

Bob Burdette and the *Hawk-Eye* Sharpshoot a General

by
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There's many a story told behind grim, granite walls.

Complaint and rumor are whispered fearfully behind cuffed hands, passed surreptitiously from cell to cell, and silently signaled by sign language. The penitentiary is its own world, a ghetto insulated from free-walking mankind, whose inmates are not names but numbers. The lockstep is the march of the convict, and some move to the jangle and clang of chains. But, despite restraints and regulations, talk goes on. One of the strangest yarns told behind bars and printed outside the walls, involved not only prisoners but also the humorist Robert J. Burdette and his newspaper, the Burlington *Hawk-Eye*, and an attempt to sharpshoot a major general of the Army of the United States.

The skirmish, if not the battle, began in the state prison at Fort Madison, Iowa, in 1874, when the institution bulged with men convicted of crimes against the State of Iowa and the Federal Government. But in addition to murderers, thieves, thugs, counterfeiters, and mail robbers there were those who once wore the blue of United States infantrymen and the yellow of the cavalry. These were military prisoners, some white and others black, who, for one reason or another, had fractured army regulations, had been tried and convicted by army courts, and sentenced to serve out their terms in Fort

Madison, then, under government contract, an authorized federal penitentiary.

The Army of the United States, after the Civil War, was, for the most part, campaigning across the wide Missouri on the western plains--escorting civilian wagon trains, protecting the mail, guarding workmen laying railroad track, and fighting Indians who were making a last and pathetic stand to hold their hunting grounds against a never-ending flood of cattlemen and sheepmen and just plain dirt farmers armed not only with pistols and rifles but also with rolls of barbed wire. The burning and the shooting and the blood-letting, even though Iowa newspapers were full of frightful stories, meant little to many Hawkeye residents to whom the Platte and the Little Big Horn rivers were not much more than names somewhere "out west thar," and the western Sioux, led by Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, were looked upon as obstacles to gold rushers thronging the Black Hills.

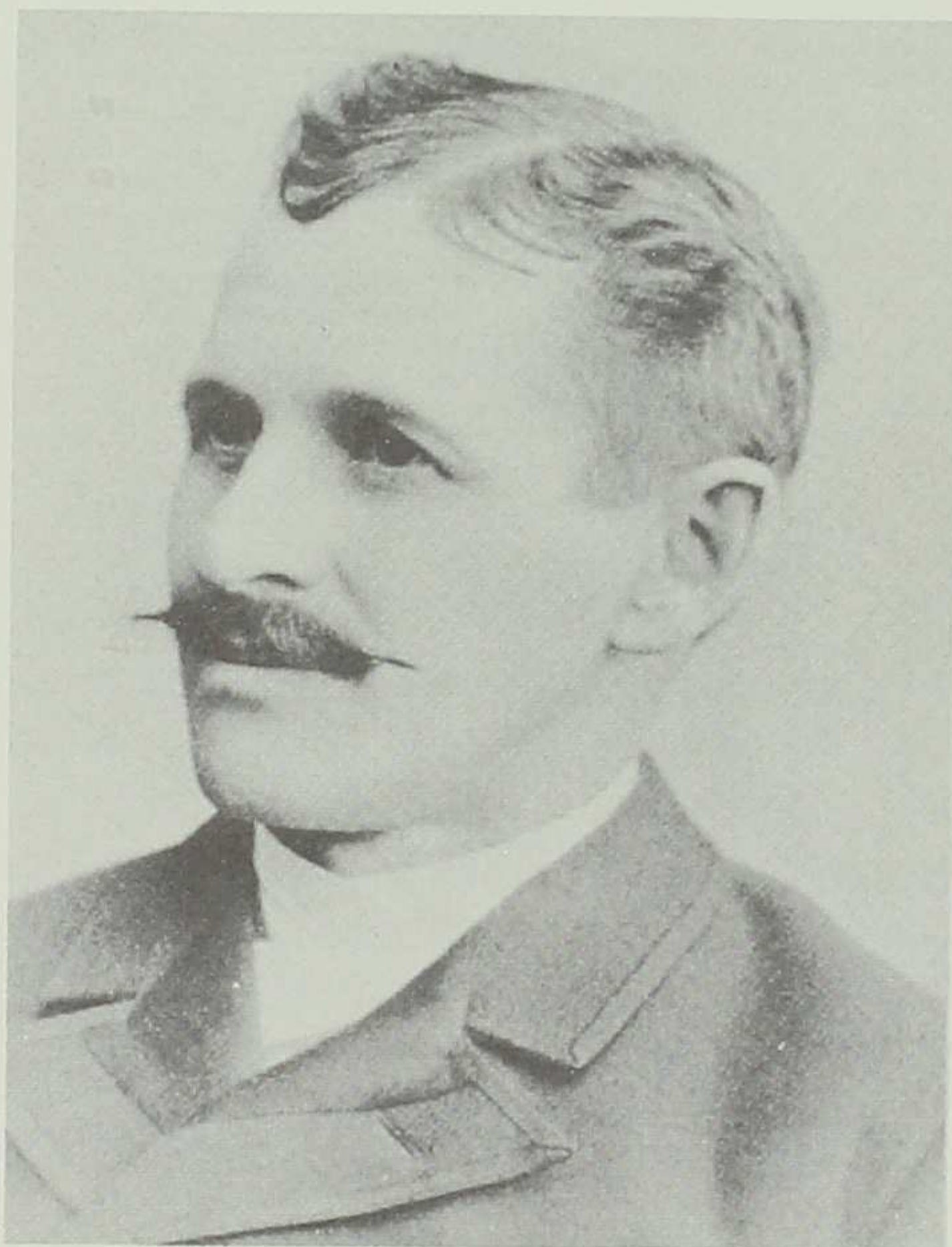
The immediacy of the military-Indian frontier of the 1870s was pointed up graphically to Iowans in a little-known incident having its origin in military posts on the plains and culminating in the Fort Madison prison. From the West to Omaha, Nebraska, and from there eastward, a steady flow of army malcontents and deserters moved through Council Bluffs, towns in central Iowa, and



General James S. Brisbin (from *Generals in Blue*, 1964).

Davenport and Burlington en route to Fort Madison. Editors frequently spoke of their passage. Newspapers for years regularly reported troop movements en route west in papers such as the *Hawk-Eye* and also, for example, in the columns of *Plattsmouth Herald* and the *Nebraska State Journal*. Plattsmouth was a flourishing community across the Missouri River close to Iowa's western border, and the *Nebraska State Journal* was published in Lincoln, the capital. Army news was reported in the *Omaha Bee*.

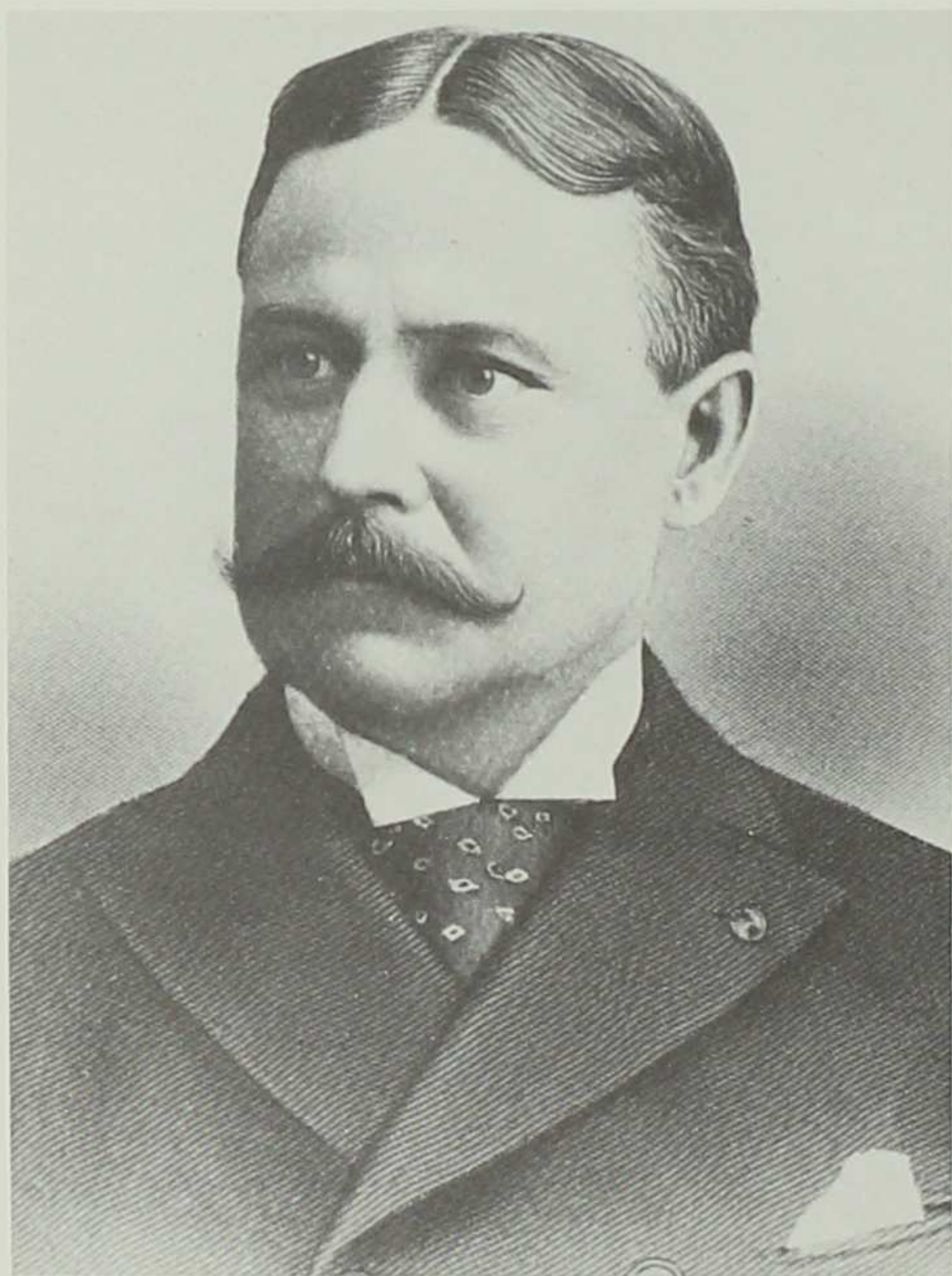
No Nebraska editor, however, paid more attention to the shipment of deserters and other military prisoners east to Fort Madison than did the staff of the *Hawk-Eye*. Their irritation at the confining of convicted soldiers in Fort Madison resulted in a heated quarrel with the paper's publisher and managing editor pitted against an army general.



Bob Burdette

Each of the protagonists possessed impressive qualifications. Frank Hatton, with curled mustache and penetrating eyes, feared no man and would gleefully pick a quarrel. Editor of the *Mt. Pleasant Journal* after the Civil War, he purchased the *Hawk-Eye* in 1874. His editorials could be curt, pungent, and biting. Hatton's managing editor was Robert J. Burdette, humorist and free-swinging but normally gentle satirist, known the nation over for his comical *The Rise and Fall of the Mustache* whose title, it was waggishly rumored, paid tribute to his boss's hirsute foliage on the upper lip. General James S. Brisbin, perhaps known primarily for his long command of black troops and in 1881 as author of the widely read *The Beef Bonanza; or, How to Get Rich on the Plains*, was a stern disciplinarian with a short-fused temper.

All three--Hatton, Burdette, and



Frank Hatton

Brisbin--served during the Civil War. Hatton, at age 15, was a drummer boy in the Fifteenth Ohio Volunteer Infantry. Burdette enlisted as a private in the Forty-Seventh Illinois Infantry and was mustered out as a private. Brisbin began his military career as a second lieutenant, First United States Dragoons, and by March 1865 wore the single star of a brigadier general. After the peace, he re-entered the army and, in 1874, was commanding Omaha Barracks, Nebraska with the rank of major-general.

Brisbin, in Omaha, had his hands full of trouble, and Hatton and Burdette, with other Iowa editors, were willing to make further trouble. Editorial criticism of the army, pointed as it was during the Civil War, increased, rather than diminished, after the war. Somehow or other the glory and glamor of military service now was tarnished and tawdry. Perhaps this

was a delayed reaction on the part of editors who themselves had marched and carried muskets, had disliked or hated army life and routine, and now were in a position to "get even." Perhaps it was a breaking out of the long-lived, contemptuous rivalry between volunteer troops and men of the regular army. And perhaps editorial censure had its roots in the rigid distinction between officers and enlisted men. The Davis County, Iowa, *Republican*, in November 1874, capsulated this view, saying, "The system of our regular army, by making snobs of officers, and machines of the men, should be changed."

Hatton wrote that officers held contempt for their men, and "in every such case his men despise him, and with reason," for such officers were asses and mistreated their men. Such outbursts--and they were numerous--might conceivably have been put down as unfounded editorial excesses had not one day, during the summer of 1874, Burdette suddenly become aware of frequently-published, and to him most peculiar and unusual, news items. All told of the transfer of the military prisoners from western posts to prison in Fort Madison. They arrived from the Third United States Cavalry stationed at Fort Russell, Wyoming, not far from the on-coming route of the Union Pacific Railroad, from Fort Fetterman, also in Wyoming and on the Oregon Trail where the Fourth Infantry was posted, from the famous Fort Laramie, at the junction of the Laramie and North Platte rivers where the Second Cavalry was garrisoned, and from Fort Cameron in far-away Utah, where the Fourteenth Infantry was headquartered. They came also from Brisbin's command at Omaha.

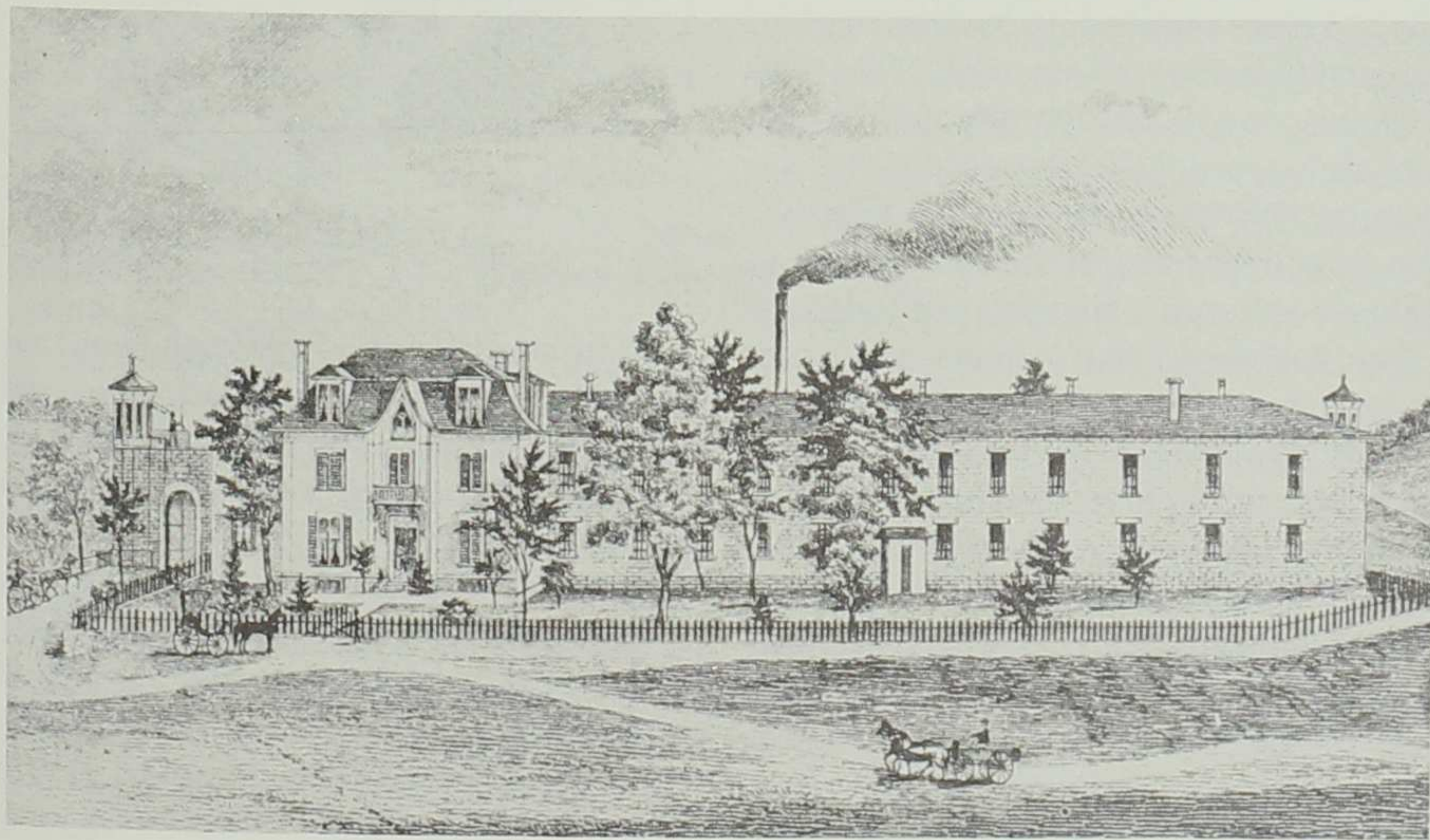
Burdette, whom relatively few persons, then or now, recognized as being as sharp a reporter as he was a witty humorist, traced their routes. Then, in August 1874, he traveled to Fort Madison to interview the prisoners and learn why they were there. He was told that of a total of 315 convicts, about a hundred were servicemen, "most of them here because rather than longer endure the brutal treatment they received at the hands of petty officers," they preferred jail. In a long, five-column story, published August 23, Burdette quoted what was told him.

Private John Gilmore, Third Cavalry, said frankly: "I deserted because I couldn't stand the bad treatment of the first sergeant any longer. He was an abusive tyrant, and none of his superior officers ever interfered with him." Gilmore admitted frankly that rations at Fort Russell were good enough and admitted also that, when he deserted, he carried away with him a government issue revolver. "I was sent here on charges of desertion

and the theft of a revolver."

James McCanna, Eighth Infantry, told Burdette he deserted from Beaver, near Salt Lake, Utah, mostly because of ill-treatment by non-commissioned officers. Thirteen others left at the same time. McCanna insisted he was not a deserter, but was in Fort Madison because he got drunk and hit a corporal. "I am better treated here, better fed, and cared for," he said. "In the army a private soldier is treated like a dog." Charles Churchill, Ninth Infantry, stationed at Omaha, was a Civil War veteran. He was convicted for selling a government uniform and for desertion. "It never does a private any good to complain," he lamented. "We had to make and tend to officers' gardens." He, like McCanna, insisted he was better treated in prison than when he was in the army.

Dennis Newport, another infantryman, made no bones of the fact that he was a deserter. He fled his outfit at Omaha, he recounted, because enlisted men were



The Iowa State Prison at Ft. Madison (from Andreas Atlas of Iowa, 1875).

badly treated and sworn at and because his first sergeant was surly and overbearing. "There is no inducement to the soldier to be faithful," maintained a deserter from Fort Steele, where the Thirteenth Infantry was stationed. "I would rather be in the penitentiary than the army, because good behavior is appreciated here, and it isn't in the army. The private soldiers are misused in every way."

Of the many interviews Burdette put into type, all were similar. Except for minor details, all emphasized contempt of officers for enlisted men, brutality, and complaints of being forced to perform menial chores for unappreciative brass. Not one soldier denied he had deserted or claimed he was innocent of the charges against him. But all, in one manner or other, alleged they would not have acted as they did had they been properly treated. Taken collectively, their narratives, as Burdette set them down, were a severe indictment of the army.

Perhaps Burdette's printed narrative might not have created such a fuss in official quarters had not Hatton published in the same issue a scathing editorial. "If the stories these men tell," he wrote, "of inhuman treatment on the part of officers, of the downright swindling in the issuing of rations whereby the private soldiers are almost starved that a company fund may be raised from which the officers can draw at will, it is certainly time that the Secretary of War or the Commanding General of the army should take the matter in hand." Hatton slashed at the policy of sending army prisoners to state penitentiaries to be shut up "with thieves, burglars and murderers, dressed in the garb of State convicts and treated like such in all respects." This, he believed, was an outrage.



A foot slogger of the western army, as seen by Frederic Remington (from Harper's Weekly, August 21, 1886).

What really singed official braid was Hatton's burning denunciation of officers. "It is not necessary for us to dwell at length upon the stories of cruel treatment by officers which these men relate." His blistering continued. "Enough is known of the average regular army officer to give credit to these reports. . . . If the stories these men tell of their officers are true, the shoulder-strapped tyrants should be stripped of their authority." If, on the other hand, the men deserted from

"pure cussedness," Hatton held that nothing in army regulations justified confinement in state prisons. He concluded with the hope that the efforts of the *Hawk-Eye* would expose the entire matter to the view of higher authority.

Hatton and Burdette had not long to wait. Somehow or other, a copy of the August 23 issue of the *Hawk-Eye* fell into the hands of General Brisbin at Omaha. He replied in a long, explanatory communication which Hatton published in full on September 5. The General, attempting to curb his wrath while penning an objective, reasonable explanation, was somewhat less than successful. He counterattacked by furnishing an abstract of the official record of McCanna and comments on others whom Burdette interviewed. In proper military style, Brisbin listed the specifications of charges against McCanna. They were impressive. McCanna had called Sergeant Christian Nagel, sergeant of the guard, "A Dutch — — —" while Nagel was on duty. McCanna had forcibly resisted Nagel and two other non-commissioned officers. McCanna, when ordered to make less noise, had replied, "Not for you, you — — —," and then deliberately hit a corporal with his fist three times. McCanna had been drunk and unfit for duty several times.

Private Churchill, said Brisbin, deliberately deceived and misled Burdette. Indeed the General flatly repudiated all information given by the Fort Madison prisoners. Carried away by his emotions, Brisbin wrote that army officers as a group were kind-hearted and considerate, anxious to make their men as comfortable as possible and to promote the good of the service. If the *Hawk-Eye*, he continued, really wished to know what

army life was really like, the paper should send a reporter to visit military posts and not rely upon prison lies and gossip.

Hatton was elated with the hornet's nest he stirred up. His answering editorial appeared in the same issue with Brisbin's letter. The *Hawk-Eye*, wrote Hatton crisply, was protesting primarily against the confinement of military personnel in state prisons. That was the real issue. "We don't care how drunk private McCanna got, or how far he knocked Corporal Quinn with his clenched fist." Hatton called Brisbin an "Omaha Napoleon." Furthermore, Hatton pointed out gleefully, the General, even if a graduate of West Point, was an inept writer and could not spell simple words correctly.

Had Brisbin been smart, his strategy would have led him to drop the matter. But the references to his misspelling so pricked him that he bent himself to composing a reply, published by Hatton on September 17. By this time the Hatton-Burdette-Brisbin feud was a conversation piece throughout Iowa. "County editors," lashed out Brisbin, "are all common scrubs--I was one, once myself--and it won't do for them to assume airs that do not by right belong to the fraternity." He rebuked Hatton for saying he was graduated from West Point, which was untrue. He listed his military record--seven commissions between 1861 and 1865 and 27 engagements. "Where were you during the *unpleasantness*, and where did you keep your graveyard?" he asked Hatton.

Then, his personal spleen exhausted, Brisbin, ignoring the *Hawk-Eye's* repeated assertion that its main objection was the lodging of convicted soldiers in state prisons, insisted upon discussing army desertions. This was a touchy subject. It had been since the army first was organ-

ized. General Grant was plagued by desertions during the Civil War. Desertion assumed alarming proportions in the West after the war. General George A. Custer freely admitted it. Indeed, some officers of the Regular Army considered "the malady incurable" and added that soldiers expected little justice when hailed before a courtmartial. Brisbin, no matter how he argued, could not successfully deny all this. Yet he attempted to convince as best he could both the editors and the readers of the *Hawk-Eye*. He advanced all the stereotypes: men ran away because they were homesick, because they wished to sit by the bedside of sick fathers, mothers, sisters, because they yearned to see once again and hold the hands of wives, children, and sweethearts. After developing this heart-throb, the General finally got around to admitting that those in the ranks departed informally because they drank too much, because they resented doing chores for officers, because of low pay, and because of inadequate quarters. He, however, emphatically denied that troops were anything but well-fed, well-clothed, and kindly treated and cared for. Officers were honest and capable gentlemen.

Hatton turned this "long-winded" letter of Brisbin's over to Burdette for reply. Known generally throughout Iowa and the nation as the author of gentle humor and witty lectures, Bob Burdette, in this instance, displayed, so far as is now known, his only example of viperous prose. Indeed, authorship of the answer to Brisbin was not established until recently.

There is a distinguishable difference between the literary style of Hatton and Burdette, and in the reply subdued flashes of the humorist's pungent wit light the prose.

Burdette wrote of General Brisbin, "rigged in full dress uniform," charging upon the *Hawk-Eye*; of Brisbin being less "ravenous after his rations of blood" than previously; and of stoutly maintaining that "neither the gold-fringed writing of a Major General nor the gatling gun English of a warrior of twenty-seven engagements" would alter the paper's views or opinions. This was only a beginning. Irked by Brisbin's sneering reference to scrub editors, Burdette went at him.

"The portrait which the General paints of himself as a country editor, while it may justify his assertion so far as he is concerned individually," said Burdette waspishly, "will hardly warrant him saying that 'all country editors are scrubs,' and we are very much inclined to agree with him that it ill becomes a self-admitted 'scrub' to 'assume airs' even after he has been transformed into an epauleted soldier. You may promote and title the 'scrub' if you will, but once a 'scrub' editor and he's a 'scrub' editor."

Brisbin, honestly enough, had mentioned in his letter that a new penitentiary was being completed at Fort Leavenworth, and it would not be long before military prisoners would be sent there instead of Fort Madison. Burdette should have been satisfied with this and accepted it. Instead, he castigated the



The cavalry responds to "Boots and Saddles" by Remington (from *Century Magazine*, January 1892).

General on the unreasonable grounds that the building of a new federal prison would not right the wrong under which soldiers serving in the Iowa penitentiary were suffering. Even though the penitentiary records of military convicts at Fort Madison were destroyed long ago, there is no evidence that inmates there "suffered." Indeed, the testimony Burdette himself took from them clearly indicates they thought they were better treated than when in the ranks.

When copies of Burdette's rejoinder reached the Fort Madison prison, no

doubt there was a certain amount of rejoicing. Indeed, rumor, passed from mouth to mouth through the years, indicates this to be true, even though it cannot now be firmly established. What tickled *Hawk-Eye* readers the most was Burdette's reply to Brisbin's rhetorical question: "Where were you during the late *unpleasantness* and where did you keep your graveyard?" There was nothing of the loveable and slightly mischievous Master Bilderback--a stock character in Burdette's humorous tales--in Burdette's reply. "In answer as to

where our whereabouts were during the war and where we kept our graveyard," wrote Burdette, "we answer, we were a private soldier, a common knapsack carrier, and we kept our cemetery about a half mile further in front than any Major General we ever saw in the army."

The controversy and the sharpshooting ended with Burdette's reply, but the echoes of the literary guns lasted long. For years, veterans of the Civil War and the Indian campaigns, heard and remembered. Old-timers, warming themselves in the sun on benches in courthouse squares, testify to this. Their routine daily greeting to one another, they said, was, "Where yuh keepin' your grave-

yard?" The answering password, in voices cackling with age, was "Brisbin! Brisbin!"

Few, if any, of the oldsters knew or recalled exactly how or when or where their salutation originated. They could not have known all, for the complete narrative is set down here for the first time. The incident had become a military-inspired folkway. Many on those benches with their canes beside them would have been amazed to learn that the roots were in an Iowa penitentiary, that an Iowa newspaper had shot down an army general, and, finally, that the searing caustic of an Iowa comical author had turned full circle to become little more than a jest. □

Note on Sources

The official records of military prisoners confined in the Fort Madison penitentiary were destroyed years ago. However, the entire account, including the correspondence between the editors of the *Hawk-Eye* and General Brisbin, was printed in the *Hawk-Eye*. Supplementary information was taken from Iowa and Nebraska newspapers as indicated in the text. The primary source for readers interested in army desertion is, of course, the multi-volumed *War of the Rebellion: a Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, but the general reader will find more than adequate material in Ella Lonn, *Desertion During the Civil War*; George A. Custer, *My Life on the Plains*; Don Rickey, Jr., *Forty Miles a Day on Beans and Hay*; Francis Paul Prucha, *Broadax and Bayonet: The Role of the United States Army in the Development of the Northwest, 1815-1860*; Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union*; and, for example, Edgar Bruce Wesley, *Guarding the Frontier: A Study of Frontier Defense, 1815-1825*. Clara B. Burdette has published a semi-satisfactory biography of her husband, *Robert J. Burdette His Message*, and the June 1923 issue of *The Palimpsest* carried an article by Sherman J. McNally, which treats of Burdette as a humorist. The evidence that old soldiers picked up and used a modification of Burdette's and Brisbin's "graveyard" sentence is from notes taken by the author from his grandfather, Frank H. Jordan, who served with the Fifteenth Volunteer Infantry and was a treasure trove of military anecdotes, each of which when checked out in later years proved reliable.