

Capture of Federal Officers and Marines from Gun-Boat "Rattler" at Rodney, Miss., by Confederate Scouts, September 12, 1863.

A War Reminiscence of more than Passing Interest, Told by Local People Who were Eye Witnesses to the Memorable Occurrence.

A FIGHT IN MISSISSIPPI CHURCH, 1863. Between Federals and Confederates.

The town of Rodney is situated on the Mississippi River in Jefferson county, Miss., and was laid out and settled in 1828 and was named for an American statesman. The locality was first known as early as 1765 and was then called Pettit Gulf, as was also the commanding hills called Pettit Gulf Hill. Cotton grown there was known in the market as Pettit Gulf cotton, and it brought the highest price for both lint and seed.

In its palmy days, through its proximity to Oakland College, Rodney enjoyed being the center of culture in its region. The Presbyterian church was well represented by eminent divines, Dr. Jeremiah Chamberlain, Dr. Robert Price, Dr. W. F. V. Bartlett, and as visiting ministers, Dr. Palmer, of New Orleans, La., and Dr. Joseph Stratton, of Natchez, Miss. Many prominent business and professional men made their homes there. Times change and men change with them! The glory of the old town has passed! Oakland College is now Alcorn College (for colored men). The mighty Father of Waters has changed its course and Rodney is now an inland town, but the old brick church where the fight took place still stands and shows the mark of the shell fired by the Federals.

During the summer of 1863, Mr. Baker, pastor of the Presbyterian church at Red Lick, Jefferson county, Mississippi, came to Rodney, seeking transportation to the North. He was a Union man at heart and resigned his pastorage to go North. While waiting a North bound boat he was the guest of acting master W. E. H. Fentress on the U. S. S. Gunboat "Rattler" lying off Rodney on the morning of September 12th, 1863. Rev. Robert Price of the Rodney Presbyterian church, invited Mr. Baker to fill his pulpit that day, Mr. Baker accepted and extended this invitation to Capt. Fentress and his men. Captain Fentress and Ensign Strunk, with 18 or 20 seamen, came to services in the church. Under cover of the organ and choir music, Lieutenant Allen (Confederate Service) with 15 Confederate soldiers standing in the church door, commanded a quiet surrender. Immediately Ensign Strunk fired at the door. Lieutenant Allen fired toward the ceiling of the building and ordered "no more firing." The Federals continued firing until some 20 or 30 shots were heard; but strange as it seems only one man was injured, a seaman was slightly wounded in the arm by Ensign Strunk's ball. Captain Fentress, the Ensign and 15 or 17 seamen were captured. Captain Fentress raised his hand as he stood outside the church door and requested permission to speak. Lieutenant Allen bowed courteously. Captain Fentress said that a message be sent to his boat for clothing and etc., for his men, the message was sent and properly answered. The officers were placed in some of the carriages still standing at the church gate; the seamen fell into file and all were marched out of town. The congregation, mostly women and children, had scarcely dispersed when the "Rattler" began to shell the church and town and the town was fired in several places, Lieutenant Allen, hearing this, sent a message to say that if shelling did not cease and order prevail, he would hang every prisoner in his charge. Hence lives were saved and property preserved. One seaman boasted that a lady saved his life. This was a natural happening. The lady, aged and infirm, Mrs. J. D. G., kept her seat in a high back pew, the seaman, quick to embrace opportunity, crawled under and was concealed by the lady's skirts. (It may be related that in 1913 a man from a Northern city came to St. Joseph, Tennessee parish, Louisiana, searching, he said for a girl (?) who saved his life under her hoop skirt during a church fight in the civil war. The man wore a gray beard, of course, and the lady was long since laid to rest.) Amid the shrieks and screams of women and children, the loud command of Lieutenant Allen and the shots from Ensign Strunk, the organist, a very tiny young woman, sprang upon a pew and raised to a high pitch her trained voice and with clapping hands cried out, "Glory to God." A rebel woman can always make herself heard! Organist is now three score years and ten!

Affixed is a copy of Captain Fentress's apology to Admiral David Porter, U. S. N., from Libby prison. Some allowance may be made for its untruthfulness.

Statement of Acting Master W. E. H. Fentress.

RICHMOND, VA. LEMMY FAYSON, Nov. 15th, 1863.

I have the honor to forward to you the report of my unfortunate capture together with Ensign S. Strunk and 15 seamen belonging to the United States Steamer "Rattler."

On the 12th of September the steamer "Rattler" lying off Rodney, Mississippi, I went on shore to attend divine service which was performed in a (Pres.) church not two hundred yards distant from the steamer and in open view. I had been stationed at Rodney since the Tennessee expedition and had never seen or heard of an enemy near that point. I

Editor Tennessean, St. Joseph, La.

Dear Sir:

I have been requested by some friends to obtain some information as regards a fight between some Confederate soldiers and marines from the Federal gun-boat "Rattler," which occurred at the Presbyterian church in Rodney, Miss., on Sunday, September 12th, 1863, while services were being conducted there, so submit the following letters on the coincidence from persons who were present. Mr. Dunbar Hart, of Rodney, was present, also his brother-in-law (and my uncle), Mr. James Archer, and his daughter, Miss Ann H. Archer. Miss Lizzie Ogden, daughter of Judge A. N. Ogden, of New Orleans, was also present when the fight took place, she jumped out of a window and sprained her ankle, requiring several months to recover. I have a friend who is now postmaster at Delta, La., Mr. J. Sam'l. Richardson, a Confederate soldier who was a member of Lieut. Allen's Company. He told me there were only nine Confederate soldiers in this fight. Hoping you will kindly publish same, and thanking you in advance, and with best regards,

I am yours truly, JAMES ARCHER TURPIN.

WATERPROOF, LA., December 27, 1915.

the match, they received a note from the scouts, saying if they molested either the citizens or property they would hang the prisoners. Then they permitted the citizens to extinguish the fire. Most of the citizens moved out to Oakland College, we were there a year or more. I believe this is all I can tell you about the capture and etc. Mr. Hart and I were so sorry we could not have remained longer when we were in Waterproof and talked over the old times with you and your wife. We also regretted exceedingly that we could not have been with the old friends and comrades at Fayette. I attended the old Academy there in '61 and '62. Emma Broughton, nee Noland, was one of my school mate there, and John Broughton also Charlie Wilcox were my childhood schoolmates at Rodney. Mr. Hart and I would have enjoyed so very much meeting his old comrades. His health is not very good, sometimes he feels real spry, then again very much let down. Please tell my niece and her husband and the "boys" that their old auntie often thinks of them and will write them soon. Mr. Hart joins me in best wishes to you and the family and the hope that if you do not meet on earth again that we will meet in heaven.

Sincerely yours, MARY CLARK HART.

Mrs. Limerick's Letter.

Natchez, Miss., Dec. 1, 1915.

Dear Mr. Turpin:

Your interesting paper is making a very tardy return to you; please pardon my seeming delay. I have been away for some weeks, visiting my relations, and the paper followed me from place to place.

On the 7th birthday of a connection of yours, Mr. Dunbar Hunt, of Jefferson county, Miss., I dined with him, and showed him Mr. Columbus Allen's press error in mentioning Confederate Scouts; there were only a very few scouts but I could not say or ever guess how many. Mr. Hunt was present in the church that 12th September.

I think you may like to have some facts of the Battle of Coleman's cross-roads, Jefferson county, close proximity to Lorman, Miss. Mrs. Coleman's house was riddled by Federal bullets; she is living there now, but in a new house on the same spot. If you care to address her, darsney she will be pleased to write.

Now, I have a first cousin in Port Gibson, Mrs. John Butler; she was the daughter of my uncle, John Humphreys, and can tell you more than any one I know now living about the Battle of Port Gibson. My uncle was taken away prisoner and was on Johnson Island in Lake Erie two years. She writes a fine letter. She too is niece of Governor Ben Humphreys of Mississippi. We in Rodney heard that battle. She has many relics of the war,—orders from Confederate Generals written on pencil of my uncle's saddle. Sad! sad times.

I am at home and very quiet now, and after Xmas if I can help you in any way with your paper I will be greatly pleased to do so. I have a photo of the dear old church and it too shows the marks of Federal shells. Should you at any time come to Natchez and will come out to Linden (R. E. Conner home) or will phone to Mrs. John A. Limerick in this house we will be glad to have you out here. Could send in for you. Mr. Conner, 72 years old, is a veteran and a very enthusiastic one.

Begging pardon for tardiness, Yours sincerely, (Mrs.) IRENE STUART LIMERICK.

Natchez, Miss., Oct. 5, 1915.

Mr. James Archer Turpin, Waterproof, La.

Dear Sir:—Your letter and its enclosure has just been read. Mrs. Mary Clark Hart is one of my dear friends. I have never known a purer Christian than Mrs. Hart. All the names she mentioned are very familiar to me.

Yes, I was organist in our Rodney Church on that memorable day of September. Mr. Limerick and I had been married two years. Mrs. Clark, our hotel-keeper's wife, was sick in bed. When the noise was over at the church, Mary asked my husband to go up and give her mother some medicine. We went to the hotel and while Mr. Limerick was up-stairs in the sick room, and also while bedding and household goods were being cut over from the upper galleries, a mid-chipsian came in where I stood, waiting in the lower hall. He carried an ax in one hand and a can of oil in the other. I imagined his intention in common Southern parlance. He gradually advanced, and putting down the can of oil, began to splinter the door, being and foot of stain. I was twenty years old, all hills of silk and lace—far from service, and was also excited, so I took up the can and forbade the ax, at which the middy laughed and which enraged me. Just then our minister, Dr. Price, (and that Mr. Baker, too), passed the door and I called Dr. Price. He came in and stated that he was on his way to the gun-boat and urged the stopping of any movements until he returned. At that moment one of Lieut. Allen's Scouts rode up and brought the message and threat of hanging. So there ended Mary's chapter. Lieut. Allen was wounded in his right hand,—it was still bound up—and he

remain, and that he would come ashore the next morning and whip us with corn stalks.

Lieut. Allen bowed again to the lady, and said:

"Madam, Capt. Fentress shall have the opportunity that he desires, to whip us with corn stalks."

I remember that I was on picket that night in a little grave-yard just above the town, and heard the calls from the gun-boat, 12 o'clock, and all's well. The next morning Lieut. Allen drew us all up and we rode out on the bluff in full view of the gun-boat and waived our sabers defiantly. Almost instantly we could see men running over the decks and three boats dropped from the davits of the ship, and each containing, as well as we could count, about eight or nine men. We watched them as they rowed for the shore, and about the time that we thought they were well off from their boats we formed and charged into Rodney. We encountered them moving up the street, and a brisk little fire was opened. Four of the men rushed into the church, followed by Capt. Fentress and Lieut. Strunk. My brother leaped from his horse and called to me, "don't fire in that church." I should have previously stated that it was Sunday morning, and a congregation had assembled in the little building in Rodney, in which the sailors and the two officers took refuge. My brother ran in on one side while I followed the four men on the other side. As we entered I heard the report of a pistol, and saw Lieut. Allen stagger back with blood on his face, but he quickly fired and the man who fired fell. I captured the other man that had gone in, as stated, and let them out at point of my pistol and turned them over to a guard. While I was coming out of a lady sitting in the aisle of the church said: "Go up in the choir. The captain has gone up there." In an instant, pistol in hand, I was leaping up the steps and out sprang the two officers and down the other side they went, only to meet the Lieut. with his pistol, and they surrendered. The other boys had captured the balance of the sailors or marines and we drew out of Rodney as the "Rattler" had opened a heavy fire of shell and grape, knocking off the steeple of the church, so I have heard.

Well out from under their fire, with our prisoners, some twenty-four in number, as well as I can remember, including the two officers, and noticing the boat's action in firing upon the defenseless town, my brother called to Capt. Fentress, and said:

"Who is in command of the 'Rattler' in your absence?"

He said: "My Executive Officer." Quickly tearing a leaf out of his book, he called Coon Clark, one of our men, and wrote the following laconic note: "To the Executive Officer, commanding gun-boat Rattler—Cease firing on Rodney, or I'll hang every prisoner in my possession."

Fentress was looking over his shoulder as he wrote the note, and said to me: "My God! does he mean that?" I told him he did.

The Gun-boat received the communication, and instantly the firing ceased. We went back and apologized for our intrusion into the church, and assured the congregation that no harm would come to them now, as the boat had ceased firing, and they were dismissed, and I do not believe that there was anybody in the house that was very much alarmed or hurt.

Our going after these men into the church may possibly be criticized by some people, but the game of war, as our friend Sherman remarked, "is hell." We reached our command with our prisoners, and turn them over. They remained with us for a considerable while, and Capt. Fentress and Lieut. Strunk, my brother and myself got to be good friends with both of them, and after the war my brother met Lieut. Strunk in St. Louis and they dined happily together, with no ugly memories of war to disturb their appetites. Whether Capt. Fentress is living or dead I do not know, as I have never heard of him since. But the poor estimate that he put on his fellow country-men who happened to be wearing the grey, by stating that he would "whip us with corn stalks," his capture, in my opinion, was a piece of poetic justice.

I shall never forget when we brought the men into camp the look of our commanding officer, who was then Col. John L. Logan. He said, "Allen for God's sake, where did you get these fellows," and then he received the information that he desired.

I will state before closing, that my brother had had his arm shattered to

the elbow at the battle of Britton's Lane, in Tennessee, but served over two years in his maimed condition.

If you will pardon the digression, I will tell you of an incident of Lieut. Allen's career in the army. He was captured during the time we were operating around Fort Hudson, and taken aboard the steamer "Herville" to be taken to New Orleans. While on the boat he walked out with the guard on the boiler deck, and, watching his chance, knocked the guard down, and, clothed in uniform, with heavy boots on and only one arm to make the desperate fight with the angry river, he leaped overboard, swam ashore, and made good his escape. The whole brigade turned out to receive him when they learned of his approach to our line, and one stalwart Arkansian bore him on his shoulders, and in this way he rejoined his command.

This story is in no sense a literary effort. I am a very busy man, and have little time for anything but the pressing affairs of business, and have written from memory, but the facts are all about as stated.

I would be glad to have a copy of the paper if you publish this.

I am, very truly, Your friend and comrade, COLUMBUS H. ALLEN.

P. S. Capt. Fentress was a native of Norfolk, Va.

Mrs. Hart's Letter.

Bethoni, Miss., Sept. 23, 1915.

Mr. J. Archer Turpin, Waterproof, La.

Dear Friend:—Your appreciated letter to my husband of September 10th was received in due time, and would have been answered sooner, but a press of other duties prevented.

In regard to the capture of the men from the gun-boat at Rodney, that you enquired about, I will just copy from a little diary I came across a few days before your letter came:

Oakland, September, 1863. Last Sunday, Sept. 12, we had quite a sensation. We were at church in Rodney; 27 Yankees were there, more than usual. We had commenced the second hymn when 10 of our Scouts came to the door and ordered them to surrender. One of them jumped up and fired his pistol (he was in old red—fourth from the front); about a dozen shots were exchanged, but only a few of the enemy were wounded they had to give up. Great excitement prevailed but no one was seriously hurt. The ladies were very much excited. Boat immediately commenced shelling the town. My father told us to sit still, but my little sister thought the church was falling down and leaped over the seat to get out. I followed with the intention of bringing her back to "sit still," but she ran up the street like a deer and reached home before I overtook her. We gathered a few things together and I got out of the house at once.

Only one of the enemy escaped, must have been the one you referred to in your letter. Last winter, while Mr. Hart and I were visiting our sons at Shreveport, La., we heard that he had come South and was enquiring for the young lady that had helped to hide him in the church, and that he wanted to marry her (his wife was dead). Thought her name was Miss Jasper Griffing. You might write Mrs. Irene Limerick, at Natchez, care of her son, John Limerick; it makes her home with him since her husband's death.

Yes, Charlie Wilcox, married Georgia Griffing, she was Mr. Frank Griffing's daughter, and he a cousin of Mr. Jasper Griffing, one the leading merchants of Rodney at that time; however, he was called Mr. Jeff Griffing. His wife died. Mrs. Jasper Griffing died a few years after the war. Mr. John Griffing, a brother, lived a few miles from town, his daughters, Misses Thureid and Emma, were often at our church. Miss Thureid died soon after the war, and Miss Emma married Mr. Isaac Herring. She is now a widow and a confirmed invalid, confined to her bed and rolling chair.

Miss Winnie Wilcox married Dr. West of Kentucky or Arkansas.

On Sunday afternoon—after the capture of the soldiers—my parents returned to Rodney to try to get their things together to leave them, fearing the town would be burned. While there the soldiers came from the boat, saying they had orders to burn our home, claiming one of them had taken refuge there and the man of the house had cured and set the dogs on him. The minister and citizens tried to convince them that my father was at church, was an elder of the church, therefore, did not use profane language, but they insisted they had orders to burn the house and had to obey orders, and proceeded to set fire to it, only giving my mother three minutes to get the things out. Just after knocking in the doorway, putting in kiesel and oil, and applying

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the elbow at the battle of Britton's Lane, in Tennessee, but served over two years in his maimed condition.

If you will pardon the digression, I will tell you of an incident of Lieut. Allen's career in the army. He was captured during the time we were operating around Fort Hudson, and taken aboard the steamer "Herville" to be taken to New Orleans. While on the boat he walked out with the guard on the boiler deck, and, watching his chance, knocked the guard down, and, clothed in uniform, with heavy boots on and only one arm to make the desperate fight with the angry river, he leaped overboard, swam ashore, and made good his escape. The whole brigade turned out to receive him when they learned of his approach to our line, and one stalwart Arkansian bore him on his shoulders, and in this way he rejoined his command.

This story is in no sense a literary effort. I am a very busy man, and have little time for anything but the pressing affairs of business, and have written from memory, but the facts are all about as stated.

I would be glad to have a copy of the paper if you publish this.

I am, very truly, Your friend and comrade, COLUMBUS H. ALLEN.

P. S. Capt. Fentress was a native of Norfolk, Va.

Mrs. Hart's Letter.

Bethoni, Miss., Sept. 23, 1915.

Mr. J. Archer Turpin, Waterproof, La.

Dear Friend:—Your appreciated letter to my husband of September 10th was received in due time, and would have been answered sooner, but a press of other duties prevented.

In regard to the capture of the men from the gun-boat at Rodney, that you enquired about, I will just copy from a little diary I came across a few days before your letter came:

Oakland, September, 1863. Last Sunday, Sept. 12, we had quite a sensation. We were at church in Rodney; 27 Yankees were there, more than usual. We had commenced the second hymn when 10 of our Scouts came to the door and ordered them to surrender. One of them jumped up and fired his pistol (he was in old red—fourth from the front); about a dozen shots were exchanged, but only a few of the enemy were wounded they had to give up. Great excitement prevailed but no one was seriously hurt. The ladies were very much excited. Boat immediately commenced shelling the town. My father told us to sit still, but my little sister thought the church was falling down and leaped over the seat to get out. I followed with the intention of bringing her back to "sit still," but she ran up the street like a deer and reached home before I overtook her. We gathered a few things together and I got out of the house at once.

Only one of the enemy escaped, must have been the one you referred to in your letter. Last winter, while Mr. Hart and I were visiting our sons at Shreveport, La., we heard that he had come South and was enquiring for the young lady that had helped to hide him in the church, and that he wanted to marry her (his wife was dead). Thought her name was Miss Jasper Griffing. You might write Mrs. Irene Limerick, at Natchez, care of her son, John Limerick; it makes her home with him since her husband's death.

Yes, Charlie Wilcox, married Georgia Griffing, she was Mr. Frank Griffing's daughter, and he a cousin of Mr. Jasper Griffing, one the leading merchants of Rodney at that time; however, he was called Mr. Jeff Griffing. His wife died. Mrs. Jasper Griffing died a few years after the war. Mr. John Griffing, a brother, lived a few miles from town, his daughters, Misses Thureid and Emma, were often at our church. Miss Thureid died soon after the war, and Miss Emma married Mr. Isaac Herring. She is now a widow and a confirmed invalid, confined to her bed and rolling chair.