

## "John Brown in Iowa - An Exciting Journey to the Front" Letter to the Editor, May 3, 1883

### *Just Before the War*

#### *John Brown in Iowa – An Exciting Journey to the Front.*

To the Editor National Tribune:

Some of the boys who once wore the blue, and who are acquainted with incidents connected with my enlistment in a Kansas regiment, while I was a citizen of Iowa, have urged me to write something in relation thereto for your columns. I had partially promised to do so, but think it doubtful whether I should have carried out my intention at this time, had I not read the interesting article by Colonel C.H. Ray, of Mantua, Ohio, concerning John Brown, which appeared in The Tribune of March 22. It recalled very forcibly to my mind a train of exciting events through which I passed, and, with your permission, I will try to give an account of some of them.

I am at this time a resident of Franklin county, Kansas, within the borders of which John Brown once lived, and from whence he departed on the long journey through Kansas and Nebraska, and thence across the State of Iowa, referred to by Colonel Ray. In 1858, however, I resided in Iowa, directly on the line of his march, and saw him and his party while en route. My home was at West Liberty, fifteen miles east of Iowa City, on the railroad leading to Davenport and Chicago. Iowa City was at that time the western terminus of railroad travel in Iowa. Beyond that point all travel was by wagon train. Sometime in the winter of 1858-59 – probably after January 1, '59 – it came to the knowledge of the writer and two other men and their families, that John Brown was on his way through Iowa with a party of fugitives from bondage, en route to Canada. They first stopped at Springdale, a Quaker settlement a few miles distant, and when it became generally known that they were actually in the country, and had, furthermore, announced their intention of making a long visit for the purpose of obtaining a much-needed rest, it occasioned a great deal of excitement throughout all that section of the State.

Friends and foes alike were much exercised as to what would be the result of their presence. Rumors of them most sensational character were circulated. Among other reports was one that officers from Missouri, with assistance from Iowa City, would attempt to capture the party at Springdale. However, although they were there several weeks, the old man did not seem to be in the least disturbed by the exciting rumors or the fears of his friends. He remained impassive and silent, his plans known only to himself and a trusted few. The men with him were all of that devoted number that met their death at Harper's Ferry, and it is certainly safe to say that any attempt to capture them would have been met with the same determination that they afterwards displayed. At last, when his preparations had been completed, John Brown made his appearance suddenly one night, with scarcely an hour's warning, at the homes of the three families residing at West Liberty, with all his men and the colored fugitives, and a number of volunteers from the Quaker settlement. They were quartered in the houses, and a mill near by was used as a store-room for their baggage and provisions necessary for their journey.

Early the next morning a train from the West left a box-car near the mill, ready for use. Before the arrival of the train that was to take them forward, however, it became known throughout the village that something unusual was going on at the mill, and a large crowd soon gathered, but it proved friendly, and many a helping hand was extended to the fugitives by persons who forgot, for the time being at least, the existence of that infamous law that sought to make bloodhounds of Northern freemen. A few days after their departure came the news of their safe arrival on Canadian soil. Colonel Ray says the party consisted of six colored people from Missouri. When the party left West Liberty, however, it included thirteen colored people. Among the men with Brown, whose names and personal appearance I well remember, were Kagi, Stephens, Carpenter, and Tidd. Further than the fact of their arrival in Canada no word was received concerning any one of their number until the world was electrified by the news of their attack on Harper's Ferry. Then only did we learn that two of our own Iowa boys had enlisted with Brown, and were with him in the raid. These were the brothers, Edwin and Barclay

Coppich, of the Springdale settlement. It is well known that Barclay Coppish was one of the number who finally escaped to Canada. His life from that time to the opening of the war of the rebellion was that of a fugitive. He made occasional visits to his home in Iowa, but his presence would soon be discovered, and the Virginia officers would be upon his track.

### **The First Volunteers**

The bombardment of Fort Sumter made him once more free, and he returned to his home and went openly among men as prior to the Harper's Ferry raid. Going to Kansas, he was offered a commission as first lieutenant in one of the regiments to be raised for "Lane's brigade," and his commission depending on the recruiting of his company, he made two trips to Iowa for the purpose of enlisting men among his former friends and neighbors.

On his first visit he found but a few men ready, but such was his impatience that he went out at once with them. The second visit was also brief, and on the 29<sup>th</sup> of August, 1861, he again set out for Kansas, taking with him, this time, six recruits, viz, Joseph Westfall, Thomas Westfall, Christian Fording, Henry Montgomery, Oliver Smith and the writer. We reached Quincy, Illinois, by steamer, without having experienced other than the ordinary incidents of travel. Disembarking, however, to take the train for St. Joseph, Missouri, we found everything in confusion. Trains for several days past had been attacked on their trips to and from St. Joseph, and the alarm was such that no train left that day or the day following. We finally got away from Quincy on the morning of September 3, at which time trains from Quincy and Hannibal were united at Palmyra, Missouri and proceeded from thence as one train. About five miles out from Palmyra a man emerged from a corn-field, and, having signaled the train to stop, informed us that he was one of the crew of a freight train ahead of us which had been attacked and ditched a short distance further on. We accordingly returned to Palmyra, but on arriving there we found that the Quincy train had left, and we were compelled to choose between staying at Palmyra or falling back upon Hannibal.

The Mississippi River seemed to us at that time to possess many advantages as a base of operations, and so we decided to keep on to Hannibal. It so happened that even there we found friends, and my recollection is that we remained two days before another train ventured out. We left Hannibal, finally, on the morning of September 6, and our trip that day across the State of Missouri was one not soon to be forgotten. Whether the loyal element was overawed, or whether it did not exist, I did not know at the time, but certain it is that the secession party was most demonstrative. We were constantly hearing that this or that local leader was mustering his men, and we saw at several points bodies of armed troops, evidently hostile, as the train was twice fired upon, though from such a distance that no harm was done. It was always possible to tell by the actions of the train men or the sudden increase of speed when we were in the vicinity of dangerous ground, and at such times a sudden desire seemed to seize the passengers to drop below the line of the car windows for awhile! At one stage of our journey, as we were coming into a small station, we saw near the depot a long line of men, which proved, on closer acquaintance, to be an Illinois regiment of infantry. We were told that it was Colonel Morgan L. Smith's regiment. It was the first time we had seen a regiment of boys in blue, and we thought it a glorious sight.

### **A Taste of Rebel Malignity**

Thus the day slowly passed, and as night approached and we found ourselves nearing our destination we began to flatter ourselves that we would pull through all right after all. The last way-station was passed, night had closed in about us, and our next stopping place would be St. Joseph. I was curled up on a seat near the rear door of the car half asleep, when the conductor pulled the check from my hat and I arose with a quick start. At this he burst into a hearty laugh; remarked "all right, nobody hurt," and passed on immediately into the next car. I remember, as if it were yesterday, his looks and words and the load banging of the doors after him as he passed through. The next moment there came a sudden jar and shock, and I seemed to be flying through the air. Then the hissing of escaping steam, and the screams, groans, yells and curses of my companions told me that some great catastrophe had occurred.

The cause was soon known. The bridge across the Platte River had been fired during the day, but only the timbers at the eastern end had been burned through when the fire was extinguished by the fall of the burning portions into the river, and so, without warning, the train plunged through the bridge at such a rapid speed that the engine leaped half way across the gap made by the missing span and crashed through into the water below, the cars piling on and over it in a mass of ruin. My story has nothing to do with details further than they concerned our own little company; but I will say here, that there were about one hundred persons on the train, including train men and passengers, and all of the former, except one, and a number of the latter were killed, while many were seriously wounded. At no time that night, indeed, were more than ten or twelve men in condition to render assistance to their fellow-travelers. Twenty-three dead were taken into St. Joseph by the wrecking train – among them two of our own number, viz: Coppich and Fording. It was about 10 o'clock in the evening when the accident occurred, and I saw none of my comrades for several hours afterward.

As for myself, I was on the ground at the foot of the eastern abutment in a few minutes after the shock, but could never recall fully how I got there. I have a confused remembrance of going through a window and alighting in the water; then, finding myself unhurt, I joined the few men able to work and busied myself all night long in getting out the wounded and

caring for them as best I could. Towards daybreak I saw Joseph Westfall on the bank, near a fire that some one had built. He had a broken ankle, a broken jaw and a fractured shoulder. Smith was also terribly bruised and cut about his head and shoulders. Tom Westfall and Montgomery had been sitting in the front end of the car, and having been buried under the debris were not released until it was almost day. Both were bruised and scratched, but not seriously injured. This we got our first taste of rebel malignity. It was our first battle and our loss was heavy – four out of seven. Some of the wounded who were carried out and placed on the bank, insisted that in the firelight they had seen men moving through the woods that surrounded us, but I saw none myself and am inclined to believe there were none there.

### **Reporting for Duty**

The next day, when the wrecking train came down from St. Joe, we carried our dead and wounded comrades with us, and were fortunate enough to get passage by the first train for Weston. On the way down we made the acquaintance of a Leavenworth man, whose name I cannot recall, who assisted us greatly in many ways and at whose instance a company of citizen-soldiers took us into their care. This company afterward acted as escort at the funeral of Coppich and Fording, which took place the day after our arrival, at Pilot Knob cemetery, near the city. After the burial my two injured comrades and myself went to Fort Leavenworth and reported to the commandant, Major Prince, of the Regular army, who treated us with great kindness and listened to our story with apparently deep interest. He told us that we should have landed at the fort first with our dead and wounded, but assigned us to quarters, and, directing us to report for duty and rations to Captain Swoyer for the present, sent an ambulance to the city for Smith and Westfall, and had them removed to the post hospital.

We remained at Fort Leavenworth three weeks, performing our regular allowance of guard and other duties, when a company of men of the Fifth Kansas came in and we were immediately ordered to join them and proceed to Fort Scott. Previous to this Smith has returned to Iowa. Joe Westfall being still in the hospital, however, when we received our orders, we called to bid him good-by, but we had no sooner told him where we were going than he declared that there was no good-by in the case, for he intended to go with us, and in spite of all remonstrance he got up from his cot, and, taking French leave of the post hospital, hobbled out and across the parade ground, where the company was in line, and started with us on a march of one hundred and fifty miles. Of course he never could have accomplished the distance, but he had the pluck to try it, and would have marched until he dropped had we not got him into an ambulance as soon as possible. Without further adventure we reached our regiment in the field in Southwestern Missouri early in October, 1861, and a few weeks later "Lane's brigade" was in Springfield, Mo., and a part of Fremont's army.

Such is my story, comrades. To me there is nothing so fascinating as the plain and simple narratives recited or written by the common soldier. As General Logan is reported by The Tribune to have said: "The soldier can give a better account of a march or a battle, than any many who was not there."

E.H. Gregg,  
Late First Serg't, Co. C, 10<sup>th</sup> Kan. Inf,  
Ottawa, Kan.