

Francis Jay Herron

“Remember Wilson’s Creek! Remember the deeds of the First Iowa!” wrote Governor Kirkwood to almost every Iowa regiment in the Union forces. And they all remembered, nor did they forget Francis J. Herron, one of the gallant captains at Wilson’s Creek, the youngest officer of the State to attain the rank of major general and the second Iowan to win the double star. When the first war tocsin sounded, Herron left his desk in his bank at Dubuque, donned his uniform as the captain of the “Governor’s Greys”, and in compliance with the unanimous vote of the company tendered their services to the President for the purpose of quelling the insurrection in the South.

From an ancient and honorable lineage, Francis Jay Herron acquired his self-reliant spirit and personal composure which destined him to be a conspicuous leader in battles where courage and resourcefulness were common. His ancestors on the paternal side were among the earliest settlers in eastern Pennsylvania and, on the maternal side, among the oldest families in Pittsburgh. It was there that Francis was born in the year 1837.

At sixteen years of age, Francis Herron left the University of Pittsburgh without obtaining his degree because he believed he knew enough to make

his way in the world — and because he thought so, all remonstrances were unavailing. Fortified with a little clerical experience, he secured employment in a Pittsburgh bank, and a year later became a partner in the banking firm of “Herron and Brothers”. In 1856 four Herron brothers, including Francis J., opened a bank in Dubuque.

The people of Iowa, during the pioneer years, had been too busy breaking sod and building log cabins to give much thought to military organization. Furthermore, since the close of the war with Mexico, no necessity had existed for a large army. With the opening of the Civil War in 1861, Iowa could offer only a few independent companies, whose training had been as much social as military. Perhaps the most famous company in the State was the Governor’s Greys, which had been organized in February, 1858, and named in honor of Governor Stephen Hempstead. “The Governor’s Greys were out on parade yesterday in their new white accoutrements”, reported the Dubuque *Herald* on April 10, 1860. “We will defy any city in the West to turn out a better looking military company or a ‘whiter’ lot of boys than our own G. G’s. ’Tis true they are composed of the very pink of our finest young men; still there is not a tinge of the cod-fish in the composition of one of them.”

Early in January, 1861, the Governor’s Grey’s under the leadership of Captain Herron, volunteered for active service in anticipation of hostilities.

When the call came in April for one regiment from Iowa, they were ready for duty. On April 23rd, the Governor's Greys left for the rendezvous at Keokuk to be mustered in as Company I of the First Iowa Volunteer Infantry.

For two weeks the First Iowa remained in camp at Keokuk, drilling five hours a day, attending picnics, living in tents, and learning to cook for themselves. Then, on the thirteenth of June, 1861, the men embarked on a steamer to join the Union forces at Booneville, Missouri. On July 3rd, General Nathaniel Lyon, with an army of a little more than three thousand infantry and one battery of artillery, determined to pursue the Confederates who were retreating toward the southwest. At Grand River, Lyon's army was reënforced by two Kansas regiments, a detachment of regulars, and a battery of artillery. The weather was intensely hot and the pace unusually rapid even for seasoned soldiers. As the recruits marched for hours along dusty roads under a torrid sun, some were overcome by the heat and compelled to fall out of the ranks. But the First Iowa stood the test of endurance so well that they out-distanced part of the column. General Lyon called them his Iowa greyhounds.

At Springfield, General Lyon sent urgent requests for more troops. But they were not furnished, and, unwilling to remain idle while the Confederates were concentrating about him, he determined to attack rather than retreat. So it was that on August 10,

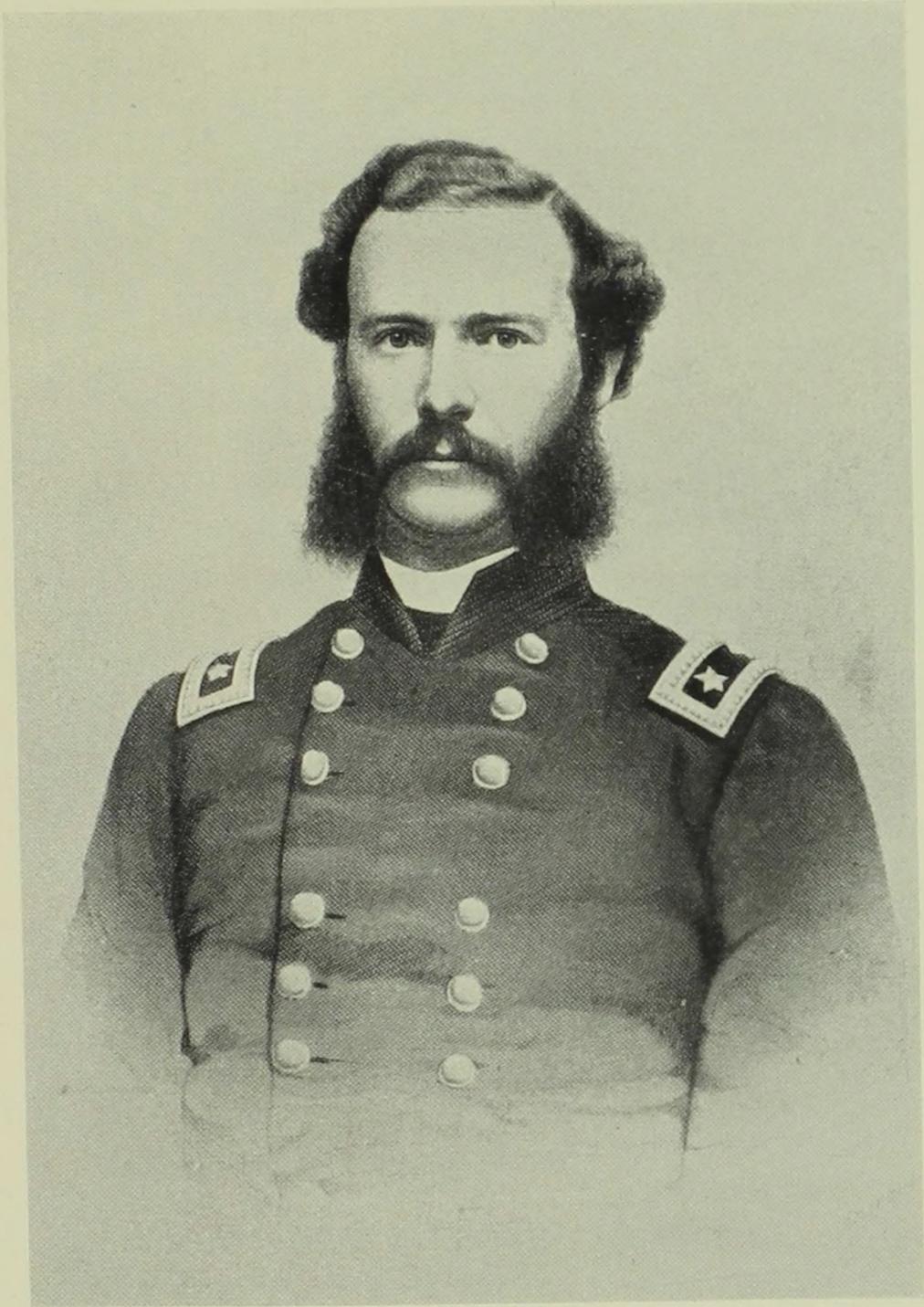
1861, in the battle of Wilson's Creek, the Iowa soldiers received their first baptism of fire, and it was there that Captain Herron first won recognition. In a battle where loyalty and patriotism were arrayed against numbers, General Lyon's devoted little army of less than six thousand faced a larger force in a strategic position and won a decisive victory.

"Will your First Iowa men stay and fight with me?" Lyon asked Lieutenant Colonel William H. Merritt.

"Every man of them," replied Merritt. And they did.

Quietly and with muffled drums, the Union troops marched through the darkness toward Wilson's Creek hoping to surprise the enemy. But the Confederate videttes had discovered the advance and ran in without firing a shot. The main force of the enemy occupied the broad valley of the stream, with reserves on a ridge beyond. From this ridge and valley, hosts of gray-clad troops charged and recharged the Union lines, hoping by sheer force of numbers to overwhelm and drive back the flanks and center.

Throughout the battle, from early morning until afternoon, the Iowa regiment was in the thick of the fight. Time after time they repulsed the desperate attacks of the Southerners; again and again they foiled attempts to turn their flanks. Officers led their men into action and inexperienced volunteers faced the terrific hail of shot and shell like veterans.



MAJOR GENERAL FRANCIS J. HERRON

Death was everywhere. After being wounded twice, General Lyon fell with a musket ball through his breast. "Iowa Regiment, you are noble boys!" he murmured as he saw his "greyhounds" prepare to charge. A moment later he died. So the struggle raged — charge and counter-charge, sortie and repulse. Regiments were thrown into confusion and retired in disorder. But at the end it was the First Iowa that held the enemy in check while the shattered Union forces retired from the field.

No unit of the First Iowa conducted itself with greater valor than Company I. At one time it was sent into ambush with two other companies to intercept a flanking movement of a large detachment of the enemy. Lying close to the brow of a hill overlooking a ravine through which the Confederates were advancing, the men waited until the head of the column was almost upon them.

"Now, boys, keep cool, aim low, and give 'em hell!" came the order.

And the Iowans responded like veterans. In the words of Major S. D. Sturgis, who assumed command after the death of General Lyon, they "fought like devils, and if any man after this ever says to me that volunteers won't fight, I'll make it a personal matter with him!"

Captain Herron was knocked down by the explosion of a shell, but he was not seriously hurt. For the "zeal and courage" he displayed, Major Sturgis gave him special mention in the official report of the

battle. Like the other volunteers in the First Iowa he was mustered out at St. Louis on August 21st. But when the Ninth regiment of Iowa infantry was organized in September, he was commissioned lieutenant colonel and returned to the theater of military operations in Missouri.

On October 11th, with scarcely more than a month of training, the regiment was ordered to proceed from Benton Barracks to Franklin, Missouri, and thence to Lebanon, where it joined the Army of the Southwest, commanded by General Curtis. Colonel William Vandever of the Ninth Iowa was placed in command of the second brigade, leaving Lieutenant Colonel Herron in command of the regiment. And so, in March, 1862, as lieutenant colonel, Herron again marched into battle at Pea Ridge where his conduct and courage won universal admiration, adding to the laurels he had previously gained at Wilson's Creek.

Upon approach of the Union forces, the Confederates evacuated Springfield, where they had spent the winter, and retired toward the Ozark Mountains. Then began that remarkable march of General Curtis's army in pursuit of the enemy. At Huntsville, forty miles from camp, a detachment of the Ninth Iowa discovered that General Earl Van Dorn was concentrating his forces to strike back viciously at the bluecoats who were pressing him too closely. Realizing the danger of being cut off and captured by a superior force, Colonel Herron hastened to re-

join the command and, after a continuous march of sixteen hours, reached the regiment at eight o'clock in the evening of March 6th.

At ten o'clock the next morning, the battle of Pea Ridge opened with such a fierce attack that every regiment of the Union army had to be used to repulse the enemy. General Curtis advanced in the hope of winning a decisive victory, but he in turn was compelled to retire under a terrific fire of musketry and canister. There were occasional intervals, during which both sides replenished their ammunition and removed the wounded to the rear.

For two days the battle raged. Through it all the Ninth Iowa fought as though inspired. Their casualties numbered nearly one-third of the regiment— heavier than any other unit engaged. Unfortunately, during the afternoon of the first day, Herron's horse was shot from under him and he, disabled by the fall, was taken prisoner. "Of Lieutenant Colonel Herron," wrote Colonel Vandever, "too much cannot be said. He was foremost in leading his men, and with coolness and bravery never excelled rallied them to repeated acts of daring and bravery."

Exchanged for a Confederate officer within a fortnight, Herron resumed active service almost immediately. On July 30, 1862, he was promoted directly to the rank of brigadier general, without being a colonel. Three weeks later he was ordered to St. Louis and placed in command of several regiments

operating in Missouri. And when the Army of the Frontier was organized in October, 1862, General Herron was put in command of the Third Division.

During most of November, the Army of the Frontier had been watching the enemy south of the old Pea Ridge battlefield in western Arkansas. On the twenty-eighth of November, General James A. Blunt, commanding the First Division, captured Cane Hill, but the Confederates, twenty-five thousand strong, started a flanking movement to cut him off from the rest of the army under Herron a hundred miles away. Blunt telegraphed for help and Herron, without a moment's delay, broke camp with the Second and Third Divisions and began a forced march to the rescue. From daylight to dark for three days, the weary soldiers hastened along the road, averaging thirty-five miles a day. Daylight, Sunday morning, December 7th, found the column at breakfast within a few miles of Cane Hill, but before the meal was finished, a portion of the advance cavalry came hurrying back to camp, panic-stricken and dismayed. Hindman's army was upon them! From the excited soldiers, General Herron learned that Major J. M. Hubbard, in command of the advance guard, had been captured. If Blunt were to be saved, Herron would have to attack swiftly and with great show of force. If he had known the diplomatic resourcefulness of Major Hubbard, he might have begun the battle with much more assurance.

"How much of a force has General Herron," Hubbard was asked by the Confederate leader.

"Enough to annihilate you," replied the major.

With less than five thousand men, General Herron accepted the challenge of battle with the odds all against him. Thanks to Hubbard's report, however, and the spirit with which the men fought, the Confederates, with a vastly larger force, well armed, and in a position of their own selection, dared not risk assault. Advancing southward, Herron met the cautious enemy at Prairie Grove. By skillful maneuvering he succeeded in throwing his whole force into the battle so suddenly and effectively that the Confederates gave way. Onward charged the Union ranks until, from concealed positions, the second lines of the enemy rose and poured a terrible fire point-blank into Herron's gallant troops. They recoiled but rallied and reformed their lines. For more than three hours the battle surged back and forth. In vain the Union officers listened for the sound of Blunt's cannon. The odds were too great. They could not hold their ground much longer. And then, about two o'clock, when the Southerners' left wing started a powerful flank movement, they encountered fresh troops and well posted batteries. Blunt had arrived, and the battle of Prairie Grove was won — in some respects the most brilliant victory for Union arms in the whole war.

During the winter, Herron remained with the Army of the Frontier, operating in Missouri and

Arkansas without participating in any major engagements. Late in May, 1863, he was summoned to Vicksburg to take part in the reduction of that city. Occupying the left of Grant's line, he rendered most effective service. From there, Herron was transferred to the Department of the Gulf, where he engaged in the siege of Mobile.

After four years of faithful and resultful service, Major General Herron was mustered out at New Orleans in 1865, and in that city he entered the practice of law. This business, however, turned out disastrously, and from 1867 to 1869 he was United States Marshal for the District of Louisiana. In 1872 and 1873, he served as Secretary of State in Louisiana, after which he went to New York, where he engaged in the practice of law. There he resided until his death on January 8, 1902.

Until the end, Herron retained his self-reliant spirit, his calm and composed attitude, and his chief characteristic — taciturnity. For General Herron was a man of few words; yet, if he talked but little, there was nothing sullen or morose about him. Intelligent and agreeable, Herron enjoyed the full confidence of men who appreciated those qualities of leadership. Throughout his career, Major General Herron won extraordinarily rapid promotion on his own merits.

GRETCHEN CARLSON