CIVIL WAR PRISON SCENES PRESERVED IN CARTOONS

Harry O. Jones of San Francisco Is the Owner of Valuable Water Color Sketches Made by a Confederate Prisoner Inside the Stockade at Point Lookout, Maryland : : : :

By H. O. Jones

WHEN success began to attend the union armies and detachments of confederate veterans began to arrive from the front the federal government established a prisoners' camp at Point Lookout, Maryland, where the Potomac river empties into the Chesapeake bay.

The camp consisted of a huge stockade some 15 feet in height, one side of which was opened toward the bay. Day and night colored sentries marched upon the stockade platform in readiness to shoot any prisoner who might attempt to escape.

Within the stockade were the officers' quarters, made of rough boards, and the tents to house the prisoners. A colored regiment under white officers guarded the camp on the land side, and off shore gunboats prevented escape by water.

Compared with some of the other great military prisons of the civil war, Point Lookout prison must have been a paradise to the prisoners in the privileges it afforded them. When they wished to take a plunge bath the bay was at hand, and if rations ran short they could add to their larder the fish which they caught, and now and then a softshell crab. Indeed, they were like castaways marooned on a desert island.

As for clothes the prisoners had a varied assortment. Many of them, before capture, had succeeded in supplying themselves with coat or trousers at Uncle Sam's expense and so their raiment was often a strange assortment of federal blue and confederate gray. Shoes were at a premium among the prisoners, yet there were some who were shod with shoes of northern make, which perhaps they had obtained in their campaigns. This, of course, resulted in a shortage in the wardrobes of federal prisoners in the south.

Within the prison pen at Point Lookout the captives had plenty of fresh air and an abundance of room for exercise, and as the time hung heavily on their hands they devised various means of amusement. Indeed, the Johnny "Rebs" probably had more fun at Point Lookout prison than at any other during the civil war.

Some of the prisoners made fans from pieces of wood and bits of ribbon. Others carved rings and watch chains from soup bones and old buttons. One inventive genius even contrived to build a steam engine from the refuse of the camp. Perhaps a stranger engine was never invented. The cylinder, the flywheel, and all the molded parts were cast from melted minie balls. A vegetable tin box served as a furnace; an old camp kettle as a boiler and a discarded piece of stove pipe, which the prisoner found half buried in the sand, served as a smokestack. The practicable feature of this marvelously made engine was that it could run; it could also whistle. But it was like Lincoln's steamboat, of which the president said, that when it ran it couldn't whistle, and when it whistled it couldn't run.

Another prisoner with the instincts of a cartoonist and a sense of humor that enabled him to ridicule the privations of the prison camp tried to relieve the monotony of the life by painting a book of water colors of familiar prison scenes. The poor chap probably had obtained his paints from the regimental sutler at the camp. After painting his pictures he coated them with a gum or varnish that, after 50 years, not only lends a luster to the colors, but has preserved their brilliancy to an extraordinary extent. This book, which is probably the only one of its kind in the world, was purchased from the cartoonist by a relative of the writer, who was a chance visitor to the camp, and it has been in the family ever since. While the name of the artist is unknown, no doubt exists that the book of cartoons is the work of a confederate prisoner at Point Lookout. Probably the cartoonist or some of his fellow prisoners are still living, and if so the name of the cartoonist may be discovered.

The prisoners' needs developed a local trade as well as a tendency toward the finer arts. Tobacco was an essential with many of the confederate prisoners. To get it they sold their handiwork to the visitors and negro soldiers for real money, when they could, and in this way purchased the much coveted article from the regimental sutler. Actual money, however, was too scarce to serve as a common medium of exchange, so the ingenuity of the prisoners was taxed to devise a common currency. Finally they hit upon something that would stand the wear and tear of all commercial uses. The new currency was nothing else than hardtack—that almost indestructible cracker issued by the government to federal troops and confederate prisoners alike.

After a currency had been agreed upon business, of course, began to boom. A laundry was established where a shirt could be washed for a definite number of crackers. A barber shop appeared where the most fastidious could get a shave or haircut for the necessary dough. A tailoring establishment sprang up where mending was done for the coin of the camp.

Hot coffee, made from old bread crusts, was sold on the streets of this pentup city. Even lemonade and molasses candy were peddled about and slapjacks and pies, made from unknown ingredients, found a market. No silversmith had a branch store at Point Lookout, but this mattered not, for a spoon made from an old canteen could be bought for five crackers. Living was not fastidious at the camp, but prices were reasonable. A chew of tobacco for one cracker is cheap either way you look at it.

Business honesty at the camp was fair, according to the report. Sometimes, though not often, a man was strung up by the thumbs for stealing prisoners' rations. But society at Point Lookout had to be protected. In this connection it must be recalled that there were a good many common people at the camp who, like other humans outside, wanted to eat and were ready to take some chances to do it, when they were hungry. These had to be restrained. The officers no doubt intended not to punish unduly, but to the man who had to walk around in a barrel or be denied the privilege of sitting down because he had been over hungry, the punishment probably seemed excessive. For those who were satisfied to sleep, to eat a little, and do no work Point Lookout must have had its charms. But for those who wished to see something of the world it had its disadvantages, since a too ardent desire to travel was restrained with ball and chain.

The negro soldiers at the camp were a source both of humiliation and profit to the white prisoners. For the first time the bottom rail was on top and the negro soldiers appreciated the situation in the fullest measure. However, the negro soldiers did not as a rule take advantage of the white prisoners, but afforded them much consideration. Even at that, when a former slave ordered a southern planter away from the stockade, both must have felt how sharply the conditions of warfare had reversed the old status. At night it was no uncommon thing, when a noise occurred in a prisoner's tent, for the negro sentinel to order the occupant out and make him do a double quick in the chilly air, clad in a single upper garment. On the other hand, the colored troops contributed much toward the comfort of those they were guarding.

For the first time in his life the colored man had money. His pockets were filled with the bounty he had received to become a soldier, and he was easily parted from it for an article with whose value he was not familiar. The prisoners gold bricked him at every turn. The negro could not resist the temptation to buy at fabulous prices the crude jewelry and nicknacks the prisoners offered for sale.

It was the fashion of the times to wear watch chains of gold dollars linked together. The genuine article possessed its counterfeit in brass, and frequently the regimental sutler would sell these bogus chains to the negro soldier for from $25 to $30 a chain, the price depending upon the number of brass dollars chained together. The confederate prisoners were novices in trade compared to the sutler, if war time stories are to be believed.

There was also a fine trade in "Commodore Perry's gun polish," a small box of which sold readily to the colored soldier for 50 cents. This celebrated polish was made by sifting coal ashes through a sieve with a very fine mesh and was undoubtedly touted up by the manufacturers as being a most indispensable article and absolutely essential to the equipment of every gentlemanly sentry.

In the illustrations accompanying this article the figures have been numbered by the artist to call attention to the supposed conversation which is given in the margin under the pictures. As the dialogue is in very fine writing a brief outline of what is going on in each picture is given herewith:

In picture No. 1 the prisoners are shown in their ragged and much patched clothing offering their trinkets to a union officer who had inquired, "Well, Johnny Reb, what's the price of fans?" An enterprising newsboy has invaded the camp and offers daily papers at 10 cents each. These sell like hotcakes to the men who are lucky enough to have 10 cents, for they wonder if the paper has any news from Washington about their parole or exchange. Of course the gallant union captain is a big purchaser of rings and chains, as the condition of Johnny Reb touches his heart.

In picture No. 2 a tinsmith is selling soup spoons made from canteens at only five crackers each. The man buying innocently inquires if soup is furnished with each spoon. On the right in this picture "coffee" made from bread crusts is being sold for one hardtack per cup.

In picture No. 3 the molasses candy man is crying his wares. "Only $2 a stick in 'confeds' or 5 cents in greenbacks." The man just behind the candy man, although without money, has managed to get a taste and his reflection upon this delicious confection is: "Who'd have thought the darned stuff was so sweet? I thought it was made from tar." On the right in this picture is the lemonade vender. Business with him is not good, for those around him have no money. One of these bystanders suggests that "he is sick and he thinks a drink will do him good." But the drink seller is adamant and tells his confederate brother "to go to the doctor and get a dose of oil."

In the barber shop, however (picture No. 4), trade seems to be brisk. Here a shave costs one cracker, a haircut two, and a shampoo three. The man on the left in this picture seems to have received the worth of his crackers, for his head looks as if he had been singed. The barber doing the haircutting asked the customer if he wants his hair cut "snapper fashion." The gentleman being operated on doesn't care, "so long as his ears are left on." The valiant soldier who is being shaved and incidentally carved, complains that "the razzor pulls." But the tonsorial expert assures the victim that if the "razzor" breaks he has two more. The man at the extreme right with the Absolom locks and the Peffer whiskers is an interested spectator, and wonders "what will happen to me."

Picture No. 5 shows Chesapeake bay and two fishermen in the water, one with pole and line and the other with crab net. On the left a practical joker with a crab has induced an innocent "to smell the bug's breath," with the result that the innocent's nose is fast in the crab's claws. On the right in this picture a prisoner is offering a crab dealer a big chew of tobacco for a soft shell.

Picture No. 6 shows the laundry. The gentleman who is washing his trousers wants to know "why the man at the door doesn't holler out and let the camp know they take in washing." The man hanging up the clothes announces that the price is two pieces for 5 cents; while the industrious prisoner who is pounding a bundle of shirts observes that "if there are any graybacks in there he will make them suffer." The last laundryman, the man at the kettle, is figuring how much he could save in wood if he did not boil the clothes.

All these pictures and the accompanying comments reveal the lights and shades of the prison camp in civil war times. Picture No. 7 gives an idea of the different phases of punishment in vogue in the camp. The man on the barrel and the man in the barrel are guilty of petty larceny. The man suspended by the thumbs has been caught stealing prisoners' rations. The man with the sign on his back has endeavored to obtain a box of tobacco under false pretenses and the men with the ball and chain attachment have tried to escape. In the background is the ever present negro sentinel.

Picture No. 8, showing the steam engine, has already been explained. In this unique volume of water color drawings of Point Lookout prison there are 24 pictures, each descriptive of some phase or incident of the prison life. It is not possible to present all the pictures with a single article, but those given reveal the spirit in which the confederate prisoners made the best of things. One of the views shows some of the habitations of the prisoners. Over the door of each is a name intended to be characteristic, such as "Growlers' Den," "Churchmen's Abode," and so on. A sense of humor was not wanting in this prison and perhaps many a homesick and despondent man was cheered thereby.

The commercial spirit which came to the front in Point Lookout was further illustrated in the tobacco shops. These shops consisted of merely a small stand in front of the tents of the dealers. These stands disappeared into the tents at night, but reappeared the next morning. Upon them the weed was displayed in most tempting form, and the minutest want of the customer was scrupulously attended to, the tobacco merchant not disdaining to deal in single chews.

Another picture portrays the accidental shooting of one negro sentinel by another. The comments of the bystanders, however, do not seem suited to the solemnity of the occasion. One prisoner explains to another that "the live soldier has given the dead one his discharge." Another confederate advises the live darkey to put down his empty gun and pick up the dead darkey's loaded one and make the corporal believe he shot himself.

Another picture depicts a confederate soldier on his knees asking "God to bless the president of the United States and deliver the colored people from slavery," a strange prayer to come from the lips of a Johnny Reb at that time, but the inspiration of it is entirely in the gun which the negro soldier is pointing at the head of the prayerful one.

On the whole this curious book of original sketches offers good evidence that the prisoners' lot at Point Lookout was not so hard that he could not laugh at it, and it shows a condition on the whole very creditable to the federal government.

Like Elbert Hubbard, the prisoners at Point Lookout prison did not take themselves too blanked seriously. Of all the prisons north or south, Point Lookout was undoubtedly the most comfortable. The worst that a prisoner had to dread was that he would be moved to a prison further north, the federal government having always to fear that a raiding party might liberate the captives at this point.

CANDY AND LEMONADE ③

① FEDERAL OFFICERS BUYING FANS

SPOONS AND COFFEE ②

SCENE ON THE BAY, ④ BARBER

FISHING ⑤

WASHING MACHINES ⑥

DIFFERENT MODES OF PUNISHMENT ⑦