so

our company was ordered to return to the barracks. Many of our men procured liquor while in Davenport and by the time we again reached camp some were pretty drunk. The officers all went back to town and the boys raised a regular "jamboree" in camp. It was a dismal night we spent. No stove in which to make a fire to keep us warm. No food to eat and no officers to give the semblance of authority in keeping order, and many of the boys wild with liquor. Doubtless Camp McClellan never saw another night the equal of this.

November 28th. This morning we arose early with shivering bodies and aching limbs with no prospect of any breakfast in camp. Many of the boys had run the guard during the night and were now in Davenport, still carousing and drinking. Finally Captain Joseph O. Shannon of Company E came out and found us without rations. He went to the Commissary and ordered him to issue rations to us at once, enforcing his order by interspersing many oaths and threats. The Commissary then proceeded to issue rations for us. The Commissary was following the letter of the law in withholding the rations, for he had no authority to issue them except on the written order of a commissioned officer. We received the rations and had a meal prepared but it was noon before this was accomplished.

After noon we again prepared to move south. When we remembered how grandly the Eleventh and Thirteenth Regiments had marched down the hill from the camp with their banners flying and bands playing it was somewhat humiliating for us to go a part at a time with no grand display like they made. We had no government regimental colors, which consist of a silken flag of stars and stripes about six feet wide and nine feet long, and a blue silk banner the same size with a large eagle embroidered with gold thread upon each side, both flag and banner finished all round with a wide gold fringe. The three companies that went to Fort Randall took our colors with them. We had a cotton flag about two-thirds the size of the regulation flag that one of our companies had brought with it from home. So the difference between the display of the other two regiments and ours was very great.

At three o'clock P. M. we again left the camp for Davenport. That is, the four companies that were then there. We went to the depot and then waited till six o'clock P. M. when we took the cars for the south. Crossed the mighty Mississippi on the only bridge that then spanned that stream, and glided over the prairies of Illinois in the darkness of the night.

Morning light found us at Joliet. This journey

was made in regular passenger cars which I here mention because it was the last trip we had in passenger coaches till we were discharged. There were guards placed at each door of each car to prevent the boys getting out. Not that they feared desertion, but that they would all get off every time the train stopped and were likely to get hurt or left if allowed this liberty. We expected to arrive at Springfield before night but six miles before reaching the city we came up with a freight train with one car derailed. It was after dark before they got it on again. Then we followed them slowly into Springfield.

Arrived at Alton about ten o'clock at night and immediately went aboard the steamboat for St. Louis. The boat would not start till morning, so we spread our blankets where we could about the deck and lay down to sleep. The next morning we were up stirring about early because we were cold and needed exercise. Racing, boxing, and jumping soon took the chill off of us. But it was too cold for comfort. Started before sunrise, soon passed the mouth of the Missouri River with its great flood of muddy water pouring into the clear water of the Mississippi, and knew that our trip to St. Louis was ended.

BENJAMIN F. THOMAS