

Iowa's First Fatal Casualty in the Civil War

by

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The Soldiers and Sailors Monument, looming prominently to the southeast of the Iowa State Capitol in Des Moines, is a late-nineteenth century tribute and memorial to the Iowans who served in the Civil War -- to the survivors as well as the "martyrs" as they were called by one and all. Outstanding on the monument are representations of the four branches of the military service: the Infantry, the Cavalry, the Artillery, and the Navy. While planning the memorial, the Monument Commission heard evidence on behalf of Shelby Norman, a private in Company A, First Iowa Infantry of Muscatine (the first company to be enrolled in Iowa), as a candidate to represent the Infantry. The claim presented on behalf of young Norman, a mere "buck"



Shelby Norman (John Schultz photo)

private in contrast to the officers chosen as prototypes of the other three branches of the service, rested not on any notions of serving democracy but on the contention that he was the first fatal casualty among Iowa troops in the Civil War. Just when, where, and by whom this claim was first made on Norman's behalf is impossible to say. As far back as August 29, 1882, Muscatine veterans of the War had honored Private Shelby Norman by naming their unit of the Grand Army of the Republic, Post 231, for him.

Apparently, the ladies of the auxiliary of Post 231 assisted in presenting Norman's case to the Monument Commission. Mrs. Jane E. Madden assembled a few facts about his life in his native Ohio and even tracked down a picture of Norman,

who was born and reared near Mount Sterling, Hopewell Township, in Muskingum County, Ohio. Even so, the minutes of the session of the Commission that recorded passage of a resolution giving thanks to "the ladies of Muscatine" for the donation of the picture also contained a resolution indicating some doubt of the claim: "On motion, it was decided that the portrait of Shelby Norman shall constitute one of the heroic figures of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument, *in case it shall fully appear* [italics mine] that he was the first Iowa soldier to lay down his life in the late war."

Perhaps the caution of the Commission was well-founded (even though Norman was ultimately chosen as the Infantry's representative). It is the purpose of this essay to examine the evidence in favor of the claim for Shelby Norman and the claims that can be made for others as the first fatal casualty among Iowa troops in the Civil War.

The Battle of Wilson's Creek, Missouri (also known as the Battle of Springfield and the Battle of Oak Hills) is given as the occasion of Shelby Norman's death and August 10, 1861 as the date. This battle, one of the decisive encounters of the War if one allows that it saved Missouri for the Union, was the first full-scale, pitched battle in which Iowa troops participated. Since Private Norman was an enlistee in the first company in the first regiment to be raised in Iowa and since this was the first battle of record for this regiment, it has usually been considered impeccable logic to assume the first Iowa fatality in this engagement was the first Iowa fatality in the War.

In weighing the claims for Shelby Norman and others, several questions

arise. For example, what was the technical, military definition of a "fatal casualty" in Civil War thinking? Are we to consider only those deaths that resulted instantly, or almost instantly, after receiving an enemy bullet, or a sabre cut, or a bayonet thrust, or a shell from an unseen artillery piece? Alas, we must also consider death from disease, the most common killer of all. Typhoid fever, pneumonia, malaria, dysentery, and other ills were frequently-reported causes of death. Should one who died from disease or a service-related accident be reckoned as a "fatal casualty" as readily as one whose death came from a bullet or other means of violent death? The answer is yes -- death from any cause while on duty was an official "casualty."

The determination of a "first" in any area of history is a difficult enterprise, sometimes of limited importance, yet the question of Iowa's first fatal casualty in the Civil War, once raised and investigated, is intriguing and of some historical value. George Mills, formerly on the staff of the *Des Moines Register* and an outstanding authority on the facts of Iowa history, raised doubt about Shelby Norman's claim in 1974 in a review of my book, *A History of Iowa*. I had blandly written that "Shelby Norman...who is memorialized on the Soldiers and Sailors Monument...in Des Moines" was the first Iowan to lose his life in the Civil War. Mills questioned this assertion and, on good authority, presented the name of Private Cyrus W. West, Company H, Third Iowa Infantry, of Mahaska County, as the one who deserved this place in history.

At first glance it seemed that I had too easily accepted the claim for Shelby Norman, even though I had relied on the

authority of several distinguished writers of Iowa history. Scholars such as Mildred Throne, Associate Editor for the State Historical Society of Iowa, William J. Petersen, Superintendent of the State Historical Society, Edith W. McElroy, author of the Civil War article for the *Iowa Official Register* and also a booklet for the Iowa Civil War Centennial Commission, and even George Mills himself had one and all advanced the name of Shelby Norman, accepting the tradition without raising a question, although Mills omitted the claim when his original article later appeared as part of a book.

The first order of business was a thorough examination of the source used by Mills in his review: where, when, and on what authority had a counter claim been made? The case for Cyrus W. West was found in an inconspicuous *Palimpsest* article, which was repeated, word for word, in a later book but without citation of authority and without description of the place or circumstances of West's death. Indeed, the author, Jacob Swisher, hedged his assertion by saying West "was, therefore, *probably* [italics mine] the first Iowan to give his life for the cause of freedom in the Civil War."

Because Swisher gave no citation for the Cyrus W. West case, I have assumed for purposes of comparison of the Norman and West records that he made use of the brief entries in *The Roster and Record of Iowa Soldiers in the War of the Rebellion*. Here are the entries in their stark, original form:

Norman, Shelly [Shelby]. Age 18. Nativity

Ohio. Enlisted April 18, 1861. Mustered May 14, 1861. [Company A, First Iowa Infantry] Killed in battle Aug. 10, 1861, Wilson's Creek, Mo.

West, Cyrus W. Age 19. Residence Mahaska County. Nativity Indiana. Enlisted June 1, 1861 [Company H, Third Iowa Infantry] Mustered June 8, 1861. Killed in action July 11, 1861, Monroe, Mo.

Although these two items are separated by many pages and are buried among thousands of similar items, the difference in dates and the priority of Private West's death apparently caught Swisher's eagle eye, and he put the information to good use.

Fortunately, there is more evidence in *The Roster and Record* than the clerical entries quoted above. There are also extensive regimental histories, written long years after the War, to be sure, but valuable because they were based in part on testimony of participants. These regimental histories, supplemented by standard accounts of the War by Iowa historians who were eye witnesses to much they described, yield far more information than the meagre company entries in *The Roster and Record*.

Consulting these sources, we may examine the case of Cyrus W. West. The first question is what battle took place at or near Monroe, Missouri (also called Monroe Station) on July 11, the reported place and time of his death? There was no pitched battle there, but extensive skirmishing occurred nearby on July 9 - 11 along the Hannibal & St. Joseph Railroad. Possession of the rail line would have been a vital link in the Federal strategy aimed

at control of northern Missouri. Therefore, the reports of these skirmishes must be taken more seriously than their military scale would otherwise indicate.

The Roster and Record asserts West was "killed in action," inferring that he was killed by an enemy bullet or other weapon while in combat, but there is evidence to the contrary. Buried deep in a Military Correspondent's letter to the *Cedar Falls Gazette* for July 26, is this casual statement about the Federal victory:

And thus ended the fight at Monroe Station. Upon our side no one was wounded, one soldier named West of Company H, 3rd Regiment, shot himself by accidental discharge of his own gun.

The Military Correspondent's account of West's accidental death is substantiated by other sources. A highly-regarded statistical study of military casualties during the War lists a mortality table for the Third Iowa Infantry, giving the "battle" at Monroe Station as the first engagement of that unit. The table shows only one casualty under the heading "killed and mortally wounded." No names are given in the study, but it seems safe to accept it as verification of the Correspondent's assertion that there was only one casualty, which had to be Private West. Still another source, written by an author with an inside view of the Third Regiment, Lieutenant S. D. Thompson, reads as follows: "In Company H of our regiment, a gun went off by accident, killing one man as he lay in the trench." Finally, there is the best evidence of all: the official Military Service Record of

Private West, preserved in the National Archives. The portion of greatest importance states simply: "July 1861 - killed by accident, July 11, 1861, Monroe."

Cyrus W. West was the only fatality listed for the Third Iowa Infantry before the Battle of Wilson's Creek on August 10. His death was commemorated by a plaque in the City Park of Oskaloosa, the seat of West's home county, that reads as follows:

In Memory
Private Cyrus W. West
Company H, Third Regiment
Iowa Volunteer Infantry, Mahaska County
Killed July 11, 1861
In the Battle of Monroe, Missouri
First Iowa Volunteer to Die in the
Civil War in Defense of the Union

It has not been possible to establish the exact date the plaque was made and first put on display, but it now hangs in the Nelson Pioneer Farms Museum in Oskaloosa.

As unglamorous as death by a self-inflicted wound seems, there is no doubt West was a "casualty" well in advance of Shelby Norman.

As to Norman himself, the printed literature is sparse, considering his fame as the reputed first fatality. *The Roster and Record* entry even misspelled his name! And, actually, Muscatine's claim on him is slight -- at the time of his enlistment he had only recently come out from Ohio with an older sister. He appeared in the 1850 Census for Hopewell Township, Muskingum County, Ohio along with his family, but neither he nor

his father appeared there in the Census for 1860. In one account, depended on heavily by some writers, Norman is described as a "fair-haired boy of seventeen," whose death was instantaneous when struck by a bullet that pierced the brain. This statement may be completely accurate, but most historians have failed to notice it does not come from company records but is part of an undated regimental history written by an anonymous historian and published in 1908 as part of an introduction to the pertinent chapter on the First Iowa Infantry in *The Roster and Record*. Even more frequently overlooked is the further point that the bullet was received while Norman was marching to the field of battle at Wilson's Creek from Springfield, a distance of 12 miles, *not* while engaged on the battlefield.

After checking other sources, it becomes evident there was a great deal of

preliminary maneuvering, sending out of scouts, and petty skirmishing, especially on August 2-3, well before the pitched battle on August 10. During these preliminary operations, the regiment sustained 12 casualties, but no attempt was made by anyone to keep a formal, day-to-day record. They were simply lumped together without discrimination as to the exact date or place, all under the heading of casualties at Wilson's Creek on August 10. Thus, there is a real possibility that a complete day-by-day report might show Shelby Norman's death occurred on any date between August 2 and August 10. Only the discovery of a diary or a letter from a companion who saw him fall would allow us to pinpoint the exact date and place of his death. The blanket entry, "died at Wilson's Creek, August 10," may be as inaccurate for others as it is for Shelby Norman; on the other hand, it may be completely accurate.



The charge of the First Iowa at the Battle of Wilson's Creek, Missouri, August 10, 1861 (from Leslie's *Illus. Famous...*, 31).

The records are inexact -- a weakness of which the Adjutant General and others were well aware. Obviously, a close examination of the names and dates of all fatalities of the First Iowa Infantry Regiment is in order. A microscopic look at the data in *The Roster and Record* turns up several names demanding further study and suggests other candidates for the honor of Iowa's first fatal casualty in the Civil War.

The *Roster and Record* lists seven men as killed in the Battle of Wilson's Creek, Shelby Norman among them, although we now know the designation to have been inexact. In addition, nine other soldiers are listed as having died between May 14, 1861 (the muster-in date of the First Iowa) and August 10 (the day of the major battle). Judging from the inconsistent and undoubtedly inaccurate reports made by company clerks, several of these nine casualties -- defining "casualty" as any service-related death, including disease -- may be the best candidate for the honor of first. A close examination, marshalling evidence from every available source, including Military Service Records, *Roster and Record* entries, and other records, is necessary -- with particular attention to time of death.

Benjamin Burris of Company C died, according to *The Roster and Record*, at an early date, July 23, while the First Iowa Infantry was in camp at Boonville, Missouri, preparing to march to the Springfield area. The cause of death was typhoid fever, one of the dread diseases at any Civil War encampment of soldiers. A soldier of Company A, Judd Clark, also died of typhoid fever "at Springfield, Mo." in the words of *The Roster and Record*. John J. Wiley, also of Company A, is

listed simply as having died "on march near Springfield, Mo." His Military Service Record is more specific. It reads: "Absent sick left on March from Springfield to Rolla Aug. 12/61 supposed dead." The meagre statement can only mean that Wiley's condition made it impossible for him to keep up with his company on the hasty march after the defeat at Wilson's Creek and he was abandoned, "supposed dead." It is impossible to establish a date for Clark's death until new evidence is found.

Charles Henke, a German-born soldier of Company H, presents an even more perplexing case. *The Roster and Record* noted he was "Supposed to have been drowned in Grand River, Missouri, as he was missing and a body was seen to sink in the river." This is not firm evidence, and his Military Service Record is equally vague. It shows he had enlisted at Dubuque, mustered in at Keokuk on May 14, and was "missing since July 10th '61. Supposed to be drowned in Grand River, Mo." This evidence is too slim to advance Henke's name as the first war-related fatality, but if convincing information ever becomes available, Henke might be given high priority.

The Roster and Record notes that Franklin Mann of Company F was "Wounded in leg Aug. 10, 1861, Wilson's Creek, Mo. Died of wounds same day." A similar entry for Frederick Otte of Company H reads: "Died of wounds Springfield." While it is possible these two casualties were recorded as inexact as was Shelby Norman's there is no compelling reason to place their deaths ahead of his. Likewise, the death of George Kargel, Company H, on "Aug. 12, 1861, Springfield" seems to rule him out.

A much more serious claim may be

advanced for Thomas McGinnis (misspelled Maginus in *The Roster and Record*). The brief entry reads: "Mustered May 14, 1861. Died of typhoid fever Pond Spring, Mo." McGinnis' Military Service Record supplies the information that he enrolled at Keokuk on May 7, 1861, was mustered on May 14, and "died at Camp McClelland [sic] near Springfield, Mo. July 29, 1861 of Typhoid Fever." Camp McClelland was located at or near Pond Spring. The Casualty Sheet in his Military Service Record was certified by the same company commander as was Shelby Norman's, and the two soldiers served in the same company. The date of McGinnis' death, July 29, is 18 days after Cyrus West's, but definitely before Shelby Norman's.

The final name to consider is Smith H. Tullis of Company C. His case is paramount, because it appears very likely that he was the first fatal casualty among Iowa troops in the Civil War. *The Roster and Record* is distressingly brief: "Died of pneumonia, Keokuk, Iowa." Fortunately, his Military Service Record is more informative. It says he enrolled in Company C, First Iowa Infantry (the second company to be raised in Muscatine), on April 22, 1861, at the age of 23. He was mustered on May 14, although he had "joined for duty and enrolled" on May 6 at Keokuk. The Military Service Record further shows he was "sick at Keokuk since May 18th" and "Died on or about July 3, 1861, at Keokuk." The latter entry is by the "War Department, Adjutant General's Office, Washington, May 4th,

1867." The MSR also shows Tullis' name on the Company Muster-Out Roll, U.S. Arsenal, St. Louis, Missouri, May 29, 1861. He was last paid on May 14, 1861. This information raises the prospect of a soldier who had been mustered out, yet who remained in a military hospital where he died "on or about July 3." There are some technical problems with this information which may never be completely resolved, but the evidence is clear that Tullis was a fully-enrolled soldier in the Union Army who died while in service, eight days before Cyrus West and several weeks before Shelby Norman.

From peripheral sources, we learn more about the circumstances of Tullis' demise. The First Iowa Infantry assembled in rendezvous at Keokuk between May 1 and May 8 and was mustered in on May 14. On June 13, the regiment left for Hannibal, Missouri by steamboat. *The Muscatine Daily Journal* reported the following day, June 14, that "Pvt. Tullis is at the hospital in town, quite ill with billious fever." Obviously, Tullis had taken ill and was left behind when the troops moved south. This assumption is confirmed by another report in the *Daily Journal* for June 20: "Pvt. Tullis we left at the hospital too sick to move."

The *Daily Journal's* companion newspaper, the *Muscatine Weekly Journal*, carried a report (probably from the same correspondent) on July 5, confirming the evidence of the official military records: "Smith H. Tullis, a member of Company C, 1st Iowa Regiment, died of Typhoid fever in the hospital at Keokuk, and his

body was brought to this place on the Steamer Pomeroy yesterday."

The strands of evidence weave together to make a clear and (at present) irrefutable claim on behalf of Private Smith H. Tullis as the first fatal casualty among Iowa troops in the Civil War. Shelby Norman can be ranked no better than

fifth in line of precedence. Ahead of him come Thomas McGinnis, Benjamin Burris, Cyrus West, and Smith H. Tullis. Charles Henke's claim is clouded by insufficient evidence. In the end, Muscatine can still lay claim to the first fatal Iowa casualty, although the death of Tullis came from fever and not a bullet. □

Note on Sources

Many people have assisted me in the preparation of this article, and to all of them I am deeply grateful. Dr. Peter T. Harstad, Director, and Mrs. Joyce Giaquinta, Manuscript Librarian, Iowa State Historical Department, Division of the State Historical Society, have been extremely generous in the time devoted to a search for materials. Mr. Jack Musgrove, Director, and Ms. Lida L. Greene, Librarian, Division of Museum and Archives, Des Moines, located the Minutes of the Monument Commission that were essential to this study. Mr. Douglas Randleman, a true history buff and an active member of the Muscatine Area Heritage Association, gave invaluable assistance and enlisted the aid of his fellow citizens, Mrs. Barbara Bublitz of the P. M. Musser Library and Mr. Lamoyne Jacobs, Custodian of the Greenwood Cemetery. Mrs. Leta C. Strah of the Oskaloosa, Iowa Public Library sent valuable information, as did Mr. Curtis Frymoyer, Wilton, Iowa and Professor B. B. Lightfoot of Southwest Missouri State University, Springfield. Edward Wagner, University of Northern Iowa Library, was helpful, as always. Herbert V. Hake loaned materials on the Battle of Wilson's Creek, and he and LeRoy H. Redfern, Cedar Falls, kindly read the article in its early stages and gave valued criticism.

An annotated copy of this article with numbered footnotes is available in the files of the Division of the State Historical Society.

For any study pertaining to the personnel of Iowa regiments, the starting point is *The Roster and Record of Iowa Soldiers in the War of the Rebellion* (6 vols. Des Moines: State of Iowa, Emory H. English, State Printer, 1908-1911). This should be supplemented by Addison A. Stuart, *Iowa Colonels and Regiments...* (Des Moines: Mills & Co., 1865); Lurton D. Ingersoll, *Iowa and the Rebellion* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1866); Samuel H. M. Byers, *Iowa in War Times* (Des Moines: W. D. Condit Co., 1888). For general information on the Missouri political and military situation

in 1861, see William E. Parrish, *Turbulent Partnership: Missouri and the Union, 1860-1865* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1964); Robert E. Shalhope, *Sterling Price: Portrait of a Southerner* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1971). Edwin C. Bearss, "The Battle of Wilson's Creek," *Annals of Iowa* (Third Series), 36 (Fall 1961), 81-109; (Winter 1962), 161-78; Lucile Morris Upton, "Wilson's Creek Story," Springfield, Missouri *Leader-Press*, Anniversary Edition, August 8, 1961; and John K. Hulston's Foreword to Hans Christian Adamson, *Rebellion in Missouri: 1861* (Philadelphia and New York: Chilton Co., 1961) give copious details about the Battle of Wilson's Creek which made possible a clearer understanding and interpretation of statements about Iowa casualties.

James Harlan, "The Iowa Soldier's and Sailor's Monument," *The Midland Monthly*, 5 (February 1896), 99-113, gave an insider's view on the subject as seen by a member of the Monument Commission. Elizabeth Clarkson Zwart's column, "The Front Row," *Des Moines Tribune*, December 4, 1950, page 13, column 7, gave an extensive and fascinating account of the plan of the Monument.

Irving B. Richman, the distinguished lawyer-historian of Muscatine, has a useful *History of Muscatine County* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Pub. Co., 1911). Jacob A. Swisher, "Remember Our Heroes," *The Palimpsest*, 23 (June 1942), and *Iowa in Times of War* (Iowa City: SHSI, 1943), present briefly the case for Cyrus W. West. William F. Fox, compiler, *Regimental Losses in the American Civil War* (Albany: Albany Pub. Co., 1889), should be consulted. S. D. Thompson, *Recollections with the Third Iowa Regiment* (Cincinnati: published by the author, 1864), gives background for the Cyrus W. West incident.

That great storehouse of information, *The War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, usually abbreviated simply as *OR*, has much data on the Battle of Wilson's Creek, but nothing pertaining to the personal records treated above. See Series I, Vol. 3, pp. 40-41; 55-130.