

*Life of a
Confederate
Soldier in a
Federal Prison*

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New Bern Historical Society

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LIFE OF A CONFEDERATE SOLDIER IN A FEDERAL PRISON.

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As the greater number of the boys of '61 and '65, who donned the Gray and fought for the Right as they saw the right, have passed over the mysterious river Styx and are at rest under the shade of the Tree of Life, and those who still remain must soon follow, I have decided to write a sketch of my life as a Confederate soldier.

In the spring of 1861, while the men and boys were gathering at every cross-road and station to enlist as soldiers to drive out those who were oppressing the South, I became anxious to cast my lot with the rest. So I obtained the consent of my parents and joined Co. I, 10th N. C. Regiment, Artillery, but later on was transferred to Infantry.

When not at drill the time was spent in the vices of army life. A gambling epidemic broke out which spread with great rapidity and but few made escape

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I saw men give half their rations to have the other cooked rather than stop gambling. All kinds of gambling was practiced morality for the time was ignored and the soldier who endeavored to live right was ridiculed. If caught reading his Bible, such expressions were heard as "Hello parson, you must be scared, I don't think there will be any fighting soon" or "Hello parson what time do you expect to start a revival in camp." Later on, however, serious thoughts of religion prevailed. When the shot and shell began to whiz by them, splintering rails and tearing off tree tops, with comrades falling around, they began to realize the great need of religion. One good battery with a good supply of grape and shell, holding an elevated position could bring hard hearted sinners to repentance. It did not require a dozen old sisters with their turkey wings begging them to repent of their sins. They were truly good then but the great trouble was in keeping them so. If his

life was spared the sacred resolution would not be long remembered. This order of things lasted only a few days, however, when some fellow would slip around to the Sutler tent and purchase a new deck of cards, return to his quarters, pick up an oilcloth and spread it on the ground, open up his new deck and begin to shuffle. Some three or four others would step up and a regular game of seven up or draw poker would begin. In less than a week the Bible reader would be a thing of the past, when gambling would go on as before and would not stop until the next signal for a fight was heard in the front, when the same unloading would take place with gambling goods.

On the 14th of March, 1862, I got my first experience in real war, but as I am writing mainly of my life in prison camp, Point Lookout, and how I was captured by a Yankee, I'll go back to March 7, 1865.

It was reported that Schoefield's Army Corps was advancing. We march-

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ed to a creek to investigate and found the enemy in full view. They shelled us pretty lively all that evening, but made no attempt to charge. Our commanding officer decided that we had better get in their rear, so we started to the rear of the "Yanks" about an hour before day to play tag with them for a spell. We found them about sunrise and were received right warmly. After much tagging on both sides, the "Yanks" gave way and we captured some two or three thousand of them. I was wounded in my leg, and seeing a pool of water I thought I would bathe my leg and stop the blood. While busily engaged with my work, up poked a "Yank" and said, "Johnny, you are mine, come with me and I will take you to a summer resort, we have room enough for you all." We went to his General's headquarters, when we arrived an aide went in the tent and the general came out, made a slight bow and I saluted him. He asked me many questions concerning the troops in his

rear, then asked me if my leg was painful, called a doctor who examined my wound and said there were small pieces of bone in the wound which made amputation necessary. I noticed a "Yank" standing near who winked at me, came closer and whispered, "Don't let that d——butcher take your leg off." I was then told to take off my equipment. They took my belt, at which I objected, I told the general if I were going to a summer resort there might be ladies there, and I could not make a very admirable appearance holding my pants up with both hands. The general then told a soldier to give me my belt. The firing then began near us, I was thrown on a horse and all moved off lively for a mile or so. We came to a place where some "Yanks" were cooking and eating. We prisoners were dismounted and were treated very kindly by our captors. The next morning there were seven more prisoners brought into camp, I think they were Georgians, and not slow on the eating line either. I

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heard some of the Yankees say that "If all the Johnnies were as good fighters as they were eaters, Schofield had better retreat lively."

We lay around for a short time with the "Yanks," eating and playing cards. Their food became scarce, then our troubles began. We were put on board a transport and started for the "summer resort." There were about eight hundred of us prisoners. After we had gotten out to sea they began to issue rations of raw pickled beef and hard tack to us of which we all ate heartily. The sea was awfully rough, the waves rolling high and soon it was very evident that almost every prisoner was suffering dreadfully with seasickness, while their cries for water were pitiable to hear. After several days we arrived at our "summer resort." We were taken from the barge to the headquarters of the officers. There were many ladies present. I suppose they were members of the officers' families. I saw some of the ladies pointing at us and remark-

ing, I suppose about our appearances. Some of us were barefooted, others without hats, while our pants were worn off on the bosoms and knees, the tails were heavily fringed denoting long and hard service. We were required to give our names and commands, names of States from which we came, after which we were marched to the "bull pen." On the way to the pen I saw a big pile of coffins and wondered what they could do with so many. I found out later. We got to the gate. It was thrown open and we marched in. Things were looking bad to me. The prisoners were placed in tents from eight to ten to the tent, with no other bedding but our clothes. The next morning we drew meat. I thought at the time it was rather small for a meal, but found out it was to last all day. At ten o'clock, we drew one-half loaf of bread (half loaf to each man) and one pint of soup. As we were all sick the rations did very well for a while. On Saturday each man drew a

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loaf of bread to last until Monday. I carefully hid half of my first loaf, I thought in a safe place, but when I went for it Sunday it was gone. No one can imagine my disappointment at my loss. I feel sure that my bread was not stolen by a Confederate for they did not steal (one might have borrowed it) and though I felt hard towards who ever got it then, I have forgiven him since, if he were a Confederate and only borrowed it. After that first Sunday I hid no more bread but put it where friends could not borrow it, nor thieves could steal it. I spent Sundays in fasting and prayer, and in watching the negro guard marching around in white paper collars and white gloves, which made them appear more hateful to us. I heard some Texans say "Those black sons of perdition are afraid of getting sunburnt."

After I had been in prison a few days I began to suffer from hunger. I saw some of the boys eating broiled rats, they smelled very appetizing, but I

could not get any to eat. I decided that I must either find something to eat or starve; on looking about I saw some oats or rye growing beyond the dead line, knowing that it was death to be caught beyond the death line, I waited until dark to venture out for some of the grain. I thought I could make soup of the grain, I got a turn of it, came back and put it on to boil. The longer it boiled the tougher it became and the less fit it was to eat, so I gave up trying to find more to eat than my captors pleased to give me.

While walking about one day I accidentally passed the guard at the hospital gate. Passing through the wards down to the dead house I saw thirty or forty of the poorest objects I had ever seen before. There were two that looked rather fleshy. Seeing a fellow standing near I thought I'd ask some questions, so began: "How long have you been here, brother?" "Eight months," he replied. "Of what kind of sickness did those men die?" He replied, "They

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starved to death." "What killed those fleshy ones?" "They got drowned diving into the soup kettle for beans." They were cooks, he said. I then asked him if he thought there was any chance for me to get cook's place that I would gladly work all day and part of the night to keep from starving. He shook his head and walked off. I passed on disgusted with all I had seen.

Now I am coming to the toughest thing I had ever struck. After leaving the dead house I came to the guard. He told me to halt. I told him that I belonged to the other side and must go. Holding his gun up so that I could see down its barrel, he said, "That ball is whirling fast, it wants to get out." He then called a white man, who came and talked to me awhile, and then said, "You need some jewelry, something like a twelve pound ball and chain." Oh! horror of horrors, if any of my piney-woods friends could have heard me then. But my pleadings were all in vain. I sat down and received the

jewelry. I sat there for a while thinking. I can't express how badly I felt—can't remember a time when I felt worse. I felt ever so much better a few years later when I asked my girl a civil question and got the right answer. I finally concluded that as long as that d——ball and chain must be my constant torment for a while at least, I had just as well move off with it, so I gathered it up and went to my tent. The boys just gazed at me when I threw the d——thing on the ground in my tent. My bunk mate asked me what had happened, and I gave them the whole story. After I had told him all about it, my bunk mate said "That darn thing will give you more trouble than twins ever gave their mother at night." I don't think he missed it far either. If possible I think my jewelry gave me more trouble at night when the Jerusalem overtakers were on strictest duty. I began to notice that those who had been wearing a ball and chain were not wearing them any more, so I began in-

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quiring and learned that there was a person in camp who had a file and would file a ball and chain off for a chew of tobacco, I found him and had soon concluded a bargain. The gate on the bay stayed open during the day time. Anyone noticing would have seen me going toward the end of the wharf carrying my haversack, but only one person knew what it contained. That ball and chain is now resting on the bottom of Chesapeake Bay.

The greatest difficulty in prison was the necessity of getting through the first few days with nothing to do. These hours dragged slowly. Some were able to pass a great number in sleeping. Those of less nerve slept fifteen or more hours, but others found such indulgence impossible and were forced to seek other methods of enduring the tiresome days and nights.

There were some very amusing things happened in camp. Now to think of such as toting barrels and boxes every day, but to see thousands of the

boys on a fair evening with their shirts off hunting the seams for—we know what—so they might get a little rest, for the Jerusalem overtakers were very bad and a bit sharp.

One amusing feature of prison life was a barber who would daily walk through the camp and repeat, "Here goes your good old Tar Heel barber, will shave you for a chew of tobacco. If anyone will shave you cheaper, I'll give you a chew to let me shave you."

In prison camp I belonged to Company I, Sixth Division, near the big cross ditch.

On the 11th of June, 1865 a notice was put on the bulletin board that all the prisoners were to be discharged. This notice brought forth the most joyous yells I had heard in months. About twenty thousand men and boys made a rush for the gate. Each man gave his name, company, regiment and State, the same as when he entered prison, then received his discharge. My name happened to be among the first called.

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I think I smiled for the first time in months. I gave my name, company, regiment and State, took the oath and received my parole, which I still have. We were put aboard a boat about dark and started for Richmond, Va. We arrived in Richmond about 4 p. m. The next day we got off the boat and the guard told us to move on. As we did not at first know which way to move, there was a little confusion. We were given permission to camp in the Capitol square until we could get transportation home. While passing Libby prison a Yankee called to me and said, "Johnnie, don't you want some boiled pork and hard tack?" I smiled or tried to smile an answer. He gave me about two pounds of pork and filled my haversack with hard tack. I am sure that Yankee's heart was in the right place and believe he will get his reward for passing "the cup of water." I had gathered up a lot of cigar stumps on my way to camp, so I ate pork and hardtack and chewed and smoked cigar

stumps nearly all at the same time. I slept well that night.

We got transportation by way of Danville, Va., Greensboro, N. C., Raleigh, N. C., and New Bern, N. C. The next day after we reached New Bern I got to my home, June 23rd, 1865.

Well, it is all over now, and I do not feel unkindly toward the Northern soldier who fought because he felt it his duty to fight. We only differed in opinion. Some one is to blame though for placing black, ignorant brutes as guards over Confederate prisoners. I don't think there are many of those prisoners who can forgive and forget that much of the past. I can't understand who or why any Southern white man can vote any ticket except the Democratic ticket today. It seems to me that there must be something wrong in the upper-story of the Republican voters of the South. But that too, is, I suppose, just a difference in opinions.

