

Governor Kirkwood and the Skunk River War

Frank W. Eichelberger

ISSN 0003-4827

Material in the public domain. No restrictions on use.



This work has been identified with a [Creative Commons Public Domain Mark 1.0](#).

Recommended Citation

Eichelberger, Frank W. "Governor Kirkwood and the Skunk River War." *The Annals of Iowa* 9 (1909), 142-145.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.3547>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

two wounds during the entire three years, one a slight wound in the foot at Arkansas Post—where we captured 7,000 prisoners—the other, in the knee, at Taylor's Ridge, Georgia. Neither of these wounds kept me off duty. Having good health, I was not absent from the regiment twenty-four hours from the date of its muster into the service in 1862 until its muster out in June, 1865.

GOVERNOR KIRKWOOD AND THE SKUNK RIVER WAR.

BY HON. FRANK W. EICHELBERGER.

During the dark days of the summer of 1863, when Grant was investing Vicksburg and Lee marching on Pennsylvania, there existed in portions of Keokuk, Poweshiek and Wapello counties a large number of Southern sympathizers, who had from the outset of the war made a fierce opposition to its prosecution.

A man named Tally, living near Ioka, in Keokuk county, a Baptist preacher, made himself a leader among this element by his blatant, disloyal speeches in different parts of the country, rendering himself obnoxious to the union-loving portion of the community. He usually went armed with a couple of revolvers and a bowie knife and openly defied the authorities to arrest him. The fall of Vicksburg and defeat of Lee at Gettysburg seemed to embitter him and his harangue became more violent and threatening.

On the first of August, accompanied by seventy or eighty men in wagons, all armed, he went to South English in Keokuk county, and held a meeting in the outskirts of the village. Whilst this was in progress, a Republican meeting was organized in the street opposite the hotel, which was addressed by a man named Settler, from Mt. Pleasant, who happened to be at the hotel. During the progress of this meeting, Tally and his crowd in wagons drove through the meeting, exhibiting butternut and copperhead pins, which were the recognized badges of disloyalty in the North at that time.

A wounded soldier named Moorman, seized one of the men wearing a butternut and stripped it off and was proceeding to serve others in the same way when he was seized by some of them. His father went to his rescue and discharged his revolver. At this, Tally raised up in his wagon and gave the word to fire, at the same time firing his own revolver into the crowd and a regular fusilade was discharged by his armed followers, but singular to relate without hitting anyone. I was there the next day and saw many bullets imbedded in the hotel front. The firing was returned and Tally was killed and one of his men wounded. On the fall of their leader they drove off vowing to return and hang a number of the citizens and burn the town.

Word was set to Washington, Iowa, where Col. N. P. Chipman, Chief of Staff for General Samuel R. Curtis, happened to be at home on a short furlough. He left immediately for South English, whither I accompanied him in the interests of the *Muscatine Daily Journal*, of which paper I was then City Editor.

On our arrival Col. Chipman organized a company, erected barricades and prepared to resist any effort to take the town. During the day companies of state militia arrived from Washington and others came in from Poweshiek and Iowa counties, and the town was turned into a military camp, with Col. Chipman in command and J. F. McJunkin of Washington, afterwards attorney-general of Iowa, as Adjutant.

In the meantime a mob of six or seven hundred men had gathered in the bottoms of Skunk river armed with all kinds of weapons from shot guns to meat axes. They demanded that ten of the best citizens of South English should be arrested and immediately tried, charged with the crime of murder in the first degree, and threatening to march on the town and burn it, and seize the men themselves and hang them, unless their demand was complied with.

The messenger sent by them, discovering the preparations made for their reception, returned and reported that the men were willing to give themselves up to the proper authorities for trial, which under the circumstances of Col. Chipman's preparation was accepted.

They were arrested by Sheriff Adams, had a preliminary hearing before a Justice of the Peace, and were bound over in the sum of \$1,000 each for their appearance at the next term of the District Court. The army of the Skunk was dispersed and Col Chipman's forces sent home and it was supposed the affair had ended. But during the night another mob of nearly a thousand men gathered on Skunk river bottom near Sigourney and threatened to march on that place and destroy it unless the men bound over at South English were immediately brought to Sigourney and placed on trial. There was great excitement at Sigourney, the business houses were closed and nearly every man turned out to defend the place. There was no railroad or telegraph line to Sigourney at the time.

Mr. Sanders, the clerk of the court, who afterwards established and conducted Sanders' Stock Journal at Chicago, drove to Washington and took an engine from there to Muscatine, where he got into telegraphic communication with Governor Kirkwood. I went back on the engine and drove to Sigourney, finding the town in a state of great excitement, patrolled by a company of home guards only half of them armed. The town was filled with ugly, scowling, armed rioters from the rendezvous on Skunk river and things looked pretty squally.

During the night Governor Kirkwood came in from Washington accompanied only by Col. Trumbull of his staff, afterwards Colonel of the 9th Cavalry. They drove direct to the court-house and Governor Kirkwood at once proceeded to make a speech.

It is only once in a lifetime that a man is permitted to hear such a speech, and especially to such an audience under such circumstances. The grand old man seemed to be inspired; he was utterly fearless, although apparently in imminent danger from the rough crowd that surrounded and threatened at times to hang him, hissing and howling curses at him, which however failed to interrupt his speech. And such a speech! Its like never came from the mouth of any other governor of any state. It was far from ladylike, in fact would hardly

do for print, but was vigorous, virile and to the point, filled with good old English and interspersed with an occasional round mouth-filling epithet as he referred to the rebels. It was exhilarating, exciting but fearsome to see that rugged, fearless, earnest, grand man standing up in the middle of the night hurling denunciations and threats to such a mob. He told them he had come to see that the law was enforced; that the people of South English would be fairly tried and if guilty punished, but not by such a scoundrelly mob as confronted him; that he had reason to believe that they were drawn together not so much to punish crime or see that it was punished, as to throw obstacles in the way of the government in putting down the rebellion; that he didn't propose to have any fire-in-the-rear rebellion in Iowa and unless they dispersed before morning he would have them shot down like dogs; that he had ordered troops which were on their way, and when they arrived the next day they would shoot, and shoot straight, and shoot leaden bullets, not blank cartridges; that he would put down this mob if he had to kill every mother's son of them—although that was not exactly the name he applied, but it would not be polite to give it verbatim.

His appearance and bravery cowed them and they commenced to slink away, and before the Governor would go to bed most of them had left town. The next morning a company came in from Muscatine and during the day others arrived from Mt. Pleasant, Washington and other towns, and by evening there were ten companies of militia quartered in and around the town and the mob had entirely dissolved and gone home.

I have always thought that there would have been bloodshed if Governor Kirkwood had not fearlessly met the crisis.

A number of the rioters were arrested and bound over, charged with exciting a riot, but they, together with the South English prisoners, were released and all prosecution was wisely dropped at the next term of court.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.