



CAPTAIN ISAAC W. GRIFFITH

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In the early days, very few persons were better known in Polk County and Des Moines than "Old Churubusco," as Captain Isaac W. Griffith was reverently and most respectfully called, to distinguish him from Captain Harry Griffith and Colonel J. M. Griffith, veterans of the Civil War.

Born in Trumbull County, Ohio, April First, 1820, he passed his boyhood days with his father, assisting him in his trade as a carpenter. During that time, he acquired all the education possible at the district schools, and one term at the academy at Farmington, a branch of the Western Reserve College.

In 1838, when eighteen years old, he decided to come West and grow up with the country, and came to Fort Madison, in October. With no capital but a vigorous constitution, energy, and faith in himself; among entire strangers, he took the first job that presented, driving team and working on a farm, under a contract for one year, at the expiration of which he carried on the farm one year on his own account, and, after gathering the crops, in 1840, went to West Point, where he resumed his trade as a carpenter.

In 1839, there was great excitement throughout the southern part of the territory respecting the southern boundary line. The Constitution of Missouri, in defining the boundaries of that state, had declared her northern boundary to be the parallel of latitude which passes through the rapids of the Des Moines River. In the Mississippi River, a little above the mouth of Des Moines River, are the rapids of the Des Moines. In making their survey, the Missouri officers found in the Des Moines, just below the town of Keosauqua, in Van Buren County, some slight ripples in the current of the river, which were claimed by Missouri as those referred to in the definition of her boundary line, and she insisted on exercising jurisdiction over a strip eight miles wide to the Mississippi, which Iowa claimed as belonging to her. Clarke County

was enrolled in Missouri, and its citizens listed for taxation, but the settlers refused to pay the taxes. The collector levied on their property. He was arrested on a warrant issued by a Justice of the Peace in Van Buren County, and subsequently indicted. The Governor of Missouri called out the State Militia, and sent one thousand men to enforce the collection of the taxes. Governor Lucas promptly responded by calling out the Iowa Militia, and twelve hundred men were enlisted and armed.

Griffith was appointed a Lieutenant of one of the companies. There was no difficulty in getting men, for the whole southern part of the territory was in fighting rage. But before hostilities were commenced, the conservative element thought it best to send a commission to consult the Governor of Missouri. General A. C. Dodge, of Burlington; General Churchman, of Dubuque, and Doctor Clark, of Fort Madison, were selected. When they arrived, the order for the collection of the taxes had been rescinded by Missouri, and the Governor had sent a proposition to Governor Lucas to submit an agreed case to the United States Supreme Court, which was declined; but subsequently both territories petitioned Congress to settle the matter. It was submitted to the Supreme Court, and there decided in favor of Iowa, and a commission delegated to fix the boundary on the Sullivan Line, and set iron pillars ten miles apart to permanently mark the boundary. This gave Iowa all she claimed, and thus was avoided what for a time looked like bloody war.

In 1842, Griffith was elected Justice of the Peace and Coroner of Lee County, and served three terms.

In 1843, March Thirtieth, he was commissioned by Governor Chambers, by "the advice and consent of the Territorial Council, Captain of Company Three, First Regiment, First Brigade, First Division, of the Territorial Militia."

In 1846, when the first call was made for troops for the Mexican War, Griffith, on June Twenty-sixth, volunteered. Twelve companies reported for duty, but they were never organized into regiments, for so many regiments had been accepted from Eastern states, Governor Lucas was notified in November that Iowa volunteers would not be wanted. But, in 1847, Griffith enlisted in a company which became Company K of the Fifteenth Regiment,

United States Infantry, and he was appointed a Corporal. In July, he was promoted to Sergeant. The regiment was ordered to report to General Scott at Vera Cruz, where it arrived on May Twenty-fourth, and from thence went to Pueblo, the headquarters of General Scott, arriving July Second, later fighting its way through guerrillas, his company losing its Captain and several men. The regiment was engaged in the battles of Contreras, Churubusco, and Chepultepec.

At Churubusco, Griffith was struck by a bullet which shattered the bones of his right arm, just above the elbow, necessitating amputation near the shoulder, but he remained with the company until it entered the City of Mexico, September Fifteenth, and on the First of November was discharged. For a time, he remained at Baton Rouge, on account of his wound. He arrived at his home in February following, and was soon after appointed Captain of State Militia by Governor Chambers.

In August, 1848, he was elected Representative for Lee County in the second Legislature under the state organization, as a Democrat, in one of the most important sessions ever held in the state. It elected the first United States Senator and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and was especially notable as the only one which elected three United States Senators, General A. C. Dodge, General George W. Jones, and James Harlan.

It was during that session that plans were made for improving the navigation of Des Moines River by building, at an estimated cost of one hundred and seventy-seven thousand, three hundred and fifty-seven dollars, thirteen locks and dams, which, when completed, would enable freight to be transported from Saint Louis to Raccoon Forks, at a saving of ninety-two per cent. The land grant of one million acres, which Congress was to grant, would pay for the improvement. The people of Central Iowa were intensely interested in the project and vigorously appealed to Congress to carry it out. In fact, so intense was the feeling that no man could get nominated or elected to public office who was not a booster for it. There were no railroads west of Chicago, and transportation to and from Eastern markets was the all-absorbing question. The Legislature did its duty in the premises, but the

project fell into the hands of a lot of unscrupulous speculators and grafters, and, after a score of years of failures, broken promises, law suits, and litigation, what was left of the immense land grant was turned over to a railroad corporation, the navigation project was condemned, universally damned, and the state retired from the business with three old scows, a half-completed dam, and a pile of rock left to it as a reminder of the River Land and Navigation Company, and the propriety of state ownership of public utilities.

During that session was also passed the first Homestead Exemption Law. Griffith introduced the bill and was largely instrumental in securing its passage. The people throughout the West were poor. The money in circulation was only one dollar and eleven cents per capita. Men were struggling to secure homes. Loan sharks demanded forty per cent interest. Thousand had to give mortgages, at such exorbitant interest they could not pay, and lost their homes. The law then passed embraced all the principles of the law as we have it now.

In 1849, Griffith was appointed Deputy Sheriff of Lee County, and served until November, 1850, when he resigned and was appointed Assistant Doorkeeper of the United States Senate at Washington, where he served three years, when he was appointed on the police force of that city, and served until April, 1858, when he was appointed by President Buchanan Registrar of the United States Land Office, and came to Des Moines. He served until 1861, when he was removed by President Lincoln.

The Civil War came on immediately after. The State of Iowa was totally unprepared to do anything respecting it, and during the excitement among the people, a committee, of whom Griffith was one, was selected to attend to the expenses and other preliminary preparations for the struggle which was to come, but he soon after resigned, and in October, 1861, was elected Sheriff of Polk County and was a candidate for a second term in 1863, but was defeated by "Hod" Bush, a shrewd politician, which "Old Churubusco" was not.

In the Fall of 1864, he was appointed Master Mechanic in the United States Quartermaster's Department at Memphis, Tennessee, where he served until October, 1865, when he was appointed Deputy United States

Marshal for the Western District of Tennessee, and served three years.

In 1868, he returned to Des Moines, and was appointed toll-gate keeper at Court Avenue bridge, and served until the bridges were made free from toll, in 1879.

In 1875, he was elected County Coroner, and was elected every two years consecutively for eighteen years, the longest servitude of any county officer, thus evidencing his popularity, fitness and trustworthiness. During his incumbency, occurred the murders of Mrs. Henry Osborn and Andrew Snedden, in 1880; Frank McCreery, Doctor John Epps and Henry Scribner, in 1881; R. W. Stubbs, 1882; James Reynolds, 1883; S. H. Wishart, 1890; James F. Kemp, 1891; Mrs. Peter Sutler, 1892.

In 1886, he was appointed Bailiff of the Supreme Court, and served many years. In 1895, at the May term of the court, he was accorded the gratifying privilege of unveiling the splendid Yewell portrait of Charles Mason, the first Chief Justice of that court, and for whom he had voted as a member of the Legislature, in 1838.

In those days, the court met in whatever building could be found available. Its first meeting at Burlington was in a tavern. The judges, lawyers, and attendants upon the court found poor accommodations. A bunk of hay full of fleas, spread on the floor of a tavern or cabin, was the bed of a majority of them, but they made the best of it. The taverns would be overcrowded, and attendants dined out of their wagons. The incidents and stories told of the court in those days by Judge Wilson, James Grant, of Davenport; Judge Murdock, of Elkader, and Judge Wilson, of Dubuque, would fill a large book. The members of the Supreme Court were also the District Judges, and held court at different places. At one place, a log court house had been built of one room. There was but one other cabin in the place, and it was occupied by a Scotchman. When it came night, hay and bedding was brought in by some farmers and spread on the floor of the court room, after a careful sweeping. Lawyers, jurors and attendants planted themselves on the floor, on which, during the Summer, a farmer's hog had made a dormitory. Scarcely had the bunkers begun to doze when,

“At once there arose so wild a yell
Within that dark and narrow dell,
As if all the fiends from heaven that fell
Had raised the banner-cry of hell.”

Some rushed out on the prairie, but soon came back; some took refuge in haystacks, but soon crawled out, declaring flight was useless, for there was no escape from the fleas. At another time, the United States Marshal was behind time, and he stopped at the cabin of the Scotchman to get dinner. While he was eating, he opened a warm biscuit, and in the middle of it was a big bedbug, cooked so that its blood crimsoned half its surface. Turning to Judge Wilson, he inquired: “What in the world is that?” “A Scotch sandwich, double price,” was the reply from an interested sitter at the table. On another occasion, court was held in a log cabin which had been built for a residence, but was not occupied. It was in hot weather. There was barely room inside for the court and jury. Judge Grant was one of the attorneys in a case on trial. The bailiff, a short, pudgy fellow, with a big, long body, was lounging with the attendants in the shade of some trees, several rods distant. Old-timers have not forgotten the leonine voice of Grant, that, when he was in full blast, could be heard a mile. On this occasion, when he was at the climax of his argument to the jury, the crowd outside thought a row had broken out, and started to see what was up. The bailiff tried to stop them, but without success. Standing close against the building, near the doorway, was a hogshead of molasses. The bailiff pushed his way through the crowd, climbed to the head of the hogshead, wheeled about, and, with outspread hands, raised to tiptoe, shouted “Silence!” when the heading of the hogshead fell in and he went to the bottom of the molasses. Court was suspended, he was fished out, taken to a nearby creek, washed and cleaned, when court was resumed as if nothing had happened.

In 1888, Griffith was elected a delegate to the National Encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic, at Columbus, Ohio, where he had the pleasure of meeting the Colonel who commanded his regiment at Churubusco.

In 1896, he was one of the speakers at the Iowa Semi-Centennial Celebration, held at Burlington, when he gave a detailed account of the

Mexian (sic) War, in which three hundred and twelve men enlisted, though but one company was sent to the front; one company to Fort Snelling, Minnesota, and the remainder joined regiments from other states. It is unfortunate that no stenographic report of his narrative was secured.

Politically, Griffith was an active Democrat, up to the time of the breaking out of the Civil War, when he joined the Union party, and during the four years' strife he was active and helpful in sustaining the Government.

Socially, "Old Churubusco" was the friend of everybody. His genial temperament and constant desire to make others happy drew them to him like iron to a magnet. Though his life was one of hardship, he was ever frank, cordial and sunny. No person ever heard him speak evil of another. His sole purpose was to do good and improve the social life of the community in which he lived. He was known by more people than any man who had lived in the county. For more than forty years, his strong, athletic stature was a familiar figure on the streets of the city. Once seen, he was always remembered. Plain, unostentatious, quiet, of sterling integrity, he had the confidence and esteem of the community at large. Handicapped by his armless sleeve, to support his large family, he accepted whatever service he could get, but public sentiment, appreciative of his virtues and patriotism, provided him the ways for a plain, honest living, which was all he desired.

He was an earnest, exemplary member of the Methodist Church, and for nearly fifty years a highly respected member of the Order of Odd Fellows, and a faithful, practical exemplar of its tenets.

In recognition of his unbounded love of country and patriotism, he was appointed by Governors Merrill, Kirkwood and Newbold to their military staff, with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel of Cavalry.

He was a good public speaker, and popular in all public meetings, especially those of old settlers, for no one could so vividly portray the pioneer days.

The old *Register* editorial room was a favorite trysting place for him, Colonel Nat. ("Pap") Baker, and "Uncle Tommy" Mitchell, where they often gathered and recounted scenes and incidents of their life and times. They

were thrice welcome visitors, and three wide-bottomed chairs were always reserved for them. Their stories were historic, much of which is hidden in the files of the *Register*, over at the State Historical Building, as effectually lost as a needle in a haystack. "Pity 'tis, 'tis true." "Old Churubusco" often promised he would put in writing his life experiences; so did Baker and Mitchell, but they procrastinated until too late.

On his decease, January, 1897, his funeral was a military one, attended by Company H, Iowa National Guard; Fort Des Moines Lodge, Independent Order of Odd Fellows; Old Settlers' Association, Tippecanoes, Grand Army of the Republic, and a large concourse of citizens. Ministers of nearly all the churches were present and gave tribute to his virtues, patriotism, and good citizenship. On his casket, when lowered into the earth, was placed by Judge Given, a comrade at Churubusco, a piece of the flag which was carried through the Mexican War.

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