

Report of Major Williams

[One of the most dramatic episodes of the Spirit Lake Massacre was the Relief Expedition made up of Webster City and Fort Dodge men led by Major William Williams of Fort Dodge. Born in Huntington, Pennsylvania, in 1796, Williams arrived in Iowa in 1849 and joined the expedition sent to establish Fort Dodge on the Upper Des Moines in 1850. He was post sutler until the fort was abandoned in 1853 when he and Bernhart Henn bought the ground for a land company and laid out the town of Fort Dodge. When the Sioux threatened hostilities in northern Iowa after the removal of the troops, Major Williams was authorized by Governor James W. Grimes to take such action as was necessary to protect the frontier. The following report of Major William Williams on the Spirit Lake Relief Expedition addressed to Governor Grimes is printed as a part of the Spirit Lake Massacre story. The expedition was re-enacted in 1957 as a part of the centennial of the founding of Webster City. THE EDITOR]

FORT DODGE, IOWA, April 12, 1857. *"To His Excellency, James W. Grimes, Governor of the State of Iowa. "SIR: — Being called upon by the frontier settlers for aid in checking the horrible outrages committed upon the citizens living on the Little Sioux river, in Clay county, in the Spirit Lake settlements, and in Emmet county by the Sioux Indians, by authority you vested in me, I raised and organized and armed three companies*

of 30 men each, which were as we proceeded increased to over 37 men each. We took up our line of march on the 25th of March, and proceeded up the west branch of the Des Moines river to intercept the savages, who, reports said, were about to sweep all the settlements on that river. By forced marches through snow banks from fifteen to twenty feet deep, and swollen streams, we forced our way up to the state line, where we learned the Indians embodied 200 or 300 strong at Spirit Lake and Big Island Groves. . . .

About 80 miles up we met those who had escaped the massacre at Springfield, composed of three men unhurt and two wounded, and one female wounded, and several women and children, in all numbering some 15 or 20 persons. They escaped in the night, carrying nothing with them but what they had on when they were attacked — had nothing to eat for two days and one night. They were about exhausted and the Indians on their trail pursuing them. Had not our scouts discovered them and reported, there can be no doubt that they would have been murdered that night. We found them in a miserable condition, destitute of everything, three of them badly wounded and several of the women without bonnets or shoes. They had nothing on them but what they had the night they fled; the poor women wading breast deep through snow and water, and carrying their crying children.

We halted at a small lake that furnished sufficient timber to make fires and warm them, furnished them with provisions, and gave them blankets to shield them from the severe weather, and gave them all the relief in our power. Our surgeon dressed the wounds of the wounded, whose wounds were in a bad condition. We encamped there with them that night, posting sentinels and pickets, expecting to be attacked. Next morning we sent them on with our scout to what is known as the Irish settlement, to remain until we returned, the settlers above that point having abandoned their homes and embodied themselves at that place where they were engaged in building a block house. We proceeded on our march, throwing out in advance some 30 scouts, reconnoitering and examining every point where the enemy might possibly be found. Every point of timber, lake, and stream was closely examined, and we found very fresh traces of the Indians throughout the day. From these tracks and trails they had all taken their course for Spirit Lake, or in that direction. By forced marches we reached the state line, near Springfield, and encamped about sundown on the margin of a grove; detailed 60 men, armed with rifles and six-shooters, with orders to cook their suppers and supply themselves with cold rations, each company their own, and be ready to march all night, in two divisions of 30 men each, and surprise the Indians before daylight next

morning; furnished them with guides, as the information we had just received was that the Indians were embodied at or near the trading house of a half-breed by the name of Gaboo. We proceeded with great hopes of overtaking and giving a good account of them; but to our great mortification we found that they had all fled at the approach of 50 regulars from Fort Ridgley. . . .

The conduct of the troops from Fort Ridgley is hard to be accounted for. On Thursday, the 26th of March, the Indians attacked Springfield and neighborhood. The citizens defended themselves as well as they could. The battle and pillaging lasted until nightfall, when the Indians withdrew. On Friday, in the afternoon, the troops from Fort Ridgley arrived all well mounted on mules. . . . Said officers lay over from Friday evening till Sunday morning without pursuing or making any effort to overtake the Indians, who, they must have known, had taken off four white women as prisoners.

On Sunday morning he, the commanding officer, set out on their trail, and followed them half the day, finding their camp fires, overtaking three or four straggling squaws, let them go, and finding all sorts of goods thrown and strewn along their trail to lighten their load and expedite their flight. When he could not have been over half a day's march from them he stopped and returned the same evening (Sunday) to Springfield. When

he ordered the men to return, they expressed a wish to follow on, and said they would put up with half rations if he would allow it. His reply was that he had no orders to follow them.

On Monday he set out for Spirit Lake to bury the dead, etc. He went to the first house, that of Mr. Marble, found one dead body, buried it, and returned to Springfield.

It is certain such troops, or rather such officers, will afford no protection to our troubled frontier settlers. Think of his conduct! His men, all well mounted, turning back when he was not a half day's march off them; they loaded down with plunder, and horses, and mules, and carrying off with them four respectable women as prisoners. The Indians were known to have twenty-five or thirty head of horses, and eight or ten mules, taken from the settlers. . . . on the Little Sioux. . . .

Throughout their whole course they have completely demolished every settlement, killed all the cattle, ravished the women and most scandalously abused them. They stood over the men with their guns cocked, while they were engaged in their hellish outrages. Along that river they approached, and got into the houses through professions of friendship, and with a rush seized the men and arms, taking the people by surprise, attacking in such a way that one family could not help the other; all attacked simultaneously, robbed them of everything, in the midst of cold weather

and deep snows. They did not commence to kill the settlers till they reached Dickinson county. There, at Spirit Lake, it appears that the settlers had prepared to defend themselves, as well as they could, and from all appearances they fought bravely for their families. The settlers of Spirit Lake numbered over forty souls, not one of whom is left to tell the tale. Finding that the troops from Fort Ridgley had not buried the dead, I detailed twenty-five men to proceed twelve miles to the lake, and reconnoiter that district, and if no Indians were discovered, to inter the dead as an act of humanity. Guides were procured, and they set out under the command of Capt. Johnson and Lieut. Maxwell, of Company C. They could find no Indians, but found their encampment, and a dreadful destruction of property. They performed the sad duty of interring the dead so far as they could find any. They found and buried twenty-nine bodies, and found the skulls and bones of those who were burned in the ruins of a house, which, with one buried by the troops from Ridgley, made in all thirty-two dead found at Spirit Lake, seven killed at Springfield, and twelve missing at the lakes, certainly killed. It is supposed they are lying off at a distance, killed in attempting to escape. Some two or three were found who had been shot in attempting to escape, four of their women taken off prisoners, and three badly wounded. I may sum up as follows: In all,

forty-one killed; twelve missing, no doubt killed; three badly wounded, two I fear mortally; four women prisoners. Besides several men from Boone river and counties east of this, who crossed the Des Moines river with a view of going to Dickinson county and the lakes, have never yet been heard from — supposed to be killed on their way.

Too much praise cannot be bestowed on the men I have had under my command on this occasion. Officers and men, without exception, have done their duty. They endured the greatest privations and fatigue without a murmur. For seventeen days they pressed forward on their march, waded rivers and creeks breast deep, and tugging wagons through snow banks, sleeping on the prairies, frequently in their wet clothes, expecting every mile, after reaching thirty miles, to meet the Indians, as their threat was at Sioux river that they would sweep the Des Moines river settlements. Our men suffered very much, owing to the severe change and snowstorm. We have fourteen men badly frozen, and two lost, Capt. Johnson, of Webster City, and Mr. Burkholder, of this place, both frozen to death in a snowstorm. They were separated in returning from the lake. From the state of the men who succeeded in getting back to camp, both of these men must be dead. Every search has been made for them, but no discovery as yet. So severe was the weather that

those who were picked up and got in were so much frozen and exhausted that they were crawling on their hands and knees when found, and three or four of them had lost their minds, becoming perfectly deranged, and knew no one.

As near as I could ascertain, the Indian force was from 150 to 200 warriors, judging from their encampments, etc. The number of Indians must be fifteen or twenty killed and wounded. From the number seen to fall killed, and judging from the bloody clothes and clots of blood in their encampments, the struggle at the lakes must have been very severe, particularly the one at the house of Esq. Mattock. Eleven dead bodies were found at this house, together with several broken guns. They appear to have fought hand to hand.

I have to inform your Excellency . . . never . . . have such outrageous acts been committed on any people. We have no accounts of Indians committing such outrages on females as they have done — no doubt committed by the half breeds. We have a host of destitute and wounded persons thrown upon us to provide for, both from Little Sioux river and the upper Des Moines river, as well as our own frozen and disabled men.

I forward this hasty and somewhat confused report; will give another soon, more in detail. . . .
Very respectfully yours,

W. WILLIAMS.