

Benjamin Stone Roberts

One day in the summer of 1835 a buzz of excitement broke the monotony at Fort Des Moines: a strange officer had arrived at this frontier post on the western bank of the Mississippi River. The newcomer was Benjamin Stone Roberts who had been graduated from West Point on the first day of the previous July, brevetted second lieutenant, and assigned to duty with the First Dragoons. A strange face was an unusual sight in this out-of-the-way cantonment, and the soldiers watched the young lieutenant curiously as he entered the log cabin which served as the headquarters of Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny, the commanding officer of the post.

At this time Lieutenant Roberts was about twenty-five years of age, and it is probable that he had never before been farther west than New York, for he had been born in Vermont and educated at West Point. Feeling that he must do credit to his military training he had dressed himself in the full regimentals of his rank — dark blue double-breasted coat with many gilt buttons, bluish gray trousers trimmed in yellow, elaborate cap, epaulettes, gold lace, orange colored sash, and cavalry sabre. But Colonel Kearny, the veteran frontier fighter, refused to be dazzled by the brilliant raiment of his subordinate. After careful inspection he decided that the hair and beard of the

man before him did not conform to army regulations and he gruffly ordered the young officer to get a shave and a hair cut.

The next lesson in the school of frontier army life was a problem in construction. Lieutenant Roberts, with a detail of men, was sent to build a log cabin. Cabin construction had not been covered in the West Point curriculum, but the men were experienced in such work and the walls of the cabin were soon raised. At this point the officer discovered that no openings had been made for windows and doors; and considering this an irreparable mistake, he ordered the men to tear down the partially completed cabin and cut out the necessary openings.

In vain the soldiers pointed out to their inexperienced but theoretically infallible superior that log cabins were always built thus, with notches in the logs where the openings were to be made later by means of a crosscut saw. An officer must be obeyed; and it was only after a part of the log structure had been torn down that Captain Jesse B. Brown happened to pass that way, inquired the cause of the demolition, and ordered the construction continued — much to the disgust of the lieutenant and no doubt to the great satisfaction of the soldier workmen.

Lieutenant Roberts was really a good soldier, and experience soon made him an efficient officer. He received his permanent commission as second lieutenant on May 31, 1836, and was made first lieutenant

ant on July 31, 1837. During at least a part of 1836 he served as post adjutant at Fort Des Moines, but in some way he became involved in financial difficulties — due, it is said, to the depreciation of paper money entrusted to him by the government. As a result of this embarrassment he resigned his commission on January 28, 1839.

Civil life, however, did not prove dull and prosaic to the young man for soon after he left the military service he was appointed chief engineer of the Ogdensburg and Champlain Railroad by the Governor of New York, and in 1840 he became assistant geologist of that State. Next the young West Pointer turned his attention to the study of law, but before he had completed his preparation for admission to the bar adventure once more called him; and in 1842 he went to Russia, having been assured by the Russian Minister that his services would be accepted in the railroad construction work then under way in that country. When Mr. Roberts arrived in Russia, however, he found that an oath of allegiance was required from all foreigners employed in such service, and considering that to become a subject of the Tsar was too great a price to pay for employment, he refused the terms and returned home in February, 1843.

Having finally completed his studies in the summer of 1843, the former lieutenant of Fort Des Moines began the practice of law at Fort Madison in Lee County, not far from the site of the old fort.

In addition to his duties as a lawyer Roberts was also justice of the peace. Here, too, he maintained his reputation for originality. It is said that on one occasion, when he desired to transfer a lot to a purchaser, he made out the deed, signed it, secured his wife's signature, and then as justice of the peace certified to the acknowledgment of the signatures.

Scarcely had he become established in the practice of law before the sound of guns in the southwest recalled Lieutenant Roberts to military duty. As soon as the Mexican War began he offered his services to the United States, and on May 27, 1846, he received a commission as first lieutenant and was assigned to the Mounted Rifle Regiment. The following February he was raised to the grade of captain. Indeed, he was promoted in line as if he had not been out of the service and received the arrears of pay from the date of his dismissal or resignation as if he had remained in the service. Evidently the matter of the depreciated paper money had been cleared up by this time.

The career of Captain Roberts in the Mexican War furnishes one of the romantic incidents associated with the story of Iowa and war. He was present at the siege of Vera Cruz, and led his regiment in storming the heights of Cerro Gordo on April 18, 1847. The Mexicans, who referred to the Mounted Rifle Regiment as the "Cursed Riflemen", met the charge of the Americans with a shower of bullets but, as Captain Roberts put it, "when dangers thick-

ened and death talked more familiarly face to face, the men seemed to rise above every terror."

Again on the tenth of August, Captain Roberts led the assault on the town of San Juan de los Llanos. Eight days later he participated in the battles of Contreras and Churubusco, and on the thirteenth of September he commanded the storming party which captured the castle of Chapultepec. The following day he led the advance of Quitman's army into the City of Mexico, and to him was assigned the honor of raising the first American flag over the palace of the Montezumas. Justin H. Smith thus describes the scene:

"As a triumphal procession the command looked rather strange. Quitman and Smith marched at its head on foot — the former with only one shoe; and behind them came troops decorated with mud, the red stains of battle and rough bandages, carrying arms at quite haphazard angles. Not less astonishing looked the city, for sidewalks, windows, balconies and housetops were crowded with people. Except for the silence, the countless white handkerchiefs and the foreign flags, it might have been thought a holiday. Before the palace, which filled the east side of the plaza, the troops formed in line of battle. Officers took their places at the front, and when Captain Roberts hoisted a battle-scarred American flag on the staff of the palace at seven o'clock, arms were presented and the officers saluted."

The following day Captain Roberts was sent out with five hundred men to drive the straggling forces of Santa Anna from the streets of the capital. In October he was transferred to the command of the United States cavalry forces in the District of Puebla and here on November 10, 1847, he surprised and defeated seven hundred Mexican guerrillas under General Torrejon, captured their supplies, and recovered a large merchant train which the bandits had captured en route to the City of Mexico. The sword of the guerrilla chief which became the prize of Captain Roberts was presented by him to the State of Iowa, and was later deposited in the office of the Adjutant General at Des Moines.

A suit of ancient Mexican armor, said to have been taken from the palace in the City of Mexico, was also presented to the State of Iowa by Captain Roberts. This souvenir, consisting of a helmet of brass similar to those worn by the Spanish military explorers, with a crest ornamented with stiff black hair from a horse's mane or tail, and a breastplate and backplate of steel covered with burnished brass, the whole weighing about thirty-five pounds, was presented by the State officials to the State Historical Society of Iowa and may still be seen in the library of the Society.

The gallant conduct of the young officer did not go unrewarded. He was brevetted major on September 13, 1847, for "gallant and meritorious conduct" in the battle of Chapultepec and lieutenant colonel on

November 24, 1847, for his part in the actions at Matamoras and the Pass Gualaxara.

But nowhere were the gallant exploits of the young captain more appreciated than in the newly admitted State of Iowa. Comparatively few citizens from this frontier Commonwealth had taken part in the battles in Mexico and the patriotic people of Iowa were sincerely proud of those who served in the front ranks. The legislature, indeed, expressed this appreciation of the achievements of the Fort Madison attorney in two joint resolutions. One of these — adopted on January 15, 1849 — was a vote of thanks and read as follows:

“*Whereas*, Capt. Benjamin S. Roberts, of the United States Army has presented to the State of Iowa, a suit of armor, taken as a prize of war; and a sword captured from General Torrejon, in the late war with Mexico, designed to commemorate the part borne in the late struggle by the officers of this State. Therefore

“*Resolved by the General Assembly of the State of Iowa*, That Capt. Benj. S. Roberts of the United States Rifles, for his gallantry and heroism during the late war with Mexico, has won for himself a brilliant distinction, which reflects a lustre upon the character of the American soldier, and an honor upon this State. And for this evidence of his patriotism and attachment to his adopted State, he deserves and is hereby tendered the cordial thanks of the Representatives of the people.”

The second resolution was approved on the same day and provided that the Treasurer of State be authorized "to procure a finely wrought sword and scabbard, not to exceed in cost the sum of one hundred dollars, with the proper inscriptions, to be presented by the Governor to Captain Benjamin S. Roberts, of the Rifle Regiment, as a memento of the pride of his fellow citizens of this State in the soldier-like patriotism and deeds of valor performed by him in the late war with Mexico."

This sword, elaborately inscribed, was presented to Captain Roberts in the Capitol at Washington by the Iowa representatives in Congress. No other similar honor has been bestowed by the State of Iowa.

Captain Roberts was a leader in organization as well as in battle. On March 20, 1860, he submitted to the Secretary of War a plan for the reorganization of the militia, but there is nothing to indicate that this plan received much notice. Indeed, the advent of the Civil War soon made necessary the training of all available men. Early in 1861 Captain Roberts was sent to Fort Stanton, New Mexico, to join Colonel George B. Crittenden who was organizing an expedition ostensibly against the Apaches. After the expedition started, however, Captain Roberts became convinced that the real object of Colonel Crittenden was to aid the Confederate cause. He refused to obey treasonable orders, and, procuring a furlough, hastened to Santa Fe to inform Colonel

Loring of the situation; but to his astonishment and chagrin he was reproved and ordered back to Fort Stanton. It transpired soon after this that Crittenden and Loring were both disloyal.

For a time, following the battle of Valverde and the rout of the Texans, Colonel Roberts was in command of several military districts in New Mexico, but on June 16, 1862, he was made brigadier general of volunteers and transferred to the staff of General John Pope as chief of cavalry. In May, 1863, General Roberts was transferred to the Department of the Northwest, and a month later was put in command of the Iowa District with headquarters at Davenport. Here he was within a few miles of the place where twenty-eight years before he had reported for duty to Colonel Kearney.

In honor of the distinguished general and former Iowan, the camp of the Eighth and Ninth Iowa Cavalry companies at Davenport was at first named Camp Roberts. Later the name was changed to Camp Kinsman, and toward the close of the war the Federal government donated this military establishment to the Iowa Soldiers' Orphans' Home.

Although Iowa was a loyal State it appears that some complaints of disloyalty were made to General Roberts, and that he attempted to forestall resistance to the government and especially to the draft by the seizure of arms belonging to certain citizens. General Pope, the department commander, did not approve of the action taken for in July, 1863, he

wrote to General Roberts from Milwaukee, Wisconsin:

“I regretted much to receive your dispatch stating that you had seized arms, &c., the personal property of the citizens of Iowa. I don't desire you to have anything to do with such matters. I have carefully refrained from allowing such things to be done here, though I have been repeatedly urged to do them. . . . I confine myself strictly to my military duty. I hope you will do the same . . . Surely the seizure of personal property on suspicion merely that it might hereafter be used in resisting the laws was out of place by a military commander in loyal States, and can only lead to ill-feeling and disagreeable and unnecessary complications, which it has been my steady purpose to avoid.”

General Pope urged that no action of this kind be taken by the military authorities in loyal States except upon the request of the civil authorities. Within a short time this contingency occurred in Iowa, for on August 6, 1863, Governor Kirkwood wrote to the Secretary of War that because of a mob of armed men in Keokuk County he had asked General Roberts to detain the six companies of the Seventh Iowa Cavalry until the danger was passed. This request was complied with. In a letter to General Roberts General Pope commended his handling of this tense situation and added: “It is not necessary to inform the people of Iowa that troops will be used to enforce the draft nor to hold out to them any

such threat in advance of execution of laws, which it is only apprehended they may resist.”

On December 2, 1863, General Roberts was relieved of his command of the Iowa District and was transferred to the Department of the Gulf where he served during the remainder of the war. He was mustered out of volunteer service on January 15, 1866, remaining in the Regular Army as lieutenant colonel of the Third Cavalry.

During the years immediately following the Civil War General Roberts devoted his energies to the invention and improvement of military equipment. He retired from the army in December, 1870, to take up the manufacture and sale of a rifle he had designed, but it does not appear that he was successful in securing the orders he anticipated during the Franco-Prussian War. He died at Washington, D. C., on January 29, 1875.

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