The Palimpsest

NOVEMBER 1932

CONTENTS

S. H. M. Byers

PUBLISHED MONTHLY AT IOWA CITY BY
THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER JULY 28 1920 AT THE POST OFFICE AT IOWA CITY IOWA
UNDER THE ACT OF AUGUST 24 1912

THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE

THE PALIMPSEST, issued monthly by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is devoted to the dissemination of Iowa History. Supplementing the other publications of this Society, it aims to present the materials of Iowa History in a form that is attractive and a style that is popular in the best sense—to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished.

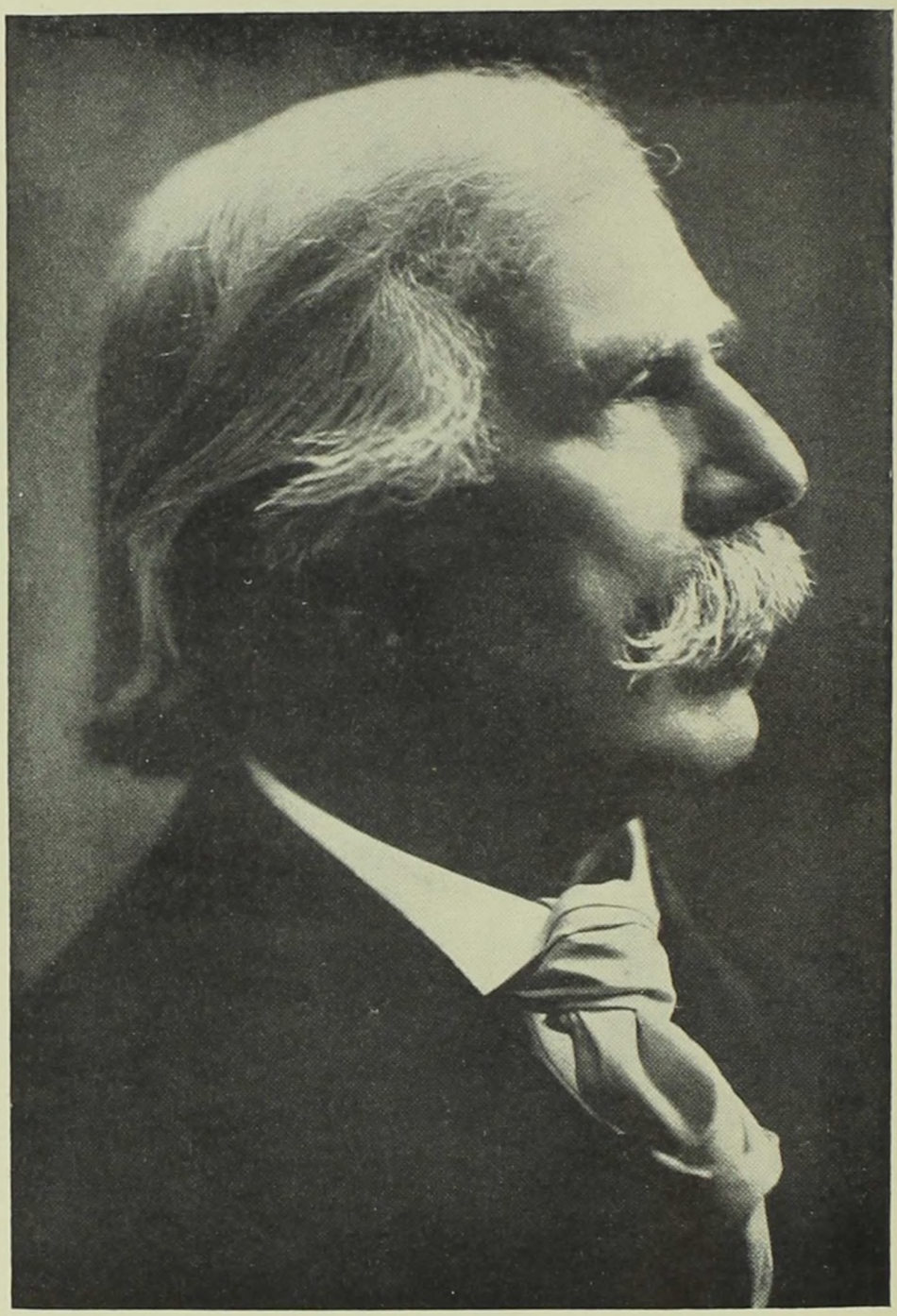
BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH
Superintendent

THE MEANING OF PALIMPSESTS

In early times palimpsests were parchments or other materials from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

PRICE—10c per copy: $1 per year: free to members of Society
ADDRESS—The State Historical Society Iowa City Iowa



S. H. M. BYERS

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

VOL. XIII ISSUED IN NOVEMBER 1932 NO. 11

With Sword

On the twenty-fourth of June, 1861, a patriotic meeting to enlist a company of infantry was held in the courthouse at Newton, Iowa. In the midst of a lull in the drums and the cheering, some one called out "Myers to the platform", but Myers had nothing to say. Instead, he pushed a young lawyer into the aisle, saying "Byers, they are calling you".

The audience took up the cry and Byers, with the enthusiasm and ambition of twenty-three, went up on the platform and, standing by the big drum, made an extemporaneous appeal for enlistments. Ten minutes after the close of his speech, his name led the list of one hundred men on the roster of Company B of the Fifth Iowa.

The speaker was Samuel Hawkins Marshall Byers, born at Pulaski, Pennsylvania, on July 23, 1838. His father, James M. Byers, a bricklayer

by trade, moved to Iowa in 1851, settling at Oskaloosa in 1853. His mother, Parmela Marshall, a grand niece of Chief Justice Marshall, died when her son was less than a month old. At the time of his enlistment young Byers had just been admitted to the Iowa bar, having supplemented his rather meager common school education by reading law in the office of William Loughridge of Oskaloosa.

The enlistment was not as unconsidered as it appeared. A year previous Byers had gone to Memphis, Tennessee, with his father to sell some horses. There the father and son were entertained in the home of the overseer of a plantation and heard the slaves at night singing their plaintive songs. There, too, the young Iowan saw the darker side of slavery — the beating of an old and devoted slave by a quick-tempered master, the cold-blooded whipping of a young negro who had failed to do his work properly — one hundred lashes on the bare back as the slave lay on the stone floor of the public lock-up. "Well, what kind of people are you, up there in Iowa, anyway?" sneered one of the masters when the elder Byers, disliking to witness such incidents, told him he was going north. "If I could not stand to see a nigger licked, I'd go North, too!"

And now the war, and the younger Byers was

to see sights worse than the whipping of a slave. Company B was mustered into Federal service on July 15, 1861, and Corporal Byers spent the winter of 1861-1862 in the guerrilla warfare which divided Missouri, civilians as well as soldiers, into hostile camps. About a year after his enlistment, Colonel Matthies called Byers into his tent and said, "Corporal, I have noticed that you always do the duty assigned you with promptness. I need a quartermaster sergeant. You are the man." Byers said he would like the promotion, but added, rather surprisingly, that he would accept it only if he might, in time of battle, turn over his quartermaster duties to a substitute and fight with his comrades. "There's a fight to-day", called one officer to another during the Vicksburg campaign. "The sign's sure. The quartermaster sergeant has got his gun."

But life was not too safe even for a quartermaster sergeant. Riding back to camp one day, Sergeant Byers saw an armed man in gray ride into a lonely wood. Returning that night with a squad from his regiment, he captured one of the most dangerous guerrillas in Missouri.

In the spring of 1862, the Fifth Iowa was transferred to the army operating around New Madrid and Shiloh. At Iuka, Sergeant Byers, fighting in the line, saw half of the men in the Fifth Iowa

fall dead or wounded. Two weeks later the remnant of his regiment was in the breastworks at Corinth.

The winter of 1862-1863 was spent in the siege of Vicksburg. Quartermaster Sergeant Byers had enough to do to provide the men with supplies, many of which were taken from the plantations, usually at considerable risk. In the midst of this campaign, Byers, because of eye trouble, spent some time in the hospital at Memphis — where he had seen the slaves whipped before the war. Now he looked down each morning, into the room where the dead from the hospital were laid during the night, and counted the corpses of his comrades in arms.

Back in the army besieging Vicksburg, Byers saw other sights more horrible than the dead — men torn by shrapnel struggling in agony, piles of amputated limbs, heaps of decaying corpses where the rain had washed out the half-buried Confederate dead. This, as Byers said often in later years, was war. At Champion Hills, he was in the midst of another desperate battle and was slightly wounded in the hand, though the injury did not take him from the front.

One morning while Sergeant Byers was out in the trenches before the Confederate forts, Colonel Charles L. Matthies crept up to where he was

stationed and presented him with a parcel wrapped in brown paper. In it was the Colonel's own sash, the token of the recent promotion of the quartermaster sergeant to adjutant of the regiment. The promotion nearly caused his death, for riding back from the sutler's store on the Yazoo River with his new uniform tied to his saddlebow and his sword buckled on him, Adjutant Byers was fired upon by a Confederate ambuscade and his horse was killed. He escaped, however, with his uniform. His commission as adjutant was dated April 23, 1863.

On the third of July, 1863, came the joyful news that Vicksburg was to be surrendered the next day. The dispatch from General Grant announcing the surrender was the first order read to the regiment by Adjutant Byers.

After a short furlough to go north in September, 1863 — the only one he had during the war — Adjutant Byers returned to find what was left of the Fifth Iowa at Memphis, ready for the relief of Chattanooga. For two months they campaigned in northern Mississippi and Alabama. Finally, at two o'clock on the afternoon of November 25th, the regiment, hungry, cold, and without sleep for one hundred hours, received orders to assault Missionary Ridge. On they went in the face of a deadly fire, but just as they

began the ascent of the ridge, a detachment of Confederates deployed from a railroad tunnel and opened a withering fire on their flank.

Byers and some eighty members of the Fifth Iowa were taken prisoners. Seizing a blanket from a dead comrade, he obeyed the orders of his captors and hurried up the mountain, a prisoner of war, but as he glanced behind him he saw his blue-coated comrades swarm over the ridge.

That night Byers was among the northern prisoners who were loaded on cattle cars and transported to Libby Prison at Richmond. The building was an old brick tobacco warehouse three stories high. The windows were without glass and the cold, damp air from the nearby James River swept over the shivering men. The "fresh fish", as newcomers were jocularly termed, found some six hundred Union officers in this prison. Among these Byers noted Neal Dow, the author of the Maine liquor law.

The prisoners slept on the floor, each man having only a single army blanket for mattress and cover, and so crowded was the building that at night the makeshift chairs had to be piled on top of the boxes used for tables to make room for the men. The food was largely corn bread made of meal ground cobs and all. In this prison Adjutant Byers spent seven months.

There were occasional breaks in the monotony. One day John Morgan, who had escaped from the Ohio penitentiary, visited the prison and Byers wrote in his diary, "He is a rakish-looking chap, but is gentlemanly for all that." On another occasion a battalion of Marylanders paraded past the prison singing "Maryland, My Maryland", and years afterwards Byers used the same tune — "Der Tannenbaum" — for an Iowa State song. Among some books sent to the prison, Byers found a Latin grammar and studied it industriously but later declared that because of his weakened condition, he was unable to remember anything he studied.

In the summer of 1864, the prisoners were rushed from Libby Prison to Macon, Georgia. On the way, Byers noted that the farmers were growing corn instead of cotton and wrote in his diary, "The rebels look very cheerless, so we guess the tide of battle is in our favor again." At Macon, the captives were herded into a walled enclosure where the sun beat down mercilessly on the sand and the men were for a time without shelter except for their blankets stretched on pine sticks. Libby Prison had been cold; this place was scorching hot. The food was bad and the guards were often brutal.

Little by little, Byers, by trading with a guard,

secured a Confederate uniform and on July 15th, the day his enlistment expired, when the Confederate officers came in to count the prisoners, he walked out the gate, casually explaining to the guard that he had been sent for a missing roll-list. For days, he wandered about the country seeking a way out, pretending to be a Confederate looking for his regiment, gathering valuable information which he was destined never to use, for on the 23rd of July — his birthday — he was surrounded by a detachment of cavalry, charged with being a spy, and only by the accidental loss of a paper sent to headquarters was he saved from trial and possible execution.

As it was, he was taken back to the stockade at Macon, and not many days later he and two hundred other prisoners were sent to Charleston, South Carolina, where they were placed under the fire of the Federal guns bombarding the city. On the way a plot was made to overpower the guards and seize the train, but the leader failed to give the signal. At Charleston the prisoners were kept at the jail and later at what was called Roper Hospital. The Union gunners, however, soon learned the location of the prison and planned to miss it with their shells. The surgeon of the prison camp at Charleston was Dr. Todd, a half-brother of Mrs. Abraham Lincoln.

Yellow fever broke out in Charleston and the prisoners were finally moved to a camp near Columbia, South Carolina, which the men, in derision of the ration of half-cooked corn and cob meal with a little sorghum, called Camp Sorghum. Here the men were confined in a cleared field surrounded by pine woods. Rude shelters were made of sticks and logs. Byers and another officer spent much of their time in a hole dug in the ground, four feet deep, four feet wide, and eight feet long, roofed over with boughs and earth. A tiny fireplace of clay burned a few roots to warm them as they talked of old times or read stale newspapers.

The men were hungry and in rags. Day after day prisoners were shot down as they attempted to run the guard lines. Byers also wanted to escape, but he tried another plan. One day in November, 1864, he and a friend walked out of the enclosure with a detachment sent to gather fuel and then disappeared in the pine woods. Again Byers wandered about in a hostile country, seeing for the most part only the colored people who were always friendly. Again there were hair-breadth escapes and again there was the sudden meeting with the enemy, this time two cavalry officers, who escorted the two Union prisoners to jail at Lexington. It was there that

Byers reports one of the few acts of kindness he received from the white people of the South. The wife of one of his captors sent him a blanket and a basket of food. In a few days the men were back in the prison at Columbia.

Not long afterward the prisoners were moved into the high-walled yard surrounding a building which had formerly been a "lunatic asylum". It was there that the news of Sherman's march reached them and it was there that Adjutant Byers wrote the words of the popular song, "Sherman's March to the Sea".

That song made Byers famous. Even the captain of the prison was impressed and Byers was permitted to sleep inside the hospital building. This proved to be an unintentional favor, for when it was announced that the prisoners were to be transferred south — Sherman's army being too near — Byers and an officer from Pennsylvania crept into the attic over the porch and lay hidden there while their comrades were marched out. Discovered in their first attempt to scale the wall of the empty enclosure, Byers and his comrade took advantage of the fire set by the guards who were looking for them and, seizing buckets, hurried past the guard and escaped, Byers risking recapture to secure his diary which he had accidentally dropped.

It was the seventeenth of February, 1865, and Union soldiers were already in Columbia. A negro, Edward Edwards, gave them food and from a high doorstep in the city the two ragged and emaciated prisoners watched General Sherman and his staff enter the city. The news had been passed around that the author of "Sherman's March to the Sea" was there and Sherman stopped his army's victorious march long enough to greet the two men.

The lady of the house where the men were standing was the daughter of a Union man, though her husband was in the Confederate army. She invited the former prisoners in and gave them food. All that night fire swept over the city of Columbia. Byers and his friend thought of the woman who had fed them and helped her carry out some of her valuable belongings before the house burned.

The Fifth Iowa had literally been wiped out of existence so Adjutant Byers accepted a place with the Tenth Iowa, but a few days later General Sherman sent for him, assigned him to a place on his staff, and invited him, still in his ragged clothing, to dinner with him and his staff. The officers soon assembled a uniform and it was as a member of the General's official family that Byers followed the remainder of the campaign. At

Cheraw, on the third of March, the army celebrated its victories with wine and song. General John A. Logan played the violin while a dozen famous generals joined in "Sherman's March to the Sea".

At Fayetteville, General Sherman sent Byers down the Cape Fear River with dispatches informing General Grant and President Lincoln of his success. By the time Byers reached Washington the war was over. Across his discharge papers, dated March 19, 1865, the Assistant Secretary of War wrote, "Discharged as a supernumerary officer".

RUTH A. GALLAHER

And Pen

One night in December, 1864, a young officer from an Iowa regiment paced back and forth in a prison pen at Columbia, South Carolina; it was too cold to sleep in the little tents, the only shelter then provided for most of the captured Union officers in the prison. For sixteen months this man had been shut away from the news of the war, except for the few reports — many of them false — which were occasionally smuggled into the prisons.

Recently, however, good news had come to the tattered and disease-plagued prisoners in the high walled yard of the old lunatic asylum at Columbia. Newspapers, hidden in loaves of bread by a colored friend, had brought the news of Sherman's daring campaign from Atlanta to Savannah. With the keen imagination of the poet, the young soldier visualized the encampment, the surprising order of General Sherman, the march, the battles, the victorious entry into Savannah. As he walked, cold and hungry, but exultant, words came to fit his mood, and there took form in his mind the title and some of the words of a song — "Sherman's March to the Sea". The next day he

remained in the tent on the little pile of straw which served as a bed and completed the verses.

Our camp fires shone bright on the mountains
That frowned on the river below,
While we stood by our guns in the morning
And eagerly watched for the foe —
When a rider came out from the darkness
That hung over mountain and tree,
And shouted, "Boys up and be ready,
For Sherman will march to the sea."

Then cheer upon cheer for bold Sherman
Went up from each valley and glen,
And the bugles re-echoed the music
That came from the lips of the men.
For we knew that the stars in our banner
More bright in their splendor would be,
And that blessings from Northland would greet us
When Sherman marched down to the sea.

Then forward, boys, forward to battle,
We marched on our wearisome way,
And we stormed the wild hills of Resaca —
God bless those who fell on that day.
Then Kenesaw, dark in its glory,
Frowned down on the flag of the free,
But the East and the West bore our standards,
And Sherman marched on to the sea.

Still onward we pressed, till our banners
Swept out from Atlanta's grim walls
And the blood of the patriot dampened
The soil where the traitor flag falls;

Yet we paused not to weep for the fallen,
  Who slept by each river and tree;
But we twined them a wreath of the laurel
  As Sherman marched down to the sea.

O! proud was our army that morning
  That stood where the pine darkly towers,
When Sherman said: "Boys, you are weary,
  This day fair Savannah is ours."
Then sang we a song for our chieftain
  That echoed o'er river and lea,
And the stars in our banner shone brighter
  When Sherman marched down to the sea.

The writer was Adjutant Samuel H. M. Byers, of the Fifth Iowa Infantry. It happened that Lieutenant Rockwell, also a prisoner, was a composer of music. Borrowing a copy of the poem he carried it to his sleeping place under the hospital building and set it to music. The prison also had a Glee Club which was permitted to give a program in the afternoons from the porch of the hospital, provided they sang an equal number of Southern songs. One drizzly afternoon the leader announced that they had a new song and the men sang "Sherman's March to the Sea". It met an enthusiastic reception in the prisons; and before long Lieutenant Daniel W. Tower of the Seventeenth Iowa Infantry, upon his exchange, carried a copy out of the Cahawba Prison in Alabama,

concealed in his wooden leg. Byers became widely known as the writer of a popular song hit.

The close of the Civil War, however, left Byers uncertain as to his future, and the first years of peace must have been difficult and uncertain for him as they were for tens of thousands of other men who had to adjust themselves to peaceful pursuits after years in the army. He was nearly twenty-eight years of age, with health seriously impaired by the hardships of army and prison life. What he found to do during the first months of peace and freedom is not recorded. Apparently there was at first no thought of a literary career.

In 1868 Byers wrote his first prose work, a small volume entitled *What I Saw in Dixie; or Sixteen Months in Rebel Prisons.* This consisted largely of selections from a diary kept from the time of the capture of Vicksburg to the end of the war. It was dedicated to "Edward Edwards, the old slave of Columbia, South Carolina, who aided me in my escape".

One of the descriptions in this little volume recalls the story of Nero and the burning of Rome. When the Confederate troops withdrew from Columbia, they set fire to some stores of cotton and when the Union troops entered the capital city they found many buildings already burning. The victorious army, irrestrainable after months of

fighting and foraging, looted the wine cellars of the wealthy planters, and the city became a pandemonium. Fires, both accidental and intentional, raged everywhere. Distracted citizens removed the furniture from their houses, hoping to save something from the flames, but in the confusion it was impossible to move the larger pieces. Beautiful rosewood pianos stood unprotected in the streets and occasionally drunken soldiers stopped to play them, the music only adding to the wild discord, the whole scene lighted by the glare of the burning city.

More than forty years later, Major Byers, as he was then known, wrote a more extended account of his war experiences in the book which he called *With Fire and Sword*. Like the earlier volume this is gripping description of life in the Union army and in Southern prisons. Both books are unusually vivid and the reader sees war, even though he may have had no experience with which to assimilate the tragic events.

Listen to Byers as he tells in a few words the story of his recapture by the two Confederate cavalry officers. "The captain rode a dozen yards or so ahead, with a revolver in his hand. I trudged along in the sand at his side, faithfully hanging on to his stirrup strap. The lieutenant and Fritchie followed us in a like manner in the

moonlight. It seems to have been a romantic occasion, when I think of it now; we two Federals and these two Confederates, there alone in the moonlight, and the big pine trees and the white sands about." Perhaps it took a poet to see romance in a bitter disappointment.

A third volume of prose dealing with the Civil War, and perhaps the most important from the standpoint of history, is *Iowa in War Times,* published in 1888, during the interim in Byers's consular service. This is a history of the Civil War activities of the State of Iowa, Iowa regiments, and Iowa men, written in a clear, matter-of-fact style.

In later years, Byers wrote a number of articles for the *Annals of Iowa,* reminiscent of his war or pre-war experience. Among these were "How Men Feel in Battle; Recollections of a Private at Champion Hills" and "Recollections of Slave Days".

In the meantime, the soldier had become the diplomat. In 1869, the year following the publication of his first book, Major Byers was appointed United States Consul at Zurich, Switzerland, and on July 23rd, he and his newly married wife, Margaret Gilmour Byers, sailed on the *City of London* for Europe. He remained in Switzerland until July, 1884, when he was sent to Italy as

Consul General, but less than a year later he was replaced by a Democrat. In 1891 President Harrison reappointed him Consul General in Switzerland, but his appointment ended with the second administration of President Cleveland and in 1893 Major and Mrs. Byers returned to America and established a home at Des Moines, Iowa, which they named St. Helens, in memory of the little daughter who had died in Switzerland.

His consular service gave Major Byers new experiences and some leisure for writing. *Switzerland and the Swiss* was first published anonymously in 1875, because the rules of the State Department prohibit the publication of such commentaries by men in the service. A second edition, however, was published under the author's name. "The Swiss Rhine", published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in April, 1880; "The Lake Dwellers", a study of archeological discoveries near Zurich, which appeared in *Harper's* in February, 1890; and "A Forgotten Republic" (St. Gall), which appeared in the *Magazine of American History* for December, 1891, are some of the magazine articles based on his travels in Switzerland. These were descriptive and historical.

Major Byers appears to have violated the rule against published comments by foreign service

officials at least once. Convinced that some localities in Europe were systematically shipping their paupers to the United States, he wrote a letter denouncing the policy, which was published in the *New York Tribune* on November 12, 1880. It caused a huge ripple in the diplomatic sea, and nearly cost Byers his position. He was officially reprimanded — and personally commended — and the charge was dropped.

After his retirement from the consular service, Major Byers devoted himself mainly to literary work. In 1900 he published *Twenty Years in Europe,* a chatty volume based largely on his journal and correspondence, containing more than fifty personal letters from General W. T. Sherman with whom Byers had formed a close and enduring friendship.

Although most of the prose work of Major Byers was based on his war experiences or on information secured during his travels, he occasionally deviated from these fields. "Good Things from Dr. Johnson" in the *Magazine of American History* for October, 1891, and *A Layman's Life of Jesus,* published in 1912, are examples of these wider interests.

Major Byers is perhaps best known, however, as a poet. The story of "Sherman's March to the Sea" has already been told. Whether he had at-

tempted to write poetry before he was a prisoner of war is not known, but apparently he tried verse making as a diversion in the prison for on December 15, 1863, soon after he reached Libby Prison, he wrote to a friend at home in the manner of Hosea Biglow.

> Well, William! my boy, 'tis in prison I thank ye;
> They've got me, at last, just for being a Yankee!

In spite of the success of his famous lyric, it was not until 1884 that Major Byers published his first collection of poems, *The Happy Isles, and Other Poems.* This volume took its title from the poem written in commemoration of his daughter.

> So with new eyes I saw, and from afar
> Heard sweetest tones, and in the rosy west
> Where they had left the golden gates ajar,
> That she might come to give my spirit rest,
> I looked and saw the Islands of the Blest.

Many of the poems in this volume were written in a light or romantic vein. One of these, "If You Want a Kiss, Why, Take It", was often copied.

After Major Byers retired from the consular service, he devoted himself almost entirely to literary work. In 1896, he published a collection of war poems entitled *The March to the Sea,* probably his best work. This included the original lyric which had made Byers famous in 1865, and

contained in addition many poems describing the varied aspects of the expedition, and portraying very successfully the various moods of the participants — soldiers, civilians, enemies, and slaves. These run the gamut from the rollicking

> Then here's to the bummer who longest can ride,
> A sheep on his shoulder, his gun at his side.
> And to every brave fellow who goes on before
> To forage good food for the grand army corps.

to the poignant, haunting refrain which expresses the awe and joy of the slaves who heard the news of Sherman's advance:

> Last night I heard the whippoorwill,
> Good-bye;
> I think I hear his sweet voice still,
> Good-bye, plantation.
> An angel brought some good news round,
> Good-bye;
> Oh, don't you hear the joyful sound?
> Good-bye, plantation.
>
> . . .
>
> Oh, make your garments clean and white,
> Good-bye;
> Great news has come to you this night,
> Good-bye, plantation.
> Oh, Massa Linkum, make us free,
> Good-bye;
> Oh, let us hail the jubilee,
> Good-bye, plantation.

Major Byers has published several other collections of poems, among them *The Honeymoon and Other Poems*; *Poems of S. H. M. Byers*; and *The Pony Express*.

During the later years, he has made his home at Los Angeles, California. Long years have passed since the young officer, huddled in the tent in the prison yard, laboriously wrote out the words of the war song, "Sherman's March to the Sea". One by one his comrades have dropped out of the ranks and the death of his only son, Lawrence Marshall Byers, has brought sorrow and disappointment. In spite of this, Major Byers has felt the glamour and romance of the Spanish regime and he has written a number of poems recalling the days of Spanish friars, the tolling of the convent and monastery bells, the galloping of senors and senoritas along El Camino Real. Among his poems of California are "The Bells of Capistrano" and "In Arcadia: A Legend of San Luis Rey". Although he is now in his ninety-fifth year, Major Byers still writes poems for the Los Angeles *Times*.

At least three of his best-known poems relate to Iowa, his adopted State. One of these is the "Song of Iowa" which he wrote in 1897, using the old tune "Der Tannenbaum", to which the Maryland detachment had paraded in front of Libby

Prison long ago. "The Launching of the *Iowa*" was read in March, 1896. In October of the same year he read his poem "Iowa" at Burlington as part of the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the admission of Iowa as a State. Here Byers tells the story of the prairie Commonwealth — the sea, the glaciers, the discovery, the Indians, the pioneers — Iowa.

RUTH A. GALLAHER

Iowa

From October 1 to 8, 1896, the semi-centennial anniversary of the admission of Iowa into the Union was celebrated at Burlington. S. H. M. Byers wrote this poem for the occasion and read it on the opening day. It was originally published in pamphlet form by the Burlington Federation of Women's Clubs. — THE EDITOR.

TO THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER

A thousand years the prairies kept
  Their secret all unseen,
While yonder Mississippi swept
  Betwixt its forests green.
O, mightiest river of the West,
  Didst thou forever flow,
And were thy shores as now so blest
  A thousand years ago?

Well hast thou kept in countless years
  The secrets thou hast known;
The tales of Egypt's joys and tears
  Are graven on her stone.
But thou dost never tell of time;
  Of thy own birth the scroll
Thou hidest in the Delta's slime,
  By the far ocean's roll.

Where are the cities that have stood
When time and worlds were young?
Know'st thou if once beside thy flood
Men spoke the Norseman's tongue?
Where was the ancient Aztec's home —
By the dark northern pine?
And didst thou see his chieftains roam
To sunnier lands than thine?

Or hast thou seen thy own fair clime
More glorious still than now?
The orange blossoming in its time,
The grateful palm trees bow;
The patient camel kneeling wait
The driver's low command;
And felt soft winds blow at thy gate
Like airs from Samarcand?

Or wast thou cold in that far day?
Hast seen the glaciers gleam,
Hast heard the icebergs break away
Beyond thy frozen stream?
O, thou art great, as seas are great!
Or Alps, deep-robed in snow,
And *greater,* — they but stand and wait,
Thou dost forever flow.

DE SOTO SEES THE GREAT RIVER, 1541

'Tis centuries since De Soto
  Looked down on the beautiful stream;
A thousand years it had lain there,
  Like the maid in the fairy dream.

And silence was all about it,
  And silence was everywhere;
A thousand years of silence,
  By the beautiful river there.

And only the rivers flowing —
  And only the odorous breeze —
And the birds, and the blossoms growing
  Was heard by the forest trees.

And over the boundless prairies
  That swept to the river side,
It was all a sea of blossoms
  That bloomed in the spring and died.

It was all a sea of grasses
  That covered the leagues of earth,
Where the red deer hid its young ones,
  And the antelope had its birth.

The golden rod and the aster
  And the cardinal lily shone

On the prairies out in the moonlight,
In the land of the great unknown.

And the mounds of the long departed,
The tombs of the ancient dead,
The altars of perished races,
Stood there in the morning's red.

MARQUETTE AND JOLIET RE-DISCOVER THE RIVER, 1673, AND ARE THE FIRST TO SEE IOWA

When Louis reigned as King of France,
And Charles was King of Spain,
Two sturdy men set out to find
De Soto's stream again.

O, good Marquette, with Joliet,
In thy birch-bark canoe,
In the dark wilds and wilderness
Thou bearest the Christ cross through.

Thou bearest the Christ cross in thy hand,
The red man welcomes thee
Where'er his smoking wigwams stand,
By stream or inland sea.

Days, nights, in thy lone birch canoe,
Thou, with thy little band,
Didst wait and watch as swift it flew
Into the unknown land.

As swift it flew, thou know'st not where,
By forest, cliff and mound,
But ever thou hadst in thy prayer
The stream De Soto found.

Till, on one morning fair, in June,
Thy blessed eyes did see
The mighty river sweep along
In its calm majesty.

Ah! more than river, vast and wide,
He saw the forests rise
Above the steep hills on its side,
Like walls to paradise!

He climbed beyond the forests' height
Up to the great plateau;
The wondrous *prairies* met his sight
Like some vast ocean's flow.

Save that their waves with blossoms shone,
And no white sails were there,
But waves, and waves, and waves alone,
And odorous sweets in air.

He saw its sunsets golden dyed,
Felt its soft breezes cool —
"O, Iowa! How fair," he cried,
"Thou art the beautiful!"

THE FIRST WHITE MAN COMES

A hundred years their suns had set,
  Still silence reigned supreme,
Since good Marquette and Joliet
  Went down the mighty stream.

A hundred years, the ancient mounds
  Are standing where they stood;
The Indian's Happy Hunting Grounds
  Are still by lake and wood.

At last, at last, the white man comes;
  'Tis Julien, brave Dubuque.
With noise of fife and pounding drums
  And guns the hillsides shook.

And he has found within the land
  The wealth that long has lain, —
Ores rich as gold in Ophir's sand, —
  In his new "Mines of Spain."

Twenty long years the red man knew
  Brave Julien's honest worth,
And when they buried him there blew
  A sad wind on the earth.

High on a cliff above the stream
  They made his simple grave,

Where he might hear the eagle's scream
And look down on the wave.

For, in their wigwams, it was said,
Some day his spirit would
Leap from its lofty burial place
Down to the shining flood.

And painted chiefs, and warriors dight,
And maidens brown and fair,
Oft sought his grave at dead of night
To see if he were there.

And old, old men for many a moon
Went to that burial place,
Or watched beyond the shining dune
To see brave Julien's face.

And often yet, on moonlight nights,
Maids with their lovers climb
Above the city's shining lights
To talk of that old time.

And, shuddering, clasp their lovers' hands,
High on the dizzy place,
And think beyond the moonlit sands
They, too, see Julien's face.

THE INDIANS PASS AWAY

The scene is changed, and Julien's spirit walks
No more beside the Indian's lone tepee;
The wigwams all, the calumet, the "talks,"
Are gone like dreams beside some moaning sea.

I saw them pass as yestere'en I lay
On the green grass of yonder sloping wood;
Like in a dream I saw them pass away,
And in their place the hunter's cabin stood.

And on the trail where once the Indians went
The white-topped wagons of the pioneer
Crept in long lines to some new settlement
In the fair lands the red man held so dear.

It little helped that barter and not force,
Drove him away from his dear forest home;
Forever west the white man steered his course;
Forever west the Indian still must roam.

No more along the Mississippi's flood
The birch canoe its arrowy course could trace;
On moonlight nights no longer warriors stood
On yonder cliff to see dead Julien's face.

No more beside the little forest streams
The Indian maiden twined her braids of hair,

Nor watched she more the mirrored brook to dream
She saw the face of her true lover there.

In yonder wood by yonder billowy plain
The white man builds his cabins one by one;
The virgin sod yields to the yellowing grain,
The corn fields ripen in the golden sun.

Let him who *will,* forget the hearts that break
When a whole people leave their altar fires —
Their childhood home, their sacred wood, their lake,
The graves, still green, of their departed sires.

Yet must there be in happier lands afar
Green hunting grounds, the red man's heart to cheer,
There must be trees where the dear angels are,
Who loves God's woods to God himself is near.

THE PIONEERS

Touch memory's veil; who lived then can forget
The hardier lives of yonder pioneers?
The old log house — I see it standing yet,
Back from the road where the new home appears.

Ah! that log house, with its plain puncheon floor,
Its clapboard roof, and papered window screen,

Could it but speak and tell the tales once more
Of the old days that it and they have seen!

The simple fire-place, built of sticks and clay,
The unbolted door, on wooden hinges swung;
"*Come in,*" was writ on every heart that day,
The welcoming latch string to the stranger hung.

Then all were neighbors, whether far or near,
And all were friends, no matter rich or poor;
Misfortune claimed the rudest settler's tear,
Distress and loss were yet of pity sure.

And joys were shared by everyone the same;
To fair or feast each soul was bid to come;
No child but heard the welcomed stranger's name,
No hearth so small but by it there was room.

Then things were great that pass unheeded now —
The weekly mail, the school house in the wood,
The threshing days, the new-bought prairie plow,
The old-time clock that by the window stood.

The spelling school, where old as well as young,
Stood round the wall to spell each other down;
The singing master, the old songs he sung,
And singing, taught the names of state and town.

The circuit preacher on his monthly ride,
With simple ways, such as the Master taught:
Nor scrip he bore, nor gold, nor aught beside;
They welcomed him for the glad news he brought.

The meeting-house — the first green grave behind —
Ah! that first grave in yonder settlement;
The sweet-briar bush bends o'er it in the wind;
The plain board tells the year, the day she went.

Brown-haired and sweet and like a flower she grew
Till her soft eyes with love's dear lamps were lit;
Breathe not her name, enough, they loved who knew,
One heart string broke — her epitaph is writ.

* * * * * * *

Those far-off times, — who saw will not recall
The old-time weddings of that merrier day, —
The feast, the dance, the wedding-infair, — all
So strangely different from our modern way.

No perfumed notes announced the happy time;
From home to home the joyous news was sent;
The singing birds made merrier wedding chime
As friend and neighbor to the cabin went.

And many a youth across the prairies rode,
Whole heart, and free, into the odorous air,
Nor dreamed that Cupid watched yon rude abode,
That fate and love were waiting for him there.

Like a wild rose that over night had bloomed,
With eyes like skies where swallows love to swim,
She came, he saw, and all things were illumed, —
A simple rose, that waited there for him.

* * * * * * *

The guests have come; the marriage will begin,
The preacher's word in kindly mood is said;
The bride is kissed by all her kith and kin,
The table waits, the wedding feast is spread —

Quick flies the meal, the cabin floor is cleared;
The violin, in yonder corner, hear,
Old Jerry Church has stroked his bow and beard —
Old Jerry Church to all the county dear.

"Choose partners, all!" he lifts his bow and calls —
And all the night he tells the dances through;
Out on the grass, close by the chimney walls,
The table stands, the big decanter, too.

And all the night the merry dance goes on —
Eyes melt, hearts break, just as in marble hall;

O love, O love, whatever times are gone,
Thou still hast been the master of them all.

Let none deride these simple marriage ways,
Love sat with them by every wedding vow,
And courts were not, in those old-fashioned days,
For marriage scandal, as we see them now.

But not their weddings gave them joy alone —
The quilting bees, with rude and simple cheer —
The husking corn, where many a bright eye shone —
The kiss to him who found the lucky ear;

For them the grouse boomed at the early dawn,
The antlered elk roamed o'er the enflowered plain;
In the tall grass the red deer hid its fawn;
They knew the spot where the gray wolf had lain.

At times they heard the bison's mighty roar,
As in vast herds they battled long and far,
Or watched them thundering the broad prairies o'er
When terror-struck, like flying hosts of war.

Nature for them endowed with magic hand
A scene as fair as Araby, the blest —

Tired of the old, she touched with magic wand,
  There sprang to life *the prairies of the West.*

Not desert sands, and leagues of burning plains,
  Far and encircling to some ocean's brim —
But billowy waves of blossom-covered mains
  Swept in great seas to the horizon's rim.

And farther, farther, past the setting sun,
  Rolled grassy waves, now purple and now green;
Touched by the wind they bend, and bow, and run —
  It is the land that only God has seen.

A thousand years it blossomed just as now;
  A thousand years the harvest moons had set,
And suns arose, nor scythe, nor any plow,
  Nor human hands, had ever touched it yet.

And other scenes, and fierce, the pioneer
  Sees from his cabin, standing there alone,
When autumn's frost turns the green prairies sear,
  And these same billows into flames are blown.

Night comes: he sees with anxious heart the sky —
  Far, far away, a strange and reddening hue;

Long bars of light on the horizon lie,
Red streaks of flame the black clouds bursting through.

Some roaming hunter, doubtless, made his bed
In the tall grass, or by some cooling stream,
Lit his lone fire, nor, careless, saw it spread
Until too late, the whole night is agleam!

In bounds and darts the lighted grasses go;
Leaps to its start the dreaded *prairie fire,*
In long, long lines the burning billows glow,
Roars the night wind, the flames are leaping higher.

Like battle steeds th' extending lines rush on,
Black grows the night, save where their banners are.
One sweep, one roar, and flowers and grass are gone;
The moon goes out; there is not any star.

Wild, fierce, devouring, o'er the waste they come,
The very ground burns 'neath them as they pass,
As if the world were hurrying to its doom,
And earth and sky had turned to molten brass.

Nor battle scene, nor wild Niagara's roar,
Nor seething Aetna with its lava hiss,
Nor ocean, thrashing on its rocky shore,
So threatening seemed, yet beautiful, as this.

Alarmed, alone, by yonder little farm,
The settler guards like midnight sentinel;
Fights flame with flame, keeps house and stacks from harm,
And gives God thanks when all has ended well.

THEY BUILT THE STATE

'Twas scenes like this that fired our fathers' breasts
To love of nature, and to deeds of fame;
They built the state; still its foundation rests
On the bed-rock they quarried when they came.

They built the state; still its foundation rests
On truth and right her boundary lines were set.
O men, O youths, so may they ever be —
O sons of theirs be worthy of them yet!

They built the state, and when the conflict burst
To save its life their blood they freely shed;
In war's red lines they stood the very first,
And honor wept o'er their heroic dead.

They built the state, and lived to see it stand
  First in all things that make a people great;
Wealth, plenty, honor, traveled hand in hand, —
  There was no good but entered at its gate.

They built the state, more glorious than they thought,
  These simple carvers of an earlier time;
Though rude the tools and few with which they wrought,
  The passing years have made their work sublime.

And like in dreams they hear its praises sung,
  Its stretching seas of green and waving corn,
Its glorious soil, whence wealth and plenty sprung,
  Land of new hopes for millions yet unborn!

They built the state, and while its rivers flow,
  Deep, vast, resistless to yon ocean's tide,
May love for it and its new splendors grow
  Till all the world shall see how just our pride.

They built the state, our hands shall keep it whole,
  Proud and erect and glorious it shall be,
Lofty its path, forever great its goal —
  Beloved one, we pledge our lives to thee.

S. H. M. Byers

Comment by the Editor

THE PRESSURE OF TIME

Weight is the expression of force, and force is the cause of action. An apple falls. Power applied to mass produces change. The pressure of earth upon vegetable matter created coal. If the old paradox of the irresistible force and the immovable object must be solved, the answer is reaction. There is no motion without cause.

Perhaps the use of human energy is also the result of force. People respond to innumerable influences associated with instinct, desire, or environment. Whatever they do is involuntary — caused by conditions beyond their control. Such elemental compulsion as hunger and cold may supply the motive power of action, or the stimuli to move may be less tangible than food and shelter. Love and pride, sea and land, day and night — all determine human conduct.

The burden of time may be as effective as any specific reagent. Men delve and build and study and explain, and yet they never seem to finish. Always there is work ahead when the allotted time is up. Eventually a project is completed, but whoever began it may not live to see it done. Life

is without end, but not for any one: there is time enough, but not for you and me. "Give me only one more year, or day, or hour!" is the cry of mental anguish wrung from a hurried mortal by the pressure of time. Upon the industrious no less than the indolent, that inexorable force weighs heavily. It is the proof that inertia is natural, that action is essentially involuntary.

Nor does leisure provide an avenue of escape from the exigencies of time. Though the exertion of definite accomplishment may be avoided, the substitution of perpetual inconclusion is equally oppressive. A surplus of time may be as burdensome as overwork. It stimulates the mind. From random thoughts, ideas emerge; the hazy outlines of a reasoned plan appear; and then begins an endless task to make illusive concepts fit a pattern of philosophy. If the form of thought conforms in structural curvature to space, the mind proceeds upon concentric orbits, infinite in size and number — forever starting out and always coming back, over and over, interminably, ever striving and never attaining. There is no finality in circles.

No wonder that solitary confinement is the cruelest of punishments. Men who have such leisure thrust upon them find that the pressure of time intensifies their thinking to the limit of endur-

ance. Permanent contemplation may exhaust their sanity. But if their solitude were modified, imprisonment might be productive of original ideas. Some of the literary masterpieces of the world were written in jail. Confederate prisons seem to have made a poet of Major Byers. How much of every man's life is conditioned by opportunity in terms of time.

J. E. B.

THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

Established by the Pioneers in 1857
Located at Iowa City Iowa

PUBLICATIONS OF THE SOCIETY

The Quarterly Journal of History
The Palimpsest—A monthly magazine
The Public Archives Series
The Iowa Biographical Series
The Iowa Economic History Series
The Iowa Social History Series
The Iowa Applied History Series
The Iowa Chronicles of the World War
The Miscellaneous Publications
The Bulletins of Information

MEMBERSHIP

Membership in the State Historical Society may be secured through election by the Board of Curators. The annual dues are $3.00. Members may be enrolled as Life Members upon the payment of $50.00.

Address all Communications to

THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Iowa City Iowa