CAPTURE OF THE IATAN FLAG.

BY COL. FRANK M. TRACY.

One of the earliest incidents of the war of the Rebellion was the capture of a Rebel flag at Iatan, in this State, by a party of twelve volunteers of the old First Kansas Regiment (infantry); and in behalf of the survivors of that expedition, of whom I happen to be one, I have the honor of presenting to you the said trophy, conditioned only that your Society shall preserve it in the archives of the State in which I enlisted as a soldier, and in which I had the honor for many years to be a citizen.

It will no doubt be of some interest to you and to many people in Kansas to have a correct account of the expedition, including the circumstances connected with the capture of the flag, and as some of my former comrades hold me under promise to write the history of our adventure, I will do so, as briefly as I am able to do.

The First Kansas Regiment was recruited under President Lincoln's first call for troops to put down the Rebellion. It was mustered into the service at Leavenworth, on May 30, 1861, and at once went into camp on the west side of the avenue leading from the city to the fort, about half-way between the two places. I will not attempt to deal with the feelings of men, or discuss the patriotism that welled up in the hearts of loyal men throughout the country at that time; but it is proper to say that no other State responded more quickly, and nowhere else were men more wrought up, more ready to fight and more determined, than in that State which had just concluded its own war for liberty. Therefore, our feelings were greatly outraged when a few of the members of Companies A and I learned, through a private source, that a Rebel flag was defiantly floating at Iatan, only a few miles distant, and that a force of Rebel cavalry had already been organized and armed at that place. A spy, in the person of private William Smart, was at once dispatched to visit the place and report, several of us contributing trifling sums to defray his expenses. On his return, he reported that a flag pole had been erected within a few feet of the railroad track, in front of a large frame store house; that the Rebels were organizing a force of "rangers" there, and were encamped in the town, numbering, at that time, 140 on their rolls.

Our regiment had not yet received its arms, but a day or two later, on Monday, June 3d, minie rifles were issued to two companies, one of which was
Company I, made up of Germans from Leavenworth. That company had also received a small quantity of ammunition. The proposed expedition was known to only a few men of Companies A and I, seventeen in all, and that evening the generous Germans managed to arm our entire party, and furnished a very scanty supply of ammunition, some being provided with two rounds, and some with only one. We stole out of camp, one by one, for we thought that our mission would justify such course, besides we were entire strangers to the discipline of army life, and were we not going out to fight rebels—the very thing for which we had enlisted?

Midnight found our little squad of seventeen men hunting down the bank at Kickapoo, for some means to cross the river into Missouri, and after vainly searching in the dark for a long time we found a small skiff, partly sunken, in which, when raised, we were enabled to cross four or five of our men, and by the time one trip had been made we had found its mate, another skiff about like it. At this juncture five of our men, of Company I, backed out, and could not be induced to cross; neither could they be prevailed upon to give us their ammunition. But dividing in the two skiffs, those who were willing and determined to go were soon on the Missouri shore, twelve of us, and the five whom we had left were wending their way back to camp. We had a hard tramp of it that night, through the dark forest of the Missouri bottom, and were well fagged out when we approached Iatan, about daybreak, for we were yet unaccustomed to hardship. We had to go straight forward, clambering through the branches of felled trees, over the trunks of others, and occasionally running against a fence which could be felt but not seen, for had we attempted to go around the fallen tree-tops, we should have lost our course.

At early morn we found a temporary resting-place in a cañon, well up on the side of the hill, a quarter of a mile from the fated city. We sent forward our faithful spy, William Smart, to investigate. In due time he returned, and reported that he had talked with some men in town, and it was his opinion that, as it looked like rain, the flag would not be hoisted that day, but he had found that the emblem of treason was kept in the store before referred to, folded and lying on the counter, at the back end of the room. He had found three men in the store when he was there, and that several guns were in a corner near the front door.

We had come for that flag, and we were determined to have it. It was already doomed, for ere we marched from that retreat had we not raised twelve hands and taken a solemn oath before God to take that flag or die? We came pretty near doing both. As we crossed the bridge leading into the town, and when within about one hundred yards of the flag-pole, we discovered that the stars and bars were just being run up. We at once charged on the double-quick, and surrounded the pole just as — Benight had tied the cord. He remonstrated, and asked "by what authority we wanted that flag," when Serg. Drenning pronounced, that "in the name of Abraham Lin-
coln, the Congress of the United States, and the American Union, I demand the lowering of that flag.” There was no time to parley, and all this took as little time as it takes to read it. The command was given, “Cut the rope!” and Mell. Lewis, with his butcher-knife, sprang to the pole, severed the cord at one stroke, and the rag was at our feet in a jiffy. Mell. gathered it up quickly, and the order was given to fall back. Just at that moment, as we turned to retreat, fire was opened on us from the store door, at a distance of less than a hundred feet. Two or three of our men fired at the door, but the range being at an angle with the front of the building, their shots probably glanced. We had no time to waste. Those who had fired one shot, now had only one left. Two double-barreled shot-guns had been emptied of heavy charges of buckshot at close quarters, and we were being fired on with revolvers. The order was given, “Double quick!” But it was found that three of our men were wounded, two of them severely in the leg. They had to be helped, and our retreat was slow. We heard the stir in the camp, and knew the rangers would soon be upon us. Having reached the cover of the woods, and crossed two or three fences without an onslaught, we concluded that we were safe from an attack from the rear, but we very naturally and correctly concluded that the enemy would aim, by pursuing the main road leading along the foot of the bluff, to cut us off at the Kickapoo ferry, where they knew we must have crossed. This course on their part was so evident to us when we had progressed about half-way to Kickapoo crossing without trouble, that we began a close search along the bank for some means of taking to the water. We were soon so fortunate as to discover a sunken skiff, only the bow of which was visible, and while some of us were engaged in raising it, another one in the same condition was found some distance below. They were both soon raised and bailed out, we resorting to our hats in the absence of buckets or pans to dip the water, and with six of our party in each boat were soon afloat on the current of the Missouri river, using the butts of our minie rifles for paddles. Through a seam in the bottom of each of our skiffs, that reached from stem to stern, the water rushed in and threatened to sink us, but by diligent work with our hats we managed to keep the water down.

As we approached Kickapoo and came in full view of the landing opposite, we discovered the company of mounted rangers awaiting us. They expected, of course, that we would make our appearance on land, and from the manner in which some of them acted, we imagined that they were greatly disappointed. We waved our hats at them, hurrahing until we were hoarse, and landing our barks on the Kansas side, opposite to them, we gave them a last farewell look at their flag by waving it at them amidst the groans of our crowd. We then took up our march for camp, distant about six miles, making our way through the fields, and had considerable trouble to get our wounded men along, especially Lieut. Umfried and Sergeant Voeth, who were shot in their legs, and had lost much blood. We reached camp about
dusk, and aimed to keep quiet about the matter, but it got out, and the next
ing morning the Leavenworth Conservative, of which D. W. Wilder was editor,
contained a flaming account of it. The same day Mr. Wilder sent up and
got the flag, and it was soon suspended, bottom upwards, in front of the
Conservative office, with the names of the captors emblazoned thereon, as
follows:

Frank H. Drenning, First Sergeant, Elwood Guards.
Frank M. Tracy, Elwood Guards.
G. Mellen Lewis, Fourth Sergeant, Elwood Guards.
Fred. Amerine, Ensign, Elwood Guards.
Wm. Smart, Elwood Guards.
James Liddle, Elwood Guards.
Emil Umfried, Second Lieutenant, Steuben Guards.
— Voeth, Steuben Guards.
Richard Lander, Steuben Guards.
Henry Laurenzlier, Steuben Guards.

The “Elwood Guards” were Company A, and the “Steubens,” Company I.
Our wounded were promptly cared for by Dr. S. D. Smith, the regimental
surgeon, and by Dr. Stein, of Leavenworth. Umfried was most seriously
wounded, having received one shot in the shoulder, one in the back, and one
in the leg. Drenning received two shots, but the wounds were not severe.
Voeth was shot in the leg, and was much weakened by the loss of blood.
Drenning continued on duty, but the two others were laid up for two or
three months.

Of the part the men of this expedition took in the four-years’ struggle
which followed, I need only say that they all did well; most, if not all of
them, received promotion, and some of them honorable mention. Drenning
is now living at his comfortable home, at Wathens, having served in both
branches of the Legislature, besides occupying other positions of honor and
responsibility. G. Mellen Lewis lives in Marshall county, Kansas, and has
served two terms as county clerk. Thomas Merrick died several years ago.
He was a fine soldier, and had been in the Crimean war. He it was that
alone captured the first rebel flag that was publicly hoisted in St. Joseph,
early in 1861, when “fifty rifles were loaded to guard it.” Fred. Amerine
was a brave, true man, but his present whereabouts are not known to the
writer. Wm. Smart was “our spy.” He was smart by nature as well as by
name. James Liddle was a sprightly fellow, and had many warm friends.
He and Smart are now in Colorado, digging gold, and I hope they may find
all they want. They deserve it. Richard Lander, I understand, is in busi-
ness in Chicago. But I have lost all trace of the others. If they are living,
I hope to hear from them.

Such, my dear sir, is the story of the capture of the flag, which I have the
honor to herewith present to your Society. I have endeavored to relate it in the simplest manner, and as briefly as possible, keeping closely to the facts. It may be proper to say that the incident created much excitement, and attracted a great deal of interest at the time, being about the first daring adventure of the war.