

MY GRANDFATHER'S WAR LETTERS

BY ALBERT P. TAYLOR.

A package of letters, old by their looks, for the paper was yellow and the pages traced with fading ink, fell into my hands recently, the war-time epistles of my grandfather written in camp, field and hospital, sometimes after a long weary march through mud or snow, oftentimes after a battle, but too frequently while he lay in the rude hospitals at the "front" frittering away his life in the vain effort to remain a soldier and continue to fight his country's battles. A soldier he remained as long as his strength endured and he came home only to lay down his life, under the peaceful shelter of his own roof tree. Of the many male members of his family and of my grandmother's, few survived the fierce struggles on the southern battlefields. My grandfather, Cornelius Pierce, of Quincy, Illinois, private in the 78th Illinois Volunteers, fought and marched and was taken, prisoner and then came home to die upon his bed. My grandmother's near relative, General Nathaniel P. Lyon, who saved Missouri to the Union, laid down his life on the field of battle at Wilson's creek, Missouri. Others lost their lives on far southern battlefields where they received the soldier's burial and their resting places are now unknown.

Gun That Wouldn't Shoot.

His first letter tells of his initial experiences in the army, of his ill-fitting uniform, the drills of the awkward squad and of the musket which was handed him to carry to the front to "shoot up the rebel army." He glibly, naturally complains in a letter "home" that the gun he was carrying toward the front was useless because a ramrod had been stuck in the barrel and it could not be removed, and the lock would not work. He says he showed it to the inspector who declared the gun was all right, and with this official declaration he was sent with his regiment in box cars to the "front," at a time when the army expected to confront the rebel army within a few days. Happily he was not engaged in any battles while he had the useless musket. In one of his first letters home he says:

"I am perfectly satisfied with my situation and expect to do my duty whenever called upon. John Bone, Wm. Bone, Cyrus Bone and Elijah Murphy and Amos Murphy are all in this war. Amos Bone was killed by the bushwhackers." And so it was news of the death of neighbors was conveyed to the home villages. In another letter he says:

"I went to the Iron Furnace where there is a store, last Saturday, and got me a pair of first-rate double-soled boots at \$4.75; eight pairs of socks at 25 cents a pair. I kept four pairs and sold the others at the same price I paid for them. The store is two miles from our camp and kept by a Union man. He keeps everything that a soldier needs, so there will be no trouble in getting anything that we want this winter. I also got a lot of stamps and paper and envelopes.

Gambling Bounty Money.

"There are some hard cases in this company. You can see twenty-five or thirty sitting around playing cards and cursing and quarrelling has become so common that not a day passes but several fights take place among them, and most of them have gambled away their bounty money. The boys borrowed a fiddle from a negro and they now have music and dancing every night. The negroes bring pies and bread into camp every day and sometimes cooked turkeys and chickens. Two Union families bring us whatever we want to eat besides, and my small change is nearly gone, so I have to be a little careful of it. It is impossible to get paper money changed for anything.

Dressing for Sleep.

"There are four or five men in our company who are my close friends. One is my bunkmate ever since we left Quincy. His name is John C. Robinson. His wife lives in Columbus with her father, Squire Willis. I must tell you how we sleep these cold nights. We lie down on the straw with all our clothes on, except our shoes and caps, with our knapsacks for pillows. We spread a blanket and then put on our two overcoats and then the other blanket and then crawl under. We keep our guns and cartridge boxes at our heads. I put on two pair of socks at night and take off one pair in the morning.

"I am writing tonight on a box of hard crackers by candle stuck in a bayonet and the bayonet stuck in the ground by the side of the box. It is now bedtime and I am very tired. I will close by saying I am well and hope you are all the same. Direct your letters to Louisville, Ky., Company F, Seventy-eighth Regiment Illinois Volunteers, care of Captain Hawkins."

Morgan Stopped the Mail.

Another letter which bears no date because it is only the half of a letter, tells of the mail to the regiment being stopped, and that the boys will get no more mail "until the bridges are rebuilt which will not take very long after General Morgan leaves here." Morgan seemed to have harassed the brigade in which Grandfather Pierce's regiment was placed. He adds: "I can not give you the full particulars of the fight which began last Saturday morning and lasted up to this time, but I suppose the papers will give an account of it in full and you may hear of it before this reaches you. The officer next to Morgan was killed in the battle of Monday and there were five of the Ninety-first Illinois killed on Saturday. The day after Christmas (1862) we got a lot of clothing. I took two shirts,

a suit of underwear and another blanket, so now I have plenty of clothing and a warm bed to sleep on, but we don't sleep much these times. Mr. Patterson is a good Union man and made us a present of a fat hog and some turkeys and chickens for a Christmas dinner, so we had a good time of it, only there was a little too much whisky smuggled into camp. The boxes that were sent to us from Columbus never came. The captain sent a man to Louisville to see about them, but he has not yet returned."

So the soldier's stomach was his hobby throughout the war. Many letters were begun, which told of the battles, but the greater part of these wartime epistles told of their desire for boxes of food from "home" and clothing and warm beds.

Hospital Experiences.

A letter dated at Shepherdsville, Bullitt Co., Kentucky, October 8, 1862, tells of experiences which were general at that time—taking cold and being sent to a hospital. "The last time I wrote you," he says, "the Seventy-eighth was at the southwestern extremity of Louisville. That was on Wednesday. On the Friday morning following we marched to another campground in the southeastern part. We did not get our tents until the next Monday evening and we slept on the naked ground. It rained most of the time on Saturday and we were all wet and cold. I took very sick with a cold settled in my breast and for four days I was unable to sit up—and that cold unsettled his system and was one of the causes of his death.

"I would have been sent to the hospital," he continues, "but it was crowded. After we got our tents, the boys confiscated all the apples and cabbages and sweet potatoes they wanted, and they were also kept busy drilling and had to get up at three in the morning for brigade drill and company drill two times in the forenoon and battalion drill in the afternoon and dress parade in the evening.

"Last Friday about a third of the regiment stacked arms and said they would not move from there until they got their bounty and better arms, but they were compelled to take them again and were put on double duty for three months.

Poisoned Pies.

"We were sent out on a march the other day and the first day camped on the same ground that (General) Bragg camped on just a week before. They marched south. Shepherdsville is all across and just about such a place as Monticello. The rebels burnt the bridge across Salt River twice within a month. We are now building it a third time and are camped on the bank of the river. When we marched to this place I put my gun and knapsack on the wagon and walked behind with the wagons. Several gave out before we got through. Henry Ebben went to the barracks as about given out. We have plenty to eat but the way it is cooked is enough to make anybody sick. I am dead set against coffee, and have not drunk two cups of it in the last twelve days. Pies and cakes have been brought into the camp but we are afraid to buy now as some of the soldiers here have been poisoned by eating them."

Hardships of Campaign.

Then came the fierce blasts of winter when a cold settled on his lungs. From Stockade No. 4, Rolling Fork, Lorne County, Kentucky, under date of December 2, 1862, he tells of the cutting of logs in the forest when the cold took hold of his system and began its ravages. He says that being ill he has not had to stand guard for about three weeks. "We have easy times since our stockade has been completed," he adds; "before it took twelve days to stand picket, but now it only takes four in the daytime and six at night. We can live as comfortable as we please. Our mess has not got a stove yet, but the other three messes have theirs. We build a fire in the center of the tent and the smoke passes up and out of the top. We have plenty to eat as usual. We have enough hard crackers to do us a month. The neighbors are nearly all Union around here and they bring us plenty of bread and pies and gingerbread and roasted chickens, but we have to pay dear for them. Two weeks ago one of our company shot his thumb off accidentally and two more got shot through the right fore finger in the other companies which makes about ten that have got shot since we came into Kentucky. We have not got our monthly pay yet nor have I heard anything said about it. John C. Robinson and I have sent four the Quincy Whig to have it sent to us for six months. We don't get much news here now."

Morgan's Raids.

In a letter from the same place, dated December 31, 1862, grandfather writes that General Morgan has been getting uncomfortably close to the Union lines in his daring raids. "On Saturday he attacked the First Illinois at Elizabethtown with 2000 men. There were only five companies of the 91st and they fought for eight hours but had to surrender to Morgan and were paroled immediately. On Sunday he attacked two of our companies of the 7th and after a battle they were compelled to surrender and were also paroled. On Monday morning Wolford attacked Morgan and defeated him. About 200 of Morgan's cavalry passed within a half mile of this place with one piece of artillery, and when within three-fourths of a mile of New Haven sent in a flag of truce to Colonel Bennesson and demanded the surrender of his forces. Although the colonel only had one company, his reply was that he would do first, using a terrible oath along with it, and in a few minutes the rebels opened fire with their cannon and fired fourteen shots. They then advanced upon the stockade when company H opened fire on them from their ditch with their Bennesson rifles, as they call them, and after a few shots the rebels retreated with a loss of one killed. Not a man of us was hurt. About eleven o'clock yesterday the rebels came on to within half a mile of company F and halted and sent in three men with a flag of truce and de-

manded of Captain Hawkins, our commander, the surrender of his company. His reply was about the same as Colonel Bennesson's, and in less time than it takes to write every man had his gun and cartridge box and was ready for them. The rebels after a short consultation wheeled their horses and put back the way they came, but made their appearance again about three in the afternoon on the other side of the river and again we made ready for them, but they kept out of reach of our guns and passed on, we suppose to join Morgan at Bardstown where he had gathered his scattered forces after Monday's battle.

"Yesterday I was on picket on the side where they made their appearance, but it was not many minutes before all the pickets were in camp. Last night and all day today all hands are busy digging a rifle pit around the stockade, to shoot out of if we are attacked. The rebels burnt all the bridges along the Nashville and Louisville road from Elizabethtown as far as they came; also the bridges along this road, so that all communication is cut off between here and Louisville. The cars have not been run since last Saturday, but we can find plenty to eat and still have enough at New Haven to do us for two weeks."

Hospital Luxury!

There is more hospital experience, and from his letters one would imagine half the medicine in their army chests had been served to him alone. "We have a comfortable room to stop in, good fireplace, but poorly fixed for beds. Straw is put down on the floor and the sick can pile down on it and cover up with their blankets and coats. When you folks at home lie down on your feather beds to sleep, just think of the sick soldier. We can get warm biscuits every day and light bread, and some butter, but we have to pay for it: biscuits, ten cents a dozen; butter, twenty cents a pound; milk, five cents a pint.

A War Photograph.

On January 24, 1863, he writes again, from Rolling Fork, using the quaint phraseology of the time—"I take my pen in hand to let you know how I am getting along at present, and also to inform you that we are leaving this place soon, but where our destination will be is more than any of us can tell. Some think we will go to Nashville and others to Vicksburg. As soon as marching orders came I went to New Haven to have my likeness taken for you. It was a very cloudy day and the room was not fit to take a picture in, but I thought it would be the last chance. I went with the intention of getting it taken standing up with my gun and cartridge box strapped on, but he was not prepared to take them, so I have my full uniform on with my military book in hand. "I will be glad when our regiment gets together again. I have not seen any of Company H for two months. Our mail has not come very regular since January 1. The railroad company refused to carry our mail from Louisville, so we only get it when officers go for it."

Pomp of War.

His next letter, dated January 21, is from Louisville, and tells of the regiment's return to that city and to their old camp, of how it rained and how muddy it was, and how thoroughly dispiriting the whole aspect of things was then. "Part of the regiment slept in an old pork house, and he was one of the sleepers. He records the promotion of Colonel Bennesson to be a brigadier-general.

In April, 1863, his regiment had marched into Tennessee and was encamped near Franklin. He was scarcely able to sit up. "I have got that old complaint again, that misery and pain in my breast and side, ever since I have been lying on the ground here in camp. I know very well that no mustard which the doctor gives me, or any other kind of a draught, will ever cure that lump in my breast.

"Nothing has happened of importance except the burning of a few houses. As I sit and write here in the tent I can see two houses in flames. It is thought here in camp that there will be another fight here with the rebels soon.

"Two men of Company F died and two others have been discharged, and I think more will get their discharge soon judging by their looks, although it does not seem like the doctors care much about the sick. Don't fail to see the general and tell him how I am."

Spies Executed.

A few weeks ago a current magazine contained a graphic story of the mystery of the visit of two officers in the tent of a Union colonel near Franklin in June 1863, and how the colonel became suspicious that they were not

Union, but rebel officers in disguise. He sent for them and brought them back, and reluctantly charged them with being spies. General Rosecrans, miles away, was wired to, but the colonel was told that the matter rested with him. One officer confessed and finally both officers were executed. The story was quite graphic and gave their names one of whom was Lieutenant Williams." In my grandfather's letter of June 9 is this passage:

"I witnessed the execution of two rebel spies today by hanging. One was a colonel and the other a lieutenant. They came into our camp and saw how we were fixed and how many men were here, and the colonel in command gave them a pass to go to Nashville and lent them fifty dollars. After they were gone a few minutes the colonel got after them and brought them back on suspicion. This morning they acknowledged all and said they were spies. They had passes from the secretary of war and from Rosecrans and have been through our whole army. They passed themselves for government inspectors."

Great and Good Man.

Then from the hospital in Nashville, on July 20, 1863, he wrote a letter saying he almost succumbed to his ailments.

"General Rosecrans and staff were here last week. I had the honor of conversing with the general. He thought it would do me good to get to the front and pick blackberries. I think the general not only a great but a good man. He talked freely with the boys and everybody seemed pleased with him." Grandfather Pierce had only one criticism of the general, and that was that he cursed too freely.

In August he wrote that he was not feeling well. "I am too sick now to write," he says, and he closes a very brief letter with his usual affectionate farewell. In a postscript he tells his wife not to try to go to the front to see him as she could not pass the lines.

A short time afterward he was brought home, honorably discharged from the service, but his homecoming was shortlived and he passed away peacefully in a feather bed to which he had so often referred after a bad night's rest on the soft side of a cold floor "at the front."

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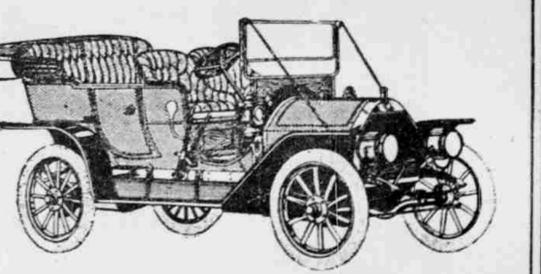
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