

William Johnson Cockayne's Civil War By Jane Cockayne Weaver

On Sunday, 24 March 1901, the *Burlington (Iowa) Hawkeye* ran a story about the death of William Johnson Cockayne. William had died the day before at the Mt. Pleasant Hospital for the Insane, where he had been taken on the previous Friday. The article said that William had taken his life because he was despondent over having been declared insane and sent to the hospital in the first place. By Monday morning, the *Hawkeye* had retracted the story of William's suicide, calling it "erroneous." After a bit of humming and hoeing about why the editors had printed the suicide story, Monday's article indicated that William had died of a disorder of the brain. In truth, William had come down with septic meningitis, which doctors had misdiagnosed as insanity. Had his doctors been able to properly diagnose William's disease, they would have had few tools at their disposal to cure him. Nevertheless, allegations of his insanity and suicide did little to elevate William's reputation in a town that had begun to think of him as "erratic." The truth was, though, at one time William belonged to a group of men considered the pride of Burlington, Iowa. Descended from one of the area's pioneer families, William had volunteered to serve during the Civil War, returned to Burlington a hero, married, and engaged in a career that he loved. Considering how fruitful William's life had been, contemporaries were left to lament the sad descent of William's fate and ask themselves how their once steadfast friend could have ended up dying in an insane asylum—afraid, angry, and alone.¹

William Johnson Cockayne had first seen the light of day on 10 April 1842, a birth month and day William shared with his father. William's parents, Samuel and Mary Price Cockayne, had arrived in Iowa from western Virginia the year before William was born. Samuel and Mary had brought their growing family with them, but William was the first of their many children who was an Iowan by birth. Samuel's brother, Hiram Cockayne, and his family had accompanied Samuel and Mary to Burlington where both men established themselves on farms in Flint River Township, an area about five miles northwest of Burlington. By the time William was born, Samuel and Mary's farm was beginning to take shape, and a small pioneer settlement called Prairie Grove was forming on the border of Samuel's farm.²

William's parents had thirteen children, and William's Uncle Hiram, who lived across the road, had the same number. When William's siblings and cousins gathered at school, church, or to celebrate a holiday, their sheer numbers overwhelmed the rest of the population. Perhaps for this reason, people referred to Prairie Grove and its surrounding area as the Cockayne District. So the church at Prairie Grove drew the name the Cockayne Church, and the school was the Cockayne School. As a youngster, William attended the school at Prairie Grove, and when not in school, William worked on his father's farm. William probably knew at an early age that he would prefer town life to farm life because when William was about sixteen, he apprenticed himself to a machinist in Burlington.³

While serving his apprenticeship, William boarded with a woman named Elizabeth Gibson. Mrs. Gibson had taken in two boarders; William and a man who was an attorney and was William's senior by about twenty years. William probably engaged the older attorney in conversations that improved William's mind and helped broaden his world view. Mrs. Gibson's neighborhood was typical of Burlington's working-class, so in addition to living in the same house as an attorney, William lived close to people who worked as blacksmiths, tailors, butchers, teamsters, cabinet makers, and one woman who described herself as a school mistress. William was working at his machinist apprenticeship when the Civil War broke out in April of 1861. William was eager to join the war effort, but he likely had to wait until he had completed his apprenticeship or found someone to replace him and keep his commitment to the machinist. Finally, on 29 August 1862, William enlisted for the duration of the war. The unit he chose was the Fifteenth Iowa Infantry Volunteers, which had mustered in at Keokuk,

Iowa in February of 1862. By the time William enlisted, the Fifteenth had moved south, and William joined his regiment in Grand Junction, Tennessee, where he helped fill the ranks of Company E.⁴

The Fifteenth Iowa was part of Major General Ulysses S. Grant's Army of the Tennessee, which was the large Union force assigned to western Tennessee. The Fifteenth was never idle for long. Soon after William joined the regiment, orders arrived directing the Fifteenth to Corinth, Mississippi, a railroad junction essential to the success of both armies. The subsequent battle of Corinth was a victory for the Union. William had experienced his first taste of battle, and he loved it. In fact, William took to soldiering with more enthusiasm than he had taken to anything in his life. He had found something that suited him and was ecstatic when the Fifteenth was ordered to march deep into the heart of Mississippi and rout the Confederate forces entrenched in the countryside.⁵

The Fifteenth moved in fits and starts toward Jackson, Mississippi. The soldiers must have tired of the back and forth movements of the regiment. Essentially, the commanders were looking for Confederate troops who seemed to evade and disappear into the countryside when outnumbered. Sometimes, the men's spirits lagged, and when that happened, William was quick to strike up a song or offer other entertainment. Fellow soldiers would write that, ". . . the songs of Cockayne cheer [us] in our home sickness."⁶ As the New Year approached, it was clear the fighting would intensify. After marching from Oxford, Mississippi to Yokena Station and on to Abbeville and Lafayette, William's regiment received orders to board the steamer *Maria Denning*, which deposited the regiment at Providence, on the Louisiana shore, about seventy-five miles north of Vicksburg. The regiment camped on the plantation of General Sparrow, a member of the Confederate Congress. By now, the spring rains had begun.⁷

Before long, William and his friends knew that they were to be part of an attack on Vicksburg. Grant and his generals had much work to do to prepare for a successful assault. The goal was to fortify the Mississippi River, upon whose banks Vicksburg sat, fortify the Louisiana side of the river, and mass a force to the east of Vicksburg, leaving no route of escape for the Confederate Army under the command of General John C. Pemberton. The Fifteenth remained near Providence for two months, and the rain rarely let up. Adding to the discomfort, insects swarmed around the soldiers creating what one man called, "a saturated solution of gnats."⁸ Soon the weather and the bugs combined to drive the Fifteenth out, and the regiment moved from place to place until 13May1863, when the regiment moved to the east bank of the river in preparation for the assault on Vicksburg.⁹

The steamer *Crescent City* brought William and his friends close to the enemy lines, and the men received field rations. Over the next six weeks the Fifteenth engaged the Confederates almost daily. William never flinched. William's comrades would later say that William, ". . . was never found lacking in an emergency; that he was always in his place in the company no matter how hot the fight. There wasn't a cowardly fiber in his body."¹⁰ William had distinguished himself and endeared himself to his fellow soldiers. When General Pemberton surrendered Vicksburg on 04July1863, the only complaint coming from the Fifteenth was that the men were, "tired, sore, and hungry."¹¹

The Fifteenth had some time off from the fighting, but the moving never stopped. The regiment continued the pattern of moving to the west bank of the Mississippi River and back again, moving north of Vicksburg and south, and patrolling the areas to the east of Vicksburg. Although the regiment was on the move, little was happening, and this gave the men time to recover from the rigors of battle. Likely William wrote home during this time of relative quiet. William's nephew, Henry Clay Cockayne, was eager to enlist, and doubtless, William's letters encouraged Henry.¹² By Christmas of 1863, the Fifteenth was detailed to Red Bone Church, about thirteen miles southeast of Vicksburg. Later, members of the Fifteenth would write a song entitled *Crocker's Iowa Brigade*. One stanza mentions William:

Dave Hornbeck and Bill Cockayne
 The Fifteenth will remember,
 On that cold Christmas march we made
 To Redbone in December
 They grabbed the chickens from their roosts,
 And dressed them in the snow
 And, when they ate them, left the bones
 For Benny Havens, O!

The day after Christmas, William and the Fifteenth marched back to the outskirts of Vicksburg where they stayed for roughly six weeks. Back home in Iowa, only three days after Christmas, William's kinsman, Henry Clay Cockayne, mustered in at Dodgeville where he joined Company G of the 39th Iowa Regiment. Henry's company quickly moved to join the main body of the 39th, which had marched deep into the South on what General Grant had named the Atlanta Campaign. Henry was eighteen years old. While Henry was marching south, William's regiment joined General Sherman's expedition against Meridian, Mississippi.¹³

By the end of March, William and the Fifteenth had returned to Iowa for a one-month furlough. On the first of May, with a much-needed rest behind them, the regiment reported for duty. The next assignment would plunge the Fifteenth even further into Dixie, heading into the heartland of Alabama and Georgia and ultimately joining Sherman's March to the Sea. During the month of May, the Fifteenth marched constantly and traveled hundreds of miles. Most days brought skirmishes with the Confederates, including the assault on Kennesaw Mountain, Georgia. William's furlough seemed to have rejuvenated him, and he returned to the line more fearless than ever. In early July, the Fifteenth met Rebel resistance at a place called Nick-A-Jack Creek, Georgia. As usual, William wanted to be in the lead of his company, and a witness described what happened next. Company E had charged and driven the Confederates into the woods, "helter-skelter." Two Confederate companies came up in support of the fleeing men, and the group reformed. At this point, the Rebels came out of the woods, "yelling like fiends." Now, Company E fell back in retreat, but William was seemingly unfazed. According to the witness, "Cockayne, although one of the fleetest runners in the company, took delight in tantalizing his pursuers by letting them get up almost within grasping distance and then with a taunting grimace over his shoulder would dart out of their reach." Company E was able to make a stand, drive the Confederates back again, and advance, "Cockayne in the lead scattering enemy right and left."¹⁴

The Fifteenth bore down on Atlanta and joined the siege of the city. For most of August and September, the regiment was on the front lines. In late September, after having helped secure Atlanta for the Union, the Fifteenth moved into northern Georgia in pursuit of Lt. General John B. Hood's Army of Tennessee. At the same time, Henry Clay Cockayne's 39th Regiment was approaching Allatoona Pass, Georgia where a fight was brewing over a small Union garrison holding a supply base. Henry Clay Cockayne and the 39th arrived at Allatoona and took up defensive positions as the Confederate forces fought their way forward. On 05October1864, the fighting became intense. The Union would hold the garrison at Allatoona, but Henry Clay Cockayne lost his life on the battlefield. Seven days after Henry's death, William and the Fifteenth marched into Allatoona, too late to help in the earlier battle. William undoubtedly knew that Henry Clay's 39th had done some of the fighting at Allatoona and had taken casualties. Whether William knew that his nephew had died at Allatoona one week earlier is uncertain. The most likely scenario is that William realized much later that he and his regiment marched over the battlefield where Henry died. William would have found this a bitter pill.¹⁵

The Fifteenth received orders to join the sweep of Sherman's troops who were marching eastward. By November of 1864, the regiment had reached Savannah and lay siege to the city. Once Savannah surrendered, the Fifteenth moved north and

joined the Campaign of the Carolinas. As the Confederates became more desperate, the fighting became more intense and brutal. William never faltered. His fellow soldiers would later say that, "In a charge across the open against a withering fire, Cockayne was shoulder to shoulder with his comrades and often somewhat in the lead. On Skirmish duty he never flinched and was the last to retreat when such action was ordered."¹⁶ As the Fifteenth fought its way through the Carolinas, William probably sensed victory in the offing. On 26 April 1865, William was present with the Fifteenth when Confederate Major General Joseph E. Johnston surrendered the armies of the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida to Union General William Tecumseh Sherman at Bennett's House, Durham Station, North Carolina.¹⁷

From 29 April until 20 May 1865, the Fifteenth joined the march to Washington D.C. On 24 May 1865, William and the Fifteenth passed in review before the President at Washington. The Fifteenth had a week of celebration before boarding a train to Parkersburg, West Virginia. From Parkersburg, the Fifteenth took a steamer to Louisville, Kentucky. On 24 July 1865, the Fifteenth mustered out of service. On 29 July 1865, the regiment arrived by rail in Davenport, Iowa, and from Davenport, the men marched to Camp Kinsman for final discharge. William had spent the past three years living life on the edge. Now he would need to adjust to civilian life again.¹⁸

William probably experienced the same anxiety many soldiers had after returning from the war. Naturally, family and earning a living were musts. On 22 November 1873, William married a woman named Mary Dodge. Mary had become a mother but had never married her baby's father. Mary had named her daughter Bertha Leone Casebolt, but for the rest of Bertha's life, people would call her Birdie. Birdie's father, J.B. Casebolt, appears to have figured little in Birdie's life, while William seemed happy to provide a home for Mary and Birdie. William began processing and selling a medicinal herb called *Rhodiola Rosea* or Golden Root. Golden Root, then and now, refers to a plant effective in treating depression and fatigue. Before long, William had a relatively thriving business going as a distributor of Golden Root. People would come into William's shop to buy the compound, or William would deliver. Sometimes, William would go door to door explaining to housewives the benefits of his product. Within a few years, William advertised himself as not only a medicine dealer, but as a doctor.¹⁹

Over the next fifteen years, Birdie would grow up and marry at least twice. About this time, though, William and Mary began to experience marital problems. Eventually, Mary moved out of the home and lived with Birdie. Finally, Mary sued for divorce, and William found himself ever more despondent. Mary won her divorce from William in January of 1901, and she remarried within days of her final decree. William refused to accept the loss of his marriage, continued to consider himself married, and continued to refer to Birdie as his daughter, even though Birdie had worked to distance herself from William. Many of William's friends were his former comrades, and they attempted to console William and remind him of his better days. The Federal Government had offered pensions to Civil War Veterans, but the process was cumbersome and lengthy, and William decided he was too proud to go through all the paperwork and waiting it would take to receive his pension. William declared that if the government thought so little of his service as to delay his pension, he would refuse to take it if offered. As William walked his regular rounds peddling his medicine, boys took to tormenting him, throwing rocks at him, and calling him names. Things went from bad to worse, and William's friends grew more frustrated in their attempts to help. Then on Friday, 22 March 1901, William's condition became desperate. He was delirious, and the doctor who saw William in Burlington believed the cause was insanity. William was bound and taken to the Mt. Pleasant Hospital for the insane. He died the next day alone in his room, where an attendant discovered him hours after his death.²⁰

A subsequent autopsy would reveal that William had died of septic meningitis, and this diagnosis, along with the recent events in William's life unleashed a storm of criticism from William's friends. Most took to the newspaper, pointing the finger

at Mary, Birdie, and the local townspeople who had dismissed William as crazy. When the furor died down, William's friends began to write of his service during the war, of his courage, and of his unique personal characteristics. Suddenly, it seemed, William had become everyone's hero again. As they lay William to rest among other Civil War Veterans at Aspen Grove Cemetery in Burlington, the old veterans sang William's praises and mourned his passing.²¹

One wonders what William might have made of it all. Certainly, William had been a scrapper all of his life. He had battled the Rebels; he had battled his demons; he had battled to save his marriage. William had won some and lost some, but he had always been brave in the attempt. Likely, William would have thought of his final days as yet one more challenge, and he had fought that last contest in his characteristic manner. He had been fearless, he had taunted fate, and when all was said and done, William had been right where he belonged, in his place, no matter how hot the fight.

¹ *Burlington Hawkeye*, Burlington, Iowa, 23-26 March 1901.

²For more information on the Cockayne Family, see the following articles by Jane Cockayne Weaver: *Cockayne Family Early English History*, 2009; *The Cockaynes and the Carters*, 2009; *Subsequent Generations and Moving Westward*, 2010, and *Hiram Cockayne*, 2014.

³ See the *United States Census of 1860*, Burlington, Iowa, 18. See also *Burlington Hawkeye*, 25 March 1901.

⁴ William Worth Belknap, *History of the Fifteenth Regiment Iowa Veteran Volunteer Infantry, From October 1861 to August 1865 When Disbanded at the End of the War* (Keokuk, Iowa: RB Ogden and Son, 1887) 593; *Burlington Hawkeye*, 25 March 1901.

⁵ *Roster and Record of Iowa Soldiers in the War of the Rebellion Together with Historical Sketches of Volunteer Organizations 1861-1866*: Published by authority of the General Assembly, under the direction of Brig. Gen. Wm.

H. Thrift, Adjutant General. (Des Moines: Emory H. English, State Printer, E. D. Chassell, State Binder; 1908).

⁶ Belknap, *History of the Fifteenth Regiment*, 67.

⁷ *Memoranda of the 15th Iowa Infantry*, <http://iagenweb.org/civilwar/regiment/index.html> (accessed October 2012).

⁸ Jerry Korn, *War on the Mississippi, Grant's Vicksburg Campaign* (Alexandria, Virginia: Time Publishing, 1985) 72.

⁹ *Memoranda of the 15th Iowa Infantry*.

¹⁰ *Burlington Hawkeye*, 25 March 1901.

¹¹ *Memoranda of the 15th Iowa Infantry*.

¹² Henry Clay Cockayne was the son of Martha Cockayne, William's sister. Martha married Richard Dowel about two years after Henry's birth. Henry is on the 1856 Iowa and 1860 Federal Census with the Dowel family and listed as Henry Dowel, but he enlisted using his legal and birth name, Henry Cockayne. Henry was initially buried in a trench outside the stockade at Allatoona. In Feb of 1867, his remains were moved to Marietta National Cemetery.

¹³ *Memoranda of the 15th Iowa Infantry*; Belknap, *History of the Fifteen Regiment*, 582; Historical Data Systems, comp. *U.S., Civil War Soldier Records and Profiles, 1861-1865* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2009;

¹⁴ Belknap, *History of the Fifteenth Regiment*, 203; *Memoranda of the 15th Iowa Infantry*; *Burlington Hawkeye*, 26 March 1901.

¹⁵ *Memoranda of the 15th Iowa Infantry*; For a good overview of the 39th at Allatoona, see

<http://www.angelfire.com/ia/captjoejoe/history.html> (accessed May 2014). Henry Clay Cockayne was initially buried in a trench outside of the fort where he died. Later his remains were relocated to Plot C, grave 807 at Marietta National Cemetery.

¹⁶ *Burlington Hawkeye*, 26March1901.

¹⁷ *Memoranda of the 15th Iowa Infantry*.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Des Moines County, Iowa, *Marriage Records, 1850-1900*; City of Burlington, Iowa, *Directories, 1880-1895*.

²⁰ Des Moines County, Iowa, *Marriage Records, 1850-1900*; *Burlington Hawkeye*, 26March1901.

²¹ *Burlington Hawkeye*, 23-26March1901; Mary Dodge died of Bright's disease on 15March1907. She is buried near William at Aspen Grove Cemetery. Birdie married two additional times and moved to San Francisco where she died on 21September1937. William lies in the Old Soldier's section at Aspen Grove.