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Sioux City Frontier Guards

During the spring of 1861, many of the citizens of Sioux City were apprehensive about Indian depredations. The town was but a sprawling frontier outpost, isolated and relatively vulnerable to concerted attack. While the panic which followed the Spirit Lake Massacre of 1857 had abated, sporadic Indian outbreaks continued to remind Sioux Citizens of their potential danger. Refugees from these raids filtered into the small city and rumor spread concerning Sioux activities along the Floyd and Little Sioux rivers. Simultaneously, regular army troops needed in the South were being withdrawn from garrisons in Minnesota and Dakota. Under these circumstances it seemed advisable to organize a militia force to protect the town and to patrol the neighboring territory.

Governor Samuel J. Kirkwood realized the imminent danger and asked the War Department to send arms and ammunition. To direct the organization of home guards he appointed Caleb Baldwin of Council Bluffs and A. W. Hubbard of Sioux City as his aids and proposed that the companies be called Frontier Guards. When the

General Assembly met in May to consider emergency legislation, the Governor urged provision for the defense of the settlers in northwest Iowa. In response to his appeal the legislature authorized the enlistment of home guards and a regiment of mounted riflemen to be armed and paid by the State.

Meanwhile, a small company of Guards had been recruited in Sioux City. While these militiamen were not in active service, they were supposed to patrol the streets at night and be ready to go on expeditions into the hinterland. It was also hoped by some of the harassed local merchants that the Guards might curb Indian begging. If these native vagrants did not actually beg, they often wanted to bargain a bowl of unappetizing berries for scarce, long-hoarded sugar or make some equally unwelcome trade.

Another group of citizens favored the formation of the Guards as a palliative for the economic distress that had afflicted Sioux City since the depression four years earlier. The small frontier city had developed more rapidly than had the surrounding country, and it still lacked railroad connections with the eastern markets. Although the economic crisis of 1857 had passed, it remained sharply etched in the memories of most Sioux Citians. Indeed, the town had not yet completely

recovered, since a number of merchants were still going bankrupt and many men were still unemployed in the spring of 1861. Thus the formation of the Frontier Guards, as a State-supported company, was welcomed as an effective form of work relief.

The original commissioned officers were William Tripp, Captain; William R. Smith, First Lieutenant; and Andrew J. Millard, Second Lieutenant. Although these officers often had difficulty in mustering more than a score of guardsmen, ninety-five names appeared on the roll at various times. Many men would plow corn or cut grass for a week and then be called off for an expedition. They served terms of various lengths and claimed pay for the actual number of days on duty. Since the Frontier Guards existed but a few months, no one was on active duty for any considerable period. Governor Kirkwood, in scrutinizing the pay roll, commented in some bewilderment that this was a strange method of operating a military organization. He did admit, however, that apparently the Guards had been honest in presenting their claims.

The dauntless Frontier Guards conducted several military expeditions into the surrounding territory. While the troop often marched on the basis of unconfirmed rumor, prompt action was

necessary if the small and mobile Indian bands were to be intercepted. A few weeks after the organization of the Guards, reports of Indian thefts in the region along the Little Sioux River reached Sioux City. In the absence of Captain Tripp, Lieutenant Smith and fifteen men started in reasonably hot pursuit.

The company was scarcely prepared for a long expedition, since the commissary outfit was woefully inadequate. It was in the charge of a man whose sole qualification consisted of a few months' service as a private in the Mexican War. After the troops had left the city, Lieutenant Smith discovered that although the supplies included a surprising abundance of sugar there was no whisky, very little meat, and almost no flour. While the company did not know just where the Indians were or how many of them to expect, it pushed on into the valley of the Little Sioux. Unfortunately, the Indians, if Indians there were, disregarded the rules of military campaigning and did not move in the direction expected. The command was gone about three days but never succeeded in locating the elusive enemy.

When the troop returned to Sioux City, Lieutenant Smith made a stirring speech. In this oration he praised the valor, if not the sense of direction, of his men. The only flaw in the wel-

coming ceremony was the obvious inability of the Guards to execute the manual of arms. Since this traditional military ritual was considered both effete and superfluous in the frontier country, the incident caused little embarrassment.

A few days after the troop had returned, another cry for help came from the Little Sioux River section. Two aged settlers of the threatened region brought the news to Sioux City early in July. Since the first of April, they said, more than thirty horses had been stolen at Smithland, Correctionville, and Ida Grove. Under the command of Captain Tripp, the Guards again departed with flying banners and stirring martial music. This time there could be no doubt that Indians were about, since only the prompt action of a sentry prevented them from stealing all the company's horses. The shouts of the sentry drove the marauders into the blackness of the night: his attempt to shoot was balked by the fact that there was no cap on his gun. Nevertheless, the troop was aroused and followed the Indians for several miles until dawn broke in the eastern sky and further pursuit seemed futile.

There was a brief exchange of shots during the night, in which William Roberts and Isaac Pendleton were wounded. It was not definitely established, however, whether these men were wounded

by the Indians or inadvertently shot by their colleagues. In the darkness and extreme confusion that prevailed, it was difficult to distinguish between friend and foe. While the troop did not actually catch the Indians during that hectic night pursuit, the chase apparently drove the robbers away.

On the same day that the Frontier Guards departed on their Little Sioux campaign, an Indian band struck at the outskirts of Sioux City. On July 9, 1861, the Indians killed two prominent citizens, Thomas Roberts and Henry Cordua. These men were tending their crops on a tract about a mile and a half east of the city. After slaying the two settlers, the Indians stole their horses and fled. Since the two whites were well-liked and both left big families, popular indignation ran high and retaliatory action was demanded of the Guards. Captain Tripp and an augmented company marched about fifty miles northeast of Sioux City. Although the Indians were reported to have fled in that general direction, they left no discernible traces. The Guards returned after a few days of determined but fruitless search.

In the autumn of 1861, the Frontier Guards conducted an extended campaign in the direction of Sioux Falls, about one hundred miles distant. They returned by way of Spirit Lake, the site of

the massacre in 1857. Since the troop did not engage in actual combat with their Indian adversaries, the only casualty suffered was the accidental wounding of John Currier, a private in the company. The Guards found no Indians, but they did operate as a sort of preventive patrol which probably minimized Indian raids and reassured the settlers.

The Guards were not elaborately equipped on these expeditions into the surrounding territory. While the company possessed adequate mounts and fairly high-calibre arms, other supplies were never abundant. War bills for goods bought in Sioux City on behalf of the Guards reflect the small-scale nature of their procurement. These documents make strange reading in 1942, when mechanized, "total" war has rendered expenditures of billions a commonplace.

One of these bills reads: "Lieut. W. R. Smith bought of D. T. Hedges this, the 10th day of June, 1861, 8 lbs. of Ground Coffee, \$2.00". Another bill, presented by the Pioneer Stove and Tin House, included these items:

12 Qt. Pail and Cover	\$1.00
3 Pt. Cups @ 10¢	.30
10 Tin Plates @ 10¢	1.00
	<hr/>
	\$2.30

A bill on behalf of L. D. Parmer included the following enlightening items:

1 Bbl. (60 lbs.) Soda Crackers @ 12½¢	\$7.25
2 Lbs. Jap. Tea @ \$1	2.00
3 Boxes Matches @ 10¢	.30
50 Lbs. Brown Sugar @ 12½¢	6.25
56 Lbs. Clear Side Bacon @ 12½¢	7.00
1 Keg Powder (best)	20.00
50 Lbs. Bar Lead	6.25
2 Grain Sacks @ 20¢	.40

\$49.45

(Allowed June 14, 1861)

In the fall of 1861, it became apparent that the Frontier Guards had outlived their usefulness. In accordance with a special order of the Secretary of War, under date of August 14, 1861, the Sioux City Cavalry, a United States Army unit, was formed. This mounted company, recruited chiefly in Sioux City, included some of the guardsmen. Andrew J. Millard was the captain. The final meeting of the Frontier Guards was held at Casady's Hall on October 12, 1861. Thus passed a slightly comic-opera phase in the basically grim and unremitting struggle to eradicate the menace of Indian attack.

During the fall of 1861 and through the following winter, only occasional rumors of Indian

depredations disturbed the quiet on the northwest border. Then suddenly, in August, 1862, a spark touched off the powder keg of Indian hatred and the Sioux under Little Crow went on the warpath. At New Ulm and other places not far above the northern border of Iowa, they perpetrated the bloodiest massacre in American history. Terror-stricken settlers fled from their homes to seek protection in larger communities. Troops were rushed to Sioux City. The Indians, however, did not invade Iowa. Later that fall the Northern Iowa Border Brigade was organized to guard the frontier at a chain of garrisons. Part of the cavalry company was stationed at Sioux City and part at Spirit Lake. But the danger was over. The Federal government punished the hostile Indians so severely that they never again seriously menaced the tranquillity of the Iowa frontier.

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