

IOWA HISTORY



Courtesy Library of Congress
Jefferson Davis

Iowan Helped Capture Confederate President

On fliers posted across the South in 1865 the U.S. government promised a reward of \$100,000 to “any person or persons who will apprehend and deliver Jefferson Davis” to authorities. The president of the Confederacy was on the run with his family and some of his Confederate officials. According to some accounts, an Iowa man participated in the raid that brought the fugitive to authorities. His interview in 1911 appeared in the *Independence Bulletin-Journal* and was carried in other newspapers, including the *Des Moines Register* and *Gettysburg Times*.

Joseph Odren was in his 80s at the time of the interview. During the Civil War he fought with the 4th Michigan Cavalry. He was on scout duty at division headquarters in Macon, Ga. when his commanding officer asked him to take part in a raid to capture the Confederate president. According to Odren, he was one of 129 men who set out on the evening of May 9, heading to Irwinville, where the soldiers believed the fugitives were hiding.

The Michigan Cavalry came upon a camp in a “pine woods” outside Irwinville and surprised the sleeping campers. Odren described coming upon a sleeping man near the campsite.

He shoved the “business end of a revolver in the man’s cheek” ordering him to halt as he reached for his gun. It turned out the man was the postmaster general of the Confederacy.

According to Odren, the lone tent at the site housed Jefferson Davis, Mrs. Davis, her brother and sister. The Michigan men easily captured the 80 fugitives and traveled overland to Macon, Ga., where they boarded a train to Atlanta. Odren was one of 150 men who guarded them. He was one of 22 men who took the group to Augusta, where a tug boat helped move the prisoners to Savannah and then to Hilton Head, S.C. A merchant vessel, under guard of a man-of-war took them to Fortress Monroe. There Davis was handed over to the fort commander.

As promised, the \$100,000 reward went to the Michigan soldiers. The colonel collected \$10,000. The rest was distributed among the men. Odren said he got \$264.64. But he also made away with a couple of valuable pieces of history.

Odren claimed he had taken the tent that the Davis family was in at Irwinville. He had it shipped to his home in Michigan, paying the grand sum of \$5.10 in shipping costs. After the war, he decided to move his family to Cresco, Iowa. He cut up the tent, using a portion as a cover for the wagon the family took to Iowa. His wife used part of it for bed ticking. And in 1911, when Odren lived in Rowley in Buchanan County, a two-and-a-half-foot square was still in his possession. He said he also had a gold locket and chain that held the likeness of Mr. and Mrs. Davis. He sold it to a friend in Michigan for \$65.

There are many accounts of the capture of Jefferson Davis by a variety of sources. Some are more colorful and dramatic than Odren’s version. Davis described it in his autobiography. The newspaper reported Joseph Odren was “altogether too modest as to his part in the drama,” which led to few people knowing about the role he played in a piece of American history.

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Sources

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