

The First Battle — Wilson's Creek

The First Iowa, a three-month regiment recruited in response to President Lincoln's first call for troops, was mustered in at Keokuk on May 14, 1861. Made up mostly of local militia companies from Muscatine, Iowa City, Burlington, Mount Pleasant, Davenport, Dubuque, and Cedar Rapids, the regiment was clothed in a mixture of peacetime uniforms of every shade and shape. The jackets varied from dark blue to a light bluish gray, while two companies wore black and white tweed frock coats. The pants ranged from black with red stripes to a pink satinet with light green stripes. In such a motley dress, and armed with ancient muskets that "kicked like an army mule," the First Iowa departed for Missouri on June 13.

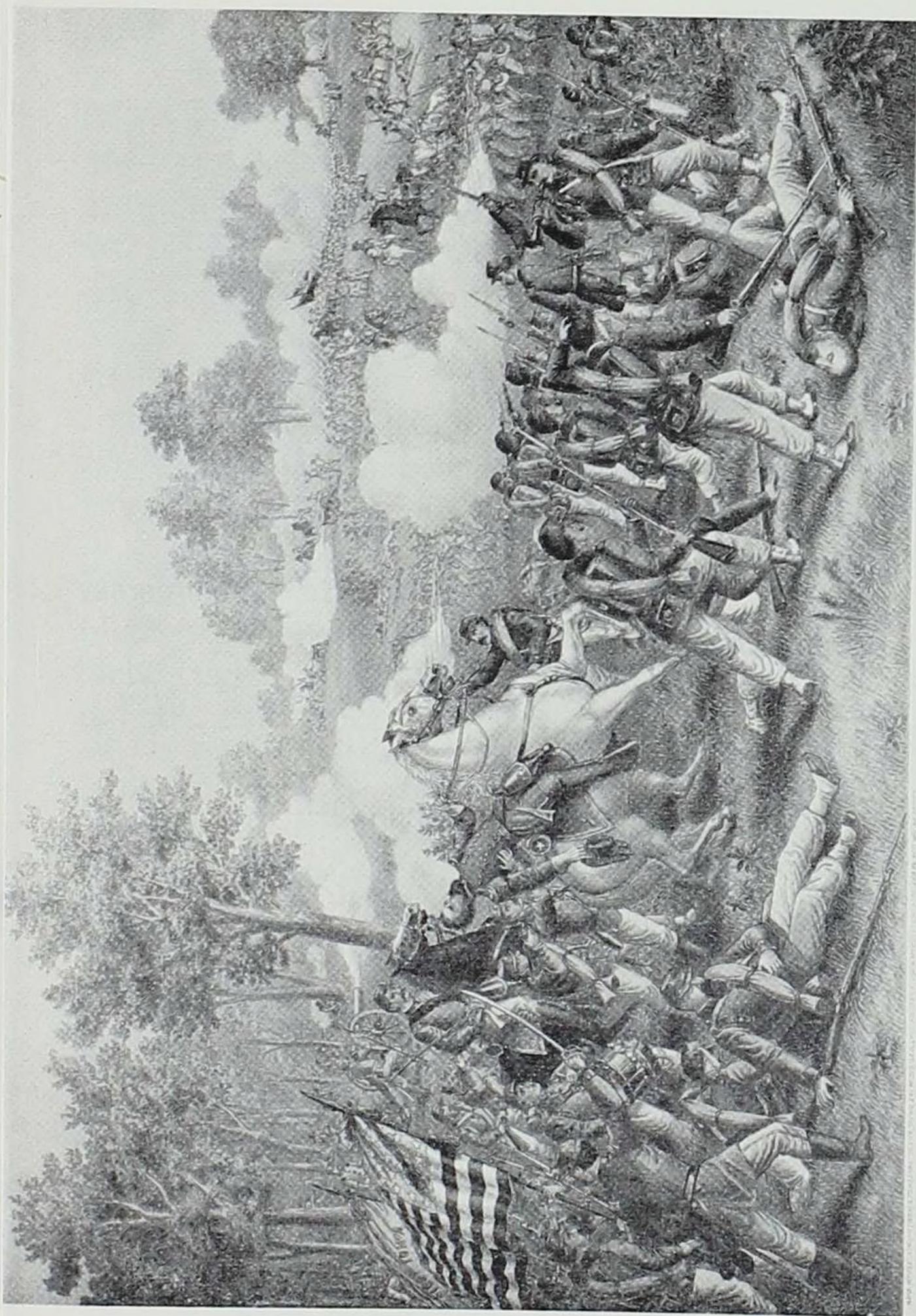
Brigadier General Nathaniel Lyon of the regular army, given the task of breaking up the Missouri Confederates led by Sterling Price, had under his command a variety of troops, some experienced, some as unused to the ways of war as the First Iowa. In addition to several companies of regular army cavalry, infantry, and artillery, Lyon had in his small army men from Missouri, Kansas, and Iowa, in all, some 5,800 men. During most of the three-month service of the First

Iowa, they marched here and there in Missouri, looking for Price.

By August 1, Lyon had assembled his ill-clad and poorly equipped army at Springfield, in southwestern Missouri. Learning that three columns of Price's men had concentrated at Wilson's Creek, south of Springfield, Lyon moved out on the night of August 9, reaching the enemy's picket line a little after midnight. He had made the mistake of splitting his small force, sending Colonel Franz Sigel of the 3rd Missouri with some 1,400 men to attack the enemy rear, while he himself with 4,000 men planned to attack in the front.

Sighting the enemy's fires at about midnight, Lyon ordered his men to halt and sleep on their arms. At 5 o'clock in the morning of August 10 the men were aroused and the movement forward began. The Confederate pickets retreated quickly, and Lyon pushed forward to a small plateau overlooking the creek valley, where most of the men under Price were encamped. This slight elevation gave Lyon his only advantage and allowed him to hold his position for some five hours, repulsing repeated enemy attacks.

The First Iowa saw the valley of Wilson's Creek spread out below them, seemingly filled with Confederate troops and supply wagons. Now for the first time they heard the "hellish sort of hiss" of the minie balls, the roar of the artillery, like the "prolonged howl of a hundred thunder-



BATTLES OF WILSON'S CREEK

storms," heard the screaming of wounded horses, and saw their comrades falling around them.

Frightened by this onslaught, the lines wavered, but the officers rallied the men, and most of them stood their ground. Seeing a charge coming, the men would let out a yell and begin firing their ancient weapons. The guns had to be loaded after each shot. The cartridges, called "minie balls," were each in a paper sack filled with gunpowder. In loading, the soldier bit off the end of the paper sack and rammed the cartridge and powder home, meanwhile chewing on the piece of paper and bits of gunpowder which adhered to it. The taste, reported one soldier, was "not unpleasantly peculiar," and during a battle soldiers would soon be chewing on great wads of paper, while the dissolved gunpowder ran down their chins in black streaks.

Sigel's attack had been repulsed, his artillery captured, and his men driven from the field. Lyon was left alone, with his handful of men, facing an enemy who had seemingly unlimited reserves. Sometime in mid-morning Lyon was killed while leading a charge. But the men and officers fought on and gave little ground until about 11:30 when, with their ammunition running low, and realizing they could not withstand another attack, the Union troops began the retreat to Springfield. The First Iowa, in its only battle, had lost 11 killed, 142 wounded, and 3 missing. The army



SHELBY NORMAN

as a whole lost about 1,000 in killed and wounded.

The first Iowan to die in the Civil War was seventeen-year-old Shelby Norman of Company A, who was killed instantly by a stray bullet as the regiment approached the field of battle. A bronze statue of young Norman can be seen on the Iowa Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument in Des Moines.

A young private of Company D, Nicholas Boquet of Burlington, won a Congressional Medal of Honor at Wilson's Creek, when he dashed out between the lines, captured a riderless horse, and returned to hitch the horse to a disabled gun, thus saving the gun from capture.

The First Iowa was mustered out at St. Louis on August 21, 1861, and very soon thereafter returned home, at last clad in the regulation army uniform. About one-third of the men enlisted in other Iowa regiments.

Wilson's Creek battlefield today is on a private farm near the town of Republic. A limestone slab marks the spot where Lyon fell.