Transcript of “Personal Recollections of the Battle of Pilot Knob” 6 June 1906 by David Agnew Wilson (from the Cyrus A. Peterson Battle of Pilot Knob Research Collection, Box 8, Folder 8, Missouri History Museum Library, St. Louis, MO)

Personal Recollection

of the

Battle of Pilot Knob

In December of 1863 having resigned the chaplaincy of the 8th regiment of the Missouri State Militia – Col. J. H. McClurg – I took charge of the Presbyterian Church of Ironton, Mo.

Pilot Knob, a mile from the Court House at Ironton, was then the terminus of the Iron Mountain Rail Road and naturally became the headquarters for the quartermaster and Commissary Department for South East Missouri. Ironton, midway between Pilot Knob and Arcadia, was the focus for refugees, white and black, for the lower counties and Arkansas. At one time quite a considerable force was posted at Pilot Knob; but after Steele’s division marched South only a small body held Fort Davidson.

Late in September 1864 the report reached Ironton that Price’s army, variously estimated from 15,000 to 35,000 was marching from the South on Pilot Knob. It was agreed that when his troops were nearing Ironton M [sic] a gun would be fired at the fort as a signal for the men of Ironton and vicinity to repair thither.

On Sabbath, Sept. 25th, I had preached at 11 o’clock, and the congregation was singing the concluding hymn when the report of a cannon fired at the fort broke upon our ears. When the stanza was finished I remarked, “We all understand what that meant. I hope every man in the house, will, as soon as he gets his arms, report to the fort, as I shall myself. To the ladies I would advise to return and remain at your homes if you would preserve your household property. Your persons, I think will be safe.”

Most, if not all, complied with my request. It, however proved a false alarm. A small body of cavalry had met the advanced guard of Shelby’s Division which marched through Farmington, and crossed the Iron Mountain R.R. at Mineral Point. Of course this apprised us that Price was near he was confidently expected at anytime.

About 1 o’clock Monday I was on my way to the Post Office in the Northern part of the town, skirting it on the East side, when I saw a company of cavalry on the main street of Ironton going South. I had not reached the P. O. when I heard pop, pop, pop. Satisfied that skirmishing had begun between our company of cavalry and the advance of Price’s army, I at once returned home. The encounter took place at a point on the Fredericktown road where a road leaves it for Arcadia.

My object in returning home was to get a shotgun which I kept and to say good bye to my family. It was my purpose to fall in with a company of home guards commanded by Capt. Franz Dinger, camped between my house and the Presbyterian Church in the shadow of some stately oaks. As I left my house a short distance from the Main street on the Fredericktown road, our company of cavalry was coming back pell-mell the fastest foremost. The open space around the saw mill on Stout’s creek was crowded with rebel cavalry apparently hesitating whether to advance or retreat.

When I left my house the company of the home-guards had disappeared. I know not whither, and I kept on toward the fort. Before I had reached the church, a ball struck the ground and raised the dust within a yard of me, when I thought it best to get out of range, and turned into a short street running East into open ground. I had scarcely left that street when three rebel horsemen entered it. Supposing they were after me, I made for a tree a hundred yards or more North East behind which I meant to defend myself. Instead of following me, however, they kept on straight East for a cavalry camp which our men had left an hour before. They were more eager for plunder than for me, and for which, I will confess, I was not sorry.

Pursuing my way forward, I soon saw a section of artillery going South, when I returned and set out for Arcadia where my niece and son were at the Academy. Meeting them on their homeward way, I concluded to see how the families of my church a number of which were strung along the Fredericktown road [were]. Beyond Stout’s creek, the fence on the East side of the road was down giving the artillery room to maneuver. In this open space on of our cavalry lay dead. Going on I found the women and children at home. One of the five Russell brothers – Cyrus- had been taken prisoner. Ordered to march, he was slow in complying and was rapped over the head with a pistol in the presence of his wife. Mrs. Smith, a sister of the Russells had been at her sister’s, Mrs. Dr. Farrar’s, obliquly [sic] across the road, seeing rebel soldiers at her house and on going home found them cutting up her parlor carpet; as they said for saddle clothes. Remonstrating them for their unsoldierly conduct, they left doing but little damage. At William Russell’s, the farthest of them from town, a squad demanded the arms in his house. Leaving them on the road, he went to the house for them, but changing his mind made through the back door for the brush. Becoming tired waiting for him and the arms, they entered the house, and helping themselves to such things as they wished, emptied and mixed together the flour, sugar, salt, pepper which they did not use.

When I returned home my good wife thought I would be safer at the fort than at home. So about dusk I bade them good bye. With the body of a soldier who had been killed near the Court house that afternoon, as a companion, I rode in an ambulance to the Knob.

With the retreat of the rebel advance guard the fight for that day ceased. The two forces, very unequal in point of numbers, as I learned afterward, bivwacked [sic] face to face at the distance of a few hundred yards, Stout’s creek separating them, Eastward of the Fredericktown road. Early next morning firing was renewed, our men falling back toward the Knob. Soon my house was directly between the hostiles and, of course, much exposed. The house being frame, and presenting but slight resistance to even musketry, wife surrounded a bed with mattresses, and under it she and the children took refuge. Curiosity, however, was stronger than fear, and now and then they would rush to the windows to see how the battle was progressing. Before 8 o’clock the enemy planted a battery on the road to the Knob where a stream crosses it, say 300 yards from the fort. A few balls from it flew over our heads, doing no damage, yet as they passed I found myself greeting them with a respectful bow. At the third discharge of one of our 32 pounders, having got the range, their battery was silenced and removed. It was taken round to the South side of Shepherd Mountain, and planted on the North side a little over the crest in line with the rifle pits running a little West of South from the fort. The instruction, no doubt, was to rake the rifle pit, but being so much higher the plunging fire did little damage.

There was considerable skirmishing between some small parties from the fort, both near the Knob and on the mountain. It was with the latter that the Rev. Mr. Rowland, a Presbyterian minister in Wayne County, near Patterson, was wounded slightly in the foot; and taken prisoner. Marched before a rebel colonel, he ordered him to take off his shirt; saying, that no man should wear a better shirt than he. Without shirt or coat a gunny sack was the covering of his body during the chilly night and lodging on the damp ground. Made prisoner Tuesday afternoon, he had nothing to eat till Wednesday night; and then only corn filched from the horses. Friday morning at Potosi, when ordered to march he hailed a rebel officer and told him how he had fared. Expressing surprise, he at once gave orders to take him and others to the remains of a beef that had been slaughtered, with the glad word to help themselves. At the Osage river [sic] he broke down, and unable to go further, a Major of the Confederate force have him a discharge, as if had been one of their number. He found kind treatment in the home of a hospitable German, who sustained him for a week or more till he was able to travel and withal gave him an overcoat, plain, indeed, but a great treasure to him at that season in his nakedness. It was near three weeks before he got back to Ironton. Making his home for a few days at my house, one day after exploring Shepherd Mountain, he reported that he had discovered the bodies of about twenty rebel soldiers unburied. He said it seemed as though when just passing over the crest they had been met by our force, and shot down before they had time to shoot. Shortly afterward I made a personal examination of that part of the mountain, but I discovered no corpses. I will not say it was only the lively imagination of the brother that pictured the scene. But the fact is that for some time his mind was a good deal rattled. It was reported, I will not vouch for its truth – that to someone remaking that it was hard battle, he replied, “You may well say it was a hard battle. I went into it with a brand new rifle, and I wore the barrel plumb out.” But he was a good man, a good patriot, and a good preacher, and living till he was over 90.

Dismissing the episode, I resume my narration of the fight. It was about mid afternoon when the real battle began. Horse brigades from different points; East, South, and South West advanced simultaneously on the fort. Only the one from the South almost reached it. The engagement was sharp, short and decisive. At long range heavy shot was employed, but as the enemy got nearer, grape shot and canister were substituted. The heavy artillery with some field pieces hastily mounted, under the brave and skillful command of Capt. Murphy, and the small arms poured in a steam of lead and iron so deadly, that the men, heedless of the urging of their officers, halted; when a retreat was ordered, and the heavy firing ceased. The South side of the fort was so fully occupied by our men that I had no opportunity to use my shotgun with effect, and I did not, as I saw some do, fire into the air aimed at the upper sky. Meeting Gen. Ewing, he said to me, “Why are you not at the parapet.” The only body of the enemy there in view was a brigade of cavalry, some three hundred yards distant for the Rail Road North of the town. Holding out my shotgun, I said, “Will this reach them?” He had nothing more to say; but I went to the parapet .

Such incidents which occurs during the heat of the engagement impressed me indelibly. At the big gun on the East side, one of the gunners was struck by a cannon ball from the battery on Shepherd Mountain. The roof of his skull was blown clear off; yet he was not instantly killed. Some moments after I saw the palpitating brain, ere the soul departed.

On the North side, after the repulse, when loading a cannon the cartridge exploded. Instantly, one of the men at the gun’s mouth was stripped naked as when he was born, and the next instant his whole body was crimson. Poor fellow! How he did scream! In a little while his head was swollen to monstrous size; and yet this man recovered.

During the fight one our soldiers, a young fellow, was shot in the ankle. It was a painful wound. When I saw him he was in the shelter of the earthwork and pleading for men to take him to the hospital, though to do would expose them to a monstrous fire. Yes, yes it needs more than soldier clothes to make a soldier.

In contrast with this almost at the same time was another showing how near akin are smiles and tears. One of my elders, Mr. Delano, in the hottest of the fight with some others, had taken shelter under a caisson. As Gen. Ewing was passing by he saw them, and said harshly, “What are you doing here?” Quick in thought Delano replied; “We are supporting the artillery.”

There was some desultory firing after the repulse. Some sharpshooters lying in shelter of the banks of the stream South and West of the fort, and some still further away in the open, continued some time blazing away. A citizen, as I learned afterward, by the name of Mason, some years later judge of the County Court was taking deliberate aim with his squirrel rifle, when a ball cut through the rather abundant flesh of his throat and the blood spurted in a stream apparently as large as the orifice made by the bullet. His chief concern seemed to be to save his white shirt for he leaned over and still over, until he was actually on all fours. At the rate the blood was flowing he must have bled to death in a minute. Seeing his critical case, I went to him, and saying, “My man, you must hold up your head.” I raised him up, and led him behind an earthwork. Laying him there with his head raised, I tied my red silk handkerchief round his neck. As the bleeding was staunched, I saw no more of him until going to the hospital about nine o’clock that night, the first man I recognized was him wearing my handkerchief and ministering to others worse wounded than himself.

Sometime after nightfall, I heard Gen. Ewing say, “There should be a party sent out to gather arms.” I at once proposed to several of my parishioners that we do so. I brought in two loads, 14 muskets in all. The morning had been rainy, afternoon the sun came out, and it was warmer. In making the charge, the men had thrown off their coats, and when night came lying on the damp ground, they were chilled. To lessen the cold, the wounded men had crowded together in piles like pigs. When on the battle ground I met Capt. Zwart of our provost marshall’s [sic] office at Ironton and the hospital steward who were busy taking the wounded men, friends or foes, to the hospital, the large hotel at the Knob having been taken for that purpose. Its lower floor was already covered with wounded men laid on the bare floor. Going from one to another I found one man unable to speak. I soon discovered that he had been shot in the face; that the lower jaw was broken, the end of his tongue cut off, the ball passing out through the left cheek. Finding his mouth filled with clotted blood, I took out a handfull [sic], when in deep guttural tones he cried, “Water, water.” When brought it was greedily drank. But while this gave relief, it again started the bleeding, requiring his mouth to be cleaned a second time. Weeks afterward I met the man in Ironton. Greeting him, I said, “Well I suppose, you have had enough of fighting.” “No,” he replied, “I’d fight ‘em again,” and it was only there that I found he was a union man from the country, like myself a volunteer for the nonce.

Having lost sleep Monday night, about twelve o’clock, I went upstairs, in quest of rest. Soon after Mr. Delano came to me and informed me that our troops were about to evacuate the fort and that we could go with them if we chose. Without hesitation I said, “My family is in Ironton, and I want to know how they are faring; I will stay.” Tom, a big colored man that worked for Mr. Delano, and had been brought to the hospital, overheard the conversation. During the battle a 32 pounder which Tom was helping to serve, had been dismounted by a rebel shot; and as it fell brushed along one of his legs, and bruised it badly. Coming to me, he said, “Mr. Wilson, what shall I do?” I said, “Tom, you have been in the fort, taking part in the fight, and if they find you here, it will likely go hard with you; and if you are able you had better go.” He thought so too, and his bruised leg mended fast. Down stairs, I went with him to put him on the trail, when just as I stepped out of the hotel two or three paces from the front door, the magazine at the fort was exploded, and the debris was falling about us like hail. To escape, I ran for shelter some 50 or 60 feet across the street when three steps would have put me safe in the hotel. The report was so sudden and unexpected that for the first and only time in the three days I lost my full presence of mind.

The next morning Pilot Knob was occupied by the enemy. A guard was stationed at each store to prevent looting by the private soldiers and petty officers, giving those with shoulder straps the first choices. In an hour or so, a man in a plaid woolen shirt and on a big horse, stopped in the street near the hotel hospital. It was Col. McLean, Price’s adjutant general. Wishing to go home, my thought was to get a pass from him to Ironton. Introducing myself, I told him my home was in Ironton and that I wished to return. In soldier fashion, he said, “Well go. We have come to set you free.” Not wishing that kind of talk, I left him without ceremony. Meeting judge Vail, one of my members, I said, “Judge, I am going home.” “Very well,” said he. “I’ll go with you,” and so we started. On the way we met hundreds, if not thousands of rebel soldiers, but not one of them said “peas.”

At home it was gladsome to find all safe and well, and besides, two rebel colonels and a captain who had been there since Tuesday noon. Col. Childs, for some reason was not on duty. Col. Buster was sick. At the battle of Pea Ridge he had been thrust through the body with a bayonet in the hands of a German soldier. Clasping him in his arms, he held the soldier fast till one of his own men came up and killed the German. Capt. Calhoun, also, for some reason was not on duty. About noon Tuesday they stopped at the house, close to the road, and before dismounting asked Mrs. Wilson if she could give them dinner. She replied that she had but little provision in the house, and begged to be excused. They then asked her where they could be accommodated. She replied that she supposed others were like herself. One of them remarking that his comrade was sick and needed food, and observing that they appeared to be respectable and respectful men, though not likely to take denial, she concluded with the promptitude of woman, it would be better to serve willingly than on compulsion, she said, “I’ll do the best I can for you,” and they dismounted. Col. Buster finding her with on the children, inquired for the husband. She told them that he was at the fort. He said there was no need for his leaving home; that Gen Price’s orders were strict that no non combatant should be molested. To this my wife replied, “My husband is not of that kind. He took his gun with him.” He had from observing my library inferred that I was a clergyman, and no doubt set me down as a "fighting parson." After dinner they were about to leave, when Col. Buster was seized with a violent attack of vomiting, and was unable to proceed, and remained till Thursday morning. They were gentlemen and proved quite a protection to us. I had a quantity of hay and oats which the rebel cavalry had begun to use freely. When this was reported Col. Buster ordered it stopped, and it stopped. Another effort to protect us was not so successful. Despite the battle, my wife had baked light bread; and had wrapped it in a blanket. As the rebel soldiers after the battle were falling back, they stopped at our house for a drink of water, and spying the bread eagerly desired some. Mrs. Wilson was cutting off liberal slices and was handing it to them from an open window; when one caught the blanket, and away with it and all that was on it; or in it.. The exclamation of my wife, "Oh, you have taken my bread," brought Col. Buster from the main house; but it was too late. The soldiers were gone and could not be identified.

As a reward for the kind treatment they had received, Col. Buster had given my son, then a lad of just

eleven years old, a five dollar bill on a Boston Bank, presumably good, but I was unwilling that he should

keep it. The conduct of these officers was so gentlemanly that all fear of ill treatment had vanished.

During Tuesday evening, my niece, a girl about 13 years of age, bantering Capt. Calhoun who was a rabid "fire-eater," said, "Captain wouldn't you like to see the old flag?" He answered evasively. But Lizzie, unwilling so to be thus thwarted, went to her room and soon returned with a small silk flag and waving sang:

"Oh long may the star spangled banner still wave

O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave."

Col. Buster had great fear of being made a prisoner, and taken to a Northern prison; and

although far from being in condition to travel he, with the others, left with the army Thursday afternoon. Wednesday and Thursday forenoon were busily employed by the army in helping themselves to the provisions and clothing in the stores of the three villages of the valley. There was a general shedding of butternut and grey jeans for store clothes by the soldiers; and for days after they left, unprincipled men could be seen going South with mule loads of dry goods which the soldiers had not taken. The whole valley, indeed, had been pretty well cleaned out. Some worn out horses were left, but very few good remained. A mule killed in the road at my gate lay there for days before I could get a team to drag it away. Coffee, tea, sugar, all groceries were scarce in the valley until communication by rail with St. Louis was reestablished. For several days we were at the mercy of guerillas, but they did us little harm. None the less, it was a joyful sight, when a company of Union Soldiers from Cape Girardeau came in.

Many wounded rebels were taken to the Arcadia Seminary. But as doing so closed the school, by

request, I interceded, to the disgust of some of the radicals, with the commander at the Knob, and they were taken to the Courthouse, where they remained till there was room for them in the large hospital connected with the Ironton Hotel.

It was months before those who recovered were removed. While there I visited them repeatedly and occasionally preached to them. The raid was a trying time to the people of the valley; but as “Providence tempers the wind to the shorn lamb," so he braces the mind of men for such emergencies.

Macon, MO. D. A. Wilson

June 6th 1906

The forgoing “Recollections” were written at the request of the President of the Pilot Knob Battle Association in my 85th year.

D. A. W.