

Civil War Reminiscences

edited by Helen H. Cresap*

The first of the two selections which follow was written by Charles Pliny Searle, and the second was written by his wife, Martha. Charles was born in Chester, Massachusetts April 16, 1831. He was reared on his father's farm and educated at the Sheldon Academy in Southampton, Massachusetts.

In the spring of 1850 he decided to go west, so with twenty-five dollars in his pocket he started out. He spent a little time in Fairport, Ohio with an older brother and then lived in Kinsman, Ohio for three years where he clerked in a store. From there he traveled by horseback to Iowa, settling in Oskaloosa, where he became a partner in the firm of Hardy, Searle and Young.

He married a teacher, Eliza Shangle in December 1856, but she died five months later of tuberculosis. In 1859 he married Martha Turner, also a teacher and the daughter of the Reverend Asa Turner.

In July, 1861 when Lincoln called for troops, Searle enlisted in the 8th Regiment of the Iowa Volunteer Infantry. In November of that year he was promoted to First Lieutenant and became Captain in 1862.

His regiment marched from Oskaloosa to Sedalia, Missouri and he fought in the battle of Shiloh, where he was taken prisoner. In October, 1862 he was on the exchange list and he rejoined his regiment and participated in the battle of Jackson, Mississippi and later the siege of Vicksburg.

In 1864 the 8th Iowa was sent to Memphis, Tennessee on provo duty and on August 21, 1864, when General Forrest made a raid on Memphis, Captain Searle was again taken prisoner. He was assisted in an escape by a Union man whom he had befriended. On his return to his command he was struck down by a blow on the head and

*Mrs. Cresap is a granddaughter of Charles P. and Martha T. Searle; she now resides in Omaha, Nebraska.

suffered a permanent spinal injury. He was left for dead but was soon found by Union troops and carried into camp. Being disabled for further military service, he resigned his commission and returned to Oskaloosa.

In January, 1867 he was made Clerk of the Courts of Mahaska County and held that office for eight years. He then opened a real estate and insurance office. In 1900 he and Mrs. Searle moved to Santa Barbara, California, where he had a small abstract office and represented several insurance companies. The couple had three daughters: Dora Howard, of Oskaloosa, and Alice Holmes and Harriette Searle of Omaha, Nebraska.

Charles P. Searle died November 10, 1918 in Santa Barbara and is buried there. The following is an excerpt from one of his journals.

TO A PRISONER OF WAR (aside from dear ones at home) nothing was *more* dear than the Flag of his Country. After months of imprisonments, of untold privation and suffering worse than death, being at last released and coming in sight and once more under the protection of the Stars and Stripes has cheered many a soldier's heart and caused him to forget his hunger and his rags. Let me recall an incident or two which came under my own observation.

While in a southern prison at Augusta, Georgia, July 4, 1862, the prisoners decided that we must do something to commemorate the day. A 4th of July celebration without Old Glory would be a tame affair. We must have the colors represented if nothing more. So, a committee was appointed to canvass among the denizens of the prison, thinking to find one who had a red shirt, another with a blue one and one with a possible white one, who would be willing to sacrifice a part of the garment for the occasion.

Imagine the surprise to find a comrade who had picked up a small flag on the Shiloh battlefield, and wrapped it over his heart under his outer garments and carried it all these months concealed from view! When it was brought forth you must, if you can, imagine the cheering and joy its revelation occasioned. I cannot describe it.

We feared that there might be some objection and trouble caused by its display on the part of those who were so solicitous in caring for our safety and so anxious for us to remain with them, but they were indulgent and seemed to enjoy it themselves.

It was a 4th of July celebration I shall never forget!

Another incident indelibly fixed in my memory: When we were

finally exchanged from Libby Prison after nearly seven months of suffering in Southern prisons, we were marched down to Aiken's Landing on the James River, twelve miles below Richmond. There one of our transports, with a guard or escort from the 118th Pennsylvania Infantry, received us and, as we stood on the upper deck of the vessel and realized that we were again under the folds of the Stars and Stripes, which floated so beautifully over our heads, the cheers were drowned out by sobs and tears as we stood there in awe. We knew then that we had never before fully appreciated this emblem of liberty and I believe that no one can until deprived of its protection. Why? Because it stands for something; for the majesty of the law, equal rights, liberty and the will of the people.

Martha Turner Searle wrote of her experiences prior to and during her husband's capture at Memphis.

IN THE SPRING OF 1864 the 8th Infantry was sent to Memphis on Provo duty. It was likely that they might remain there some time and my husband sent for me to spend my vacation (the summer months when school was not in session) with him. In June I went to St. Louis and took a Memphis packet

My husband's Company and the regimental band were stationed in the southern part of Memphis on Hernando Road. My rooms were just across the street from the barracks. A little Episcopal Church stood next to our boarding house. The members were strongly Rebel in sentiment and when I ventured into service, as I sometimes did, I sat quite alone in the pew. No one would sit near a Yankee Captain's wife and they gave me plenty of room to pass out, fearing apparently that if they touched but the hem of my garment they would be defiled.

Some ladies would walk in the middle of the street, rather than to pass under the Stars and Stripes, which hung in front of the barracks. When my husband finally draped flags quite across the street, it was amusing to watch the disdainful air with which they surveyed them as they approached and the contempt with which they would turn and go blocks out of their way, rather than to submit to the humiliation of allowing its folds to wave above them.

Among my youthful aspirations was one I never expected to realize—to witness a battle. I was fully satisfied at the time of Forrest's raid on Memphis.

We were aroused before daylight on the morning of August 21st by an unusual commotion in the street. At first we thought it was Union cavalry returning from a raid. To me there was something different in the yelling of these troops from any I had ever heard and we hurried out on an upper porch overlooking the street. As we peered into the darkness, we soon discovered that the uniforms of the riders who filled the roadway were butternut and not blue. The advance column passed on into the City and my husband decided that he must get over to his men.

Every available soldier would be needed if the City was surprised, as seemed probable, for our barracks were three miles inside the picket lines and there had been no warning of the enemy's approach.

Putting on his uniform, Captain waited a few moments until the thinning ranks of the enemy would give him an opportunity to cross the street. Many times in life we must face uncertain results of any straight-forward walk in the path of duty which it would be so much easier not to take. It seemed to me that morning that so much depended on the opening and shutting of that door—one would keep my husband safely by my side; the other would thrust him out to possible death or capture, which he feared almost as much because of his former experience in Libby prison; and yet, I should never have respected him nor myself if I had urged him to stay and he had weakly yielded to my pleadings, while it was possible to save his men or avert the disaster seemingly impending in the City.

So, while I stood trembling in the dim morning light, I could say no word to keep him back. A glance from my window as I returned to my room showed that he was already a prisoner, captured by a squad of Rebels concealed in a clump of evergreens. The rear of the column had surrounded the barracks and the men were brought out prisoners. In a few moments they were all marched away out of my sight.

By this time the fire of musketry was heard in all directions and the guns at Fort Pickering boomed out in the morning air. In company with two or three loyal women, our landlady and myself ventured over to the barracks and hastily securing as much of the Company's private property as possible, we hurried back and stored it under the Church. By this time squads of returning Rebels came dashing past, much faster than when they came in, some carrying their wounded comrades.

During the day the citizens were ordered off the streets, which were planted with cannon, but we stood on the porch with wine and coffee, ready to serve wounded or weary soldiers on their way to the hospital or barracks. Only those who were slightly wounded could walk but I remember one with a bullet hole through his arm, another with a scalp wound who was faint from the loss of blood, and they were thankful for our ministrations.

Of all I inquired anxiously for my husband. A young lady came in toward evening. She had passed the prisoners at the outskirts of Memphis. My husband had recognized her and sent me a message. She told me that he had his head tied up with a handkerchief and his face was covered with blood, the first intimation that I had that he was wounded.

Late in the day an ambulance drove up and great was my joy to see the Captain lifted out! He had been assisted to escape by a Union man whom he had befriended and at whose house five miles in the country the Rebels had made a stand but were soon routed by our forces. For many days he was weak and half paralyzed, unable to perform any duty, but I comforted him with the assurance that in my opinion he was considerably better than a dead husband, and as he was marked by the cutting off of part of his right ear, he could not well run away from me without detection.

I told him too that a crippled back with a brave heart was infinitely better than a sound body with a cowardly spirit. I stayed with him until he was able to walk about, then returned to my school duties.

Continued disability caused his resignation from the service and he returned home in January, 1865. After this the closing of the War speedily followed and we welcomed home the remnant of our battle-scarred veterans, bearing their tattered flags with songs and rejoicing in which all loyal hearts united.

* * *

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.