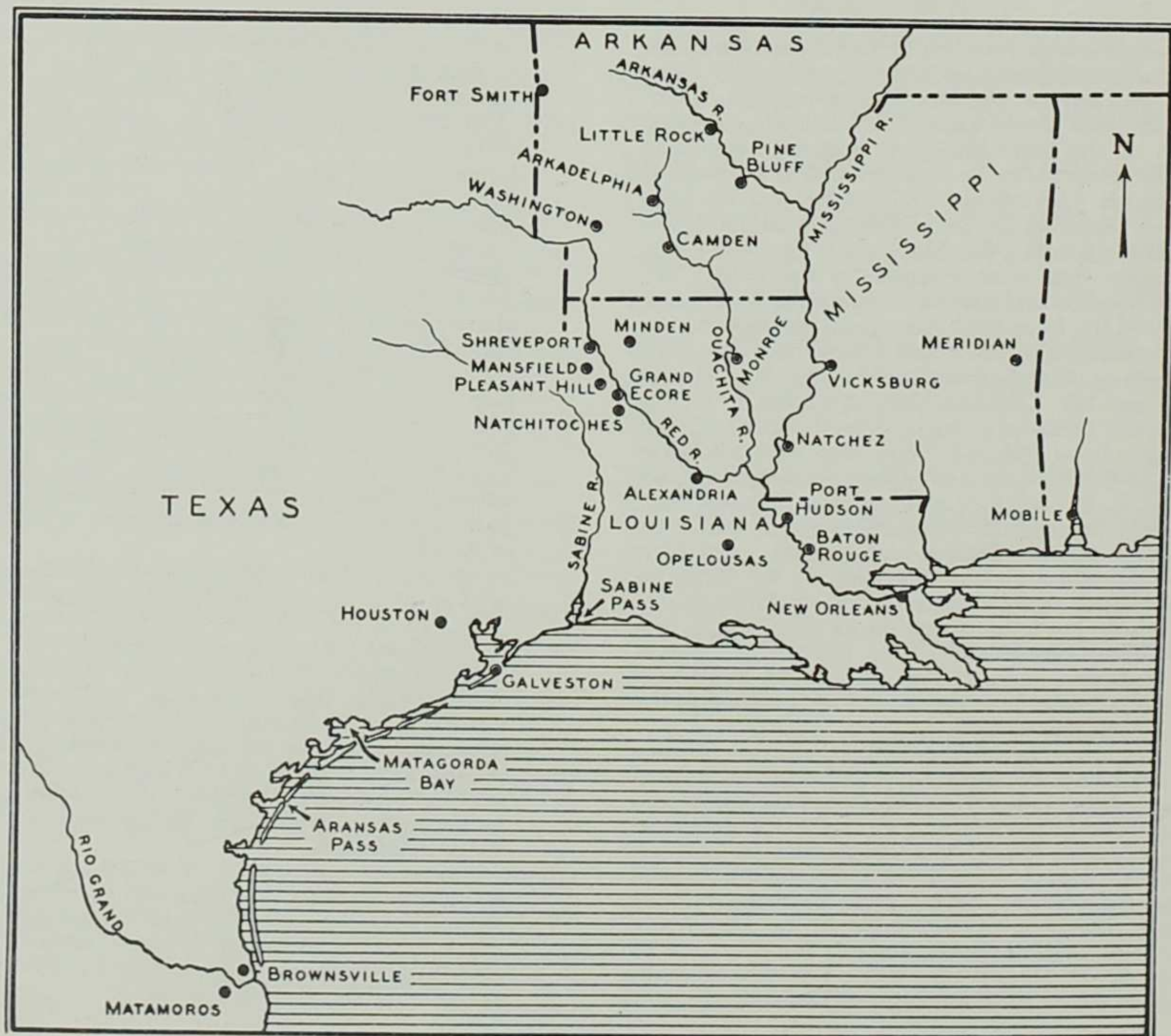


# An Iowa Private in the Civil War

by  
George Hanrahan





"Good-by. I'm off to war."

With these simple words, Laurence Hannan said farewell to his sister Caty, tied his horse in the farm field, climbed a fence, and walked off to the Civil War. The date was September 10, 1862; the place was Taylor Township in eastern Allamakee County, Iowa. Hannan, then in his early twenties, went down the Mississippi to Dubuque, arriving there the evening of the next day, September 11. He was never to see his family again.

Born to Irish immigrants, Peter Hannan and Bridget Whalen Hannan who came to America in 1837 and were married in New York in 1838, Laurence was the oldest of five children. He was born in New York City, though like his brother and sisters Mary, Johanna, Catherine, and James, family records are incomplete as to birth dates, with the exception of Catherine--or Caty--who was born on December 25, 1849, also in New York City. Sometime in the 1850s, the family moved to Allamakee County in the northeast corner of Iowa and settled on a farm.

When the Civil War broke out in April 1861, his father needed him to help on the farm so Laurence did not enlist, but as more and more of his friends left, the romantic notions of war and the strong patriotic sentiment in northeast Iowa apparently became too much for him. Two months after he had joined the Army, he seemed to have second thoughts. In one of his early letters home, he told his sister Johanna: "I took a sudden start...I never would have started if things went right. My name today

would not be on the army roll only for too much selfishness. You asked me before if anyone knew anything of my starting. Not one. I had not the slightest idea the day before."

Laurence mailed the letter from Camp McClellan in Davenport, where he mustered into Company B, Twelfth Iowa Infantry Regiment, on October 20, 1862 after enlisting on September 12. By the time he joined, the Twelfth Regiment of Iowa Volunteer Infantry was a veteran fighting outfit. The ten companies comprising the Twelfth had been raised at Dubuque on dates ranging from October 17 to November 25, 1861 about a year before Private Hannan left the farm. Decimated by the heavy fighting in Tennessee at Shiloh and Corinth, battles Laurence was fortunate to have missed, the regiment, low in manpower, had been pulled back to Camp McClellan where fresh recruits like Hannan once again filled the ranks.

According to the Company B Descriptive Book, Private Hannan was 23 years old, 5 feet 7½ inches tall, dark complected with grey eyes and brown hair. Like thousands of others, his occupation was listed as "farmer." Two tintypes Laurence sent home to his family show a young-looking face with chin whiskers, but no mustache or sideburns. The pictures were probably taken in Davenport--in a November 20, 1862 letter from Camp McClellan, Private Hannan told his family: "You may expect my likeness soon."

Camp McClellan was the first and most important of five military camps



maintained at Davenport at various times during the Civil War. Established in 1861, it was located just east of the city on a bluff above the Mississippi. (Today, within the present city limits, the site has become a park.) Private Hannan's letters talked of day-to-day life in the Camp: "We have straw ticks to sleep on." (Nov. 20, 1862) "Our water is hauled here by a drayman in a hogshead & he puts it in our barrels. There has been two until of late. He is just as busy on Sunday as any other day. . . . It is surprising to see all the clothing there is in Davenport at the R. Road depot. There is clothes for 9,000 men that are to be drafted.

"As a general thing everybody is clean. Lice are called Grey Backs. They say there are plenty of Grey Backs in where the prisoners were kept so big that they carried the ashes out of the stoves during the night. Nobody here can keep the dust out of the heads sleeping on those blankets. When ever the barracks are swept out nobody can see another." (Dec. 12, 1862)

"I will tell ye about Christmas. The morning was dark and cloudy. It commenced to rain lightly about 9 o'clock in the morning. It kept on all day and night. We had a fiddle in the barracks at night. We danced until about 12 o'clock.

"We have things more complete now than ever. We sit down to two meals. Now we have two long tables about the length of 100 ft. It is a sight to see so many tin dishes. We eat in the old hospital. . . . There is very little sickness here now, only colds." (Dec. 28, 1862)

Private Hannan seemed often to think of home and family. He ended most of his letters with a plea to "write soon." In a November 20, 1862 letter, he prom-



*Laurence Hannan wrote from camp in Nov. 1862: "You may expect my likeness soon." (courtesy of the author)*

ised that "when I come home I shall bring ye all some presents." And he addressed a few words to his sister Caty, who would be 13 on Christmas Day: "Caty, I suppose you are at school every day. You must write some to me."

Caty was again in his thoughts on December 28, 1862: "Caty I do often think of the morning I last saw you. Let me know how Christmas and New Years passed. I wish you a happy time of it. I would be very glad to see you. I guess it will not be long until I do. . . . Write soon. Let me know everything."

Laurence hungered for news from home. On February 1, 1863 he asked after the doings in society: "Mary, Johanna and Caty, I hope you are enjoying yourselves this winter. Let me know if ye have been to any dance or ball this winter. If I get any money I will send ye some money and ye may enjoy the sport. Let me know all the particulars.

"I think I should have a letter before this. Answer this immediately."

But Private Hannan was concerned not only with family news and camp life. In his letters of December 1862 and



of January and February 1863, he talked often of the rumors of peace, worried where the regiment might be going and when he might hope to get out:

"I suppose ye see the contradictory reports of peace in the papers. I am sure the war will be over by spring. It is the talk of everybody. The night the news came to Rock Island that Illinois had gone Democratic you never heard such firing of cannon for half the night...I have learned a good deal since I joined the army. I am 3 months enlisted today." (Dec. 12, 1862)

"I believe I will be here all winter." (Dec. 28, 1862)

"There is talk of an armistice for six months here in the paper. The paroled prisoners of the 12th are expected here soon. We will go either to Dubuque or St. Louis soon. The boys who came from below (the Regiment veterans) have got furloughs to the 27th. When they come back we will go some where. Some say we will be sent to Washington or somewhere on the Potomac. More say we will be disbanded. There is no telling what will be done with us. Some say also we will not leave until May. I think we will soon have peace. I suppose you see the papers. There is talk of foreign intervention in them." (Jan. 14, 1863)

No foreign power intervened, peace did not come, and the regiment was not disbanded. It waited for two more months in camp, for its orders, amid rumors and gossip. Apparently there was a dispute between Union generals over who should receive the prisoners paroled from Southern prison camps. On February 1, Laurence wrote: "I think we will move soon somewhere," but it was not so soon. The detachment that wintered at Camp McClellan finally left

for St. Louis in late March and arrived there on March 29, 1863. The new recruits and veterans back from furlough proceeded to Benton Barracks where they joined the regiment's other survivors and paroled prisoners. On Thursday, April 9, 1863 the reassembled regiment, with a "total of 450 muskets," embarked on the steamer *Planet* for the trip down the Mississippi. It arrived at Duckport, Louisiana nine miles above Vicksburg, on April 14 to join in the Siege of Vicksburg, where the Twelfth was assigned--with the Eighth and Thirty-fifth Iowa Regiments--as Third Brigade (Colonel Woods commanding) of the Third Division (Gen. James Tuttle commanding) of the Fifteenth Corps (Gen. W. T. Sherman commanding). After a long march through Louisiana, the Twelfth crossed the Mississippi River to Grand Gulf, Mississippi then marched eastward to join the rest of the army already on its way to the rear of Vicksburg.

Private Hannan apparently saw his first action on May 14 when the Fifteenth Corps pressed to within a mile and a half of Jackson, Mississippi, where they found the enemy strongly entrenched. Companies B and C of the Twelfth were deployed as skirmishers and, advancing across a low meadow in a pelting rain, drove the enemy inside his works. The Rebels then pulled out of Jackson, and the Federals occupied the capital of Mississippi. On Saturday, May 16, Sherman's troops moved out again and on May 18 reached a point north of Vicksburg, shutting the city in on the north.

The Vicksburg campaign was followed by almost three months of comparative rest. The Twelfth went into camp on the Black River, eight miles in the rear of Vicksburg. The Black River,



which runs southwest across the state, enters the Mississippi River south of Vicksburg. Hannan's Company B was stationed at Stevens, Mississippi. He reported home, in a letter dated September 20, 1863, that "I am still in good health and I hope this will find ye in good health." The letter told of scouting missions and skirmishing. "In my letter of Sunday," he wrote, "I spoke of some of our men being out on a scout. On Sunday 3 of our men were out on the watch watching while the rest were laying in the woods and weeds. 8 Rebs rode up to the three men and ordered them to surrender, at the same time fired a volley.

"All the rest came out. The Rebs turned around 2 of their horses were killed and two of them were wounded, in one of the saddles there was a bullet hole.

"A nigger saw them behind Harris' field, 2 on one horse. The one behind was holding his arm with his other hand."

Hannan then went on to say:

"It is believed in camp today that there was a fight this morning at Black River Bridge. Firing commenced this morning between 3 and 4. Artillery and musketry firing was heard. The bridge is about 8 miles from here.

"The 8 and 12 Reg. went out yesterday on a scout but saw nothing. . . ."

Private Hannan, in his surviving letters, took no apparent stand on the issue of slavery. His references to "nigs" and "niggers" would not be acceptable now, but they were in his day. He mentioned the Emancipation Proclamation in his letter of January 14, 1863, but did not make his own feelings clear. The proclamation by President Lincoln, freeing the slaves in those parts of the nation still in rebellion, had gone into effect on New Year's Day. Said Hannan, writing from

Camp McClellan: "The Proclamation is not endorsed by a majority here. The boys in the union brigade do not like it. They say the army below is also opposed to it. There is a few everywhere who endorse it."

The Twelfth Regiment remained at Stevens until November 1863, when it was assigned to the Third Brigade, First Division of Maj. Gen. Stephen Hurlbut's Sixteenth Corps, and ordered to the Memphis, Tennessee area. The men left Vicksburg on November 9, 1863, on the steamer *Thomas E. Tutt* and arrived in Memphis on November 12. The Twelfth was sent to Chewalla, 90 miles east of Memphis, to guard a section of railroad which had been undergoing raids by rebel cavalry.

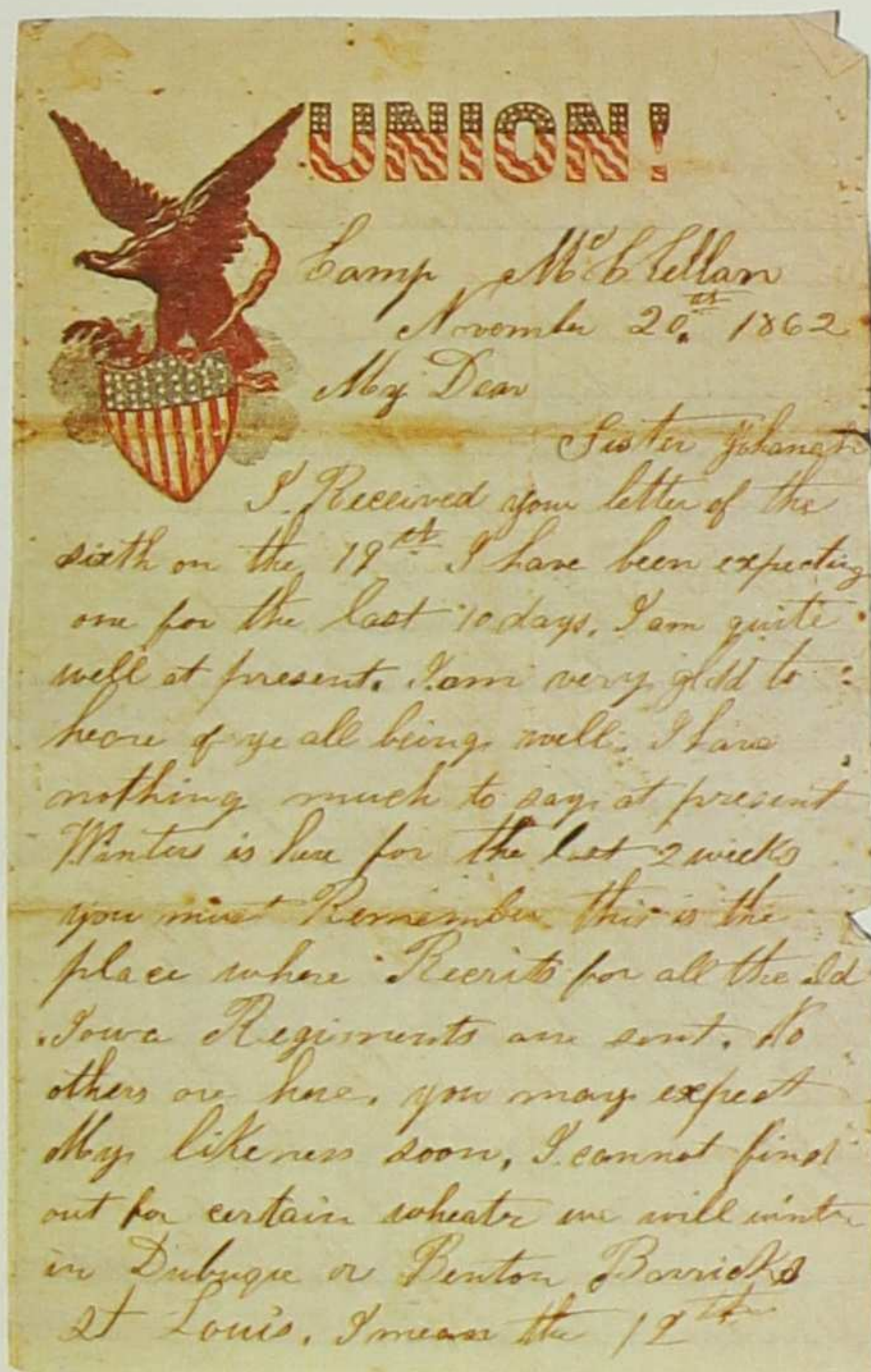
Writing from Chewalla on December 7, 1863, Private Hannan described some of the action:

"Pretty serious events have occurred since my last letter around here. On last Monday night the last of Nov. the guerillas burned a bridge about two miles from here towards Pocahontas. It was about midnight.

"After they set the fire they went north. Co. F of our Reg was one mile beyond the R.R. up they came when F let them have a volley, one horse was killed. About six blankets and six hats three guns were left behind.

"Next night a train was fired into near La Grange. [Nathan Bedford] Forrest, [Samuel] Ferguson, [James] Chalmers [all Confederate generals] and others formed a junction about Pocahontas, Wed. so that fighting has been going on along the road until about Sat. The Rebs had, it is reported, 8,000 men, all mounted, and 8 pieces of artillery. It is said we took 800 prisoners.





(courtesy of the author)

"Several miles of the road is destroyed between here and Memphis. Mostly every bridge is burned. There is a piece of trestle work about 4 miles from here. One Co. is there all the time. Each Co. stays 2 days at a time. No cars have run at all this week only from here to Corinth. It will take some days yet I believe to have the road in running order....

"I have heard nothing of Forrest since Sat. This trestle work I spoke of is at Cypress River....I forgot to say we were about out of rations and could get none from Memphis so we got 5 days rations from Corinth."

On February 1, the Twelfth was ordered to return to Memphis. They then went downriver to Vicksburg again, arriving there March 5. Writing from

Vicksburg on the day of his arrival, Private Hannan told of rumors of the future:

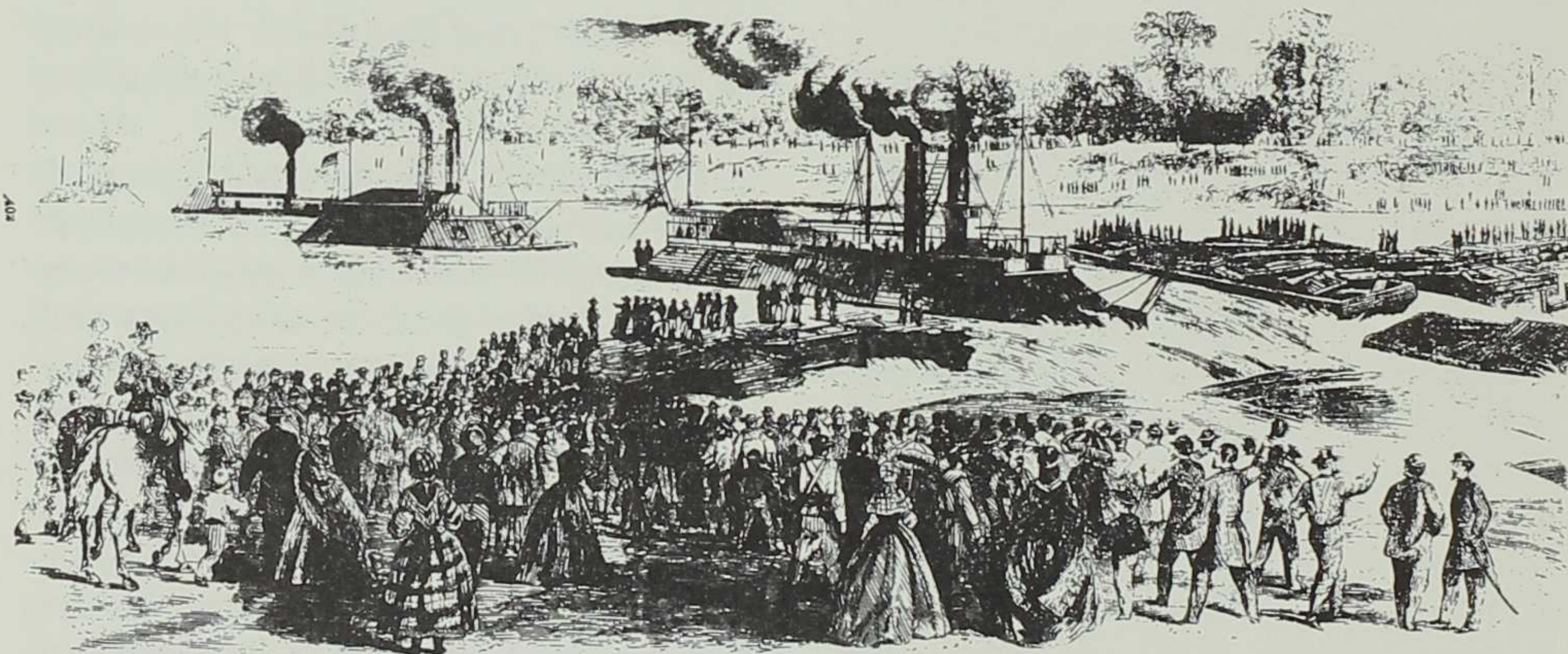
"We are going some where not known for certain. Some say down the Miss. and up Red River. That is contradicted again by the report that Red River is too low, and boats cannot go up. Some think we go home soon."

Unfortunately for Private Hannan, he did not go home. Veteran members of the Twelfth who had re-enlisted were given furloughs. But Private Hannan and about 70 of his comrades were temporarily transferred to the Thirty-fifth Iowa to take part in the Red River campaign--Hannan's last.

Various objectives have been given for the Red River campaign--capture of Shreveport, Louisiana, the center of a rich cotton district, in order to secure cotton for the mills of the North; full military possession of all parts of Louisiana and Arkansas in the Red River area; positioning for the occupation of Texas.

Gen. Nathaniel Banks, as senior commander, worked out the Federal plans for the disastrous operation. Private Hannan was in a task force commanded by Gen. A. J. Smith, which left Vicksburg on March 10, 1864 and was escorted into the Red River by Admiral David Porter with "the most formidable force that had ever been collected in western waters"--13 ironclads and seven light-draught gunboats. Smith's command entered Alexandria without opposition. The Rebel force, under the command of Gen. Richard Taylor, retreated up the Red River. After several minor clashes, a general engagement erupted late in the day of April 8. The Federals, with Banks now in command, were routed with a loss of 2,500 prisoners and much equipment. This was the battle of





*Porter's fleet passing a special dam above Alexandria during the Red River campaign (from Leslie's Illus. Famous..., 402).*

Sabine Cross Roads. That night Banks withdrew his forces to Pleasant Hill, and in an ensuing battle on April 9, Taylor's attack was repulsed with heavy loss.

Writing in *Iowa in War Times*, S. H. M. Byers said that in the battle of Pleasant Hill the Thirty-fifth Iowa "was thrown to the front and shared the hard fighting and the victory of the day. Capt. Henry Blanck was killed as were many of the privates." Byers also described the aftermath of the battle: "Gen. Banks did not realize that his troops had won a victory at Pleasant Hill and that the Rebels were checked. Apparently frightened by the disaster of Sabine Cross Roads, and by the fierce opposition at Pleasant Hill, he sounded the grand retreat--a retreat full of hardships and some fighting on the way, and that did not stop short of the Mississippi river."

Private Hannan also did not realize that the Rebel troops had been repulsed.

Writing from Grand Ecore, Louisiana, on April 18, Hannan told of the battle of Pleasant Hill in his most descriptive letter:

"I suppose before you get this you will have heard of Banks defeat at Pleasant Hill....[Fighting] did not commence in earnest until 4 p.m. From then until after dark the musketry firing was the heaviest I ever heard. I thank God that I was not struck. I thought one time we were all gone.

"The Rebs forced the front line to give way. Back they came and the Rebs close behind. When they got at good range the second line with the artillery let into them so they turned back into the woods again. We followed up. They soon turned around again. But they were again driven back. This was about dark and was the last attempt made.

"We commenced to retreat that night at 2 o'clock. Banks lost first day 22 pieces



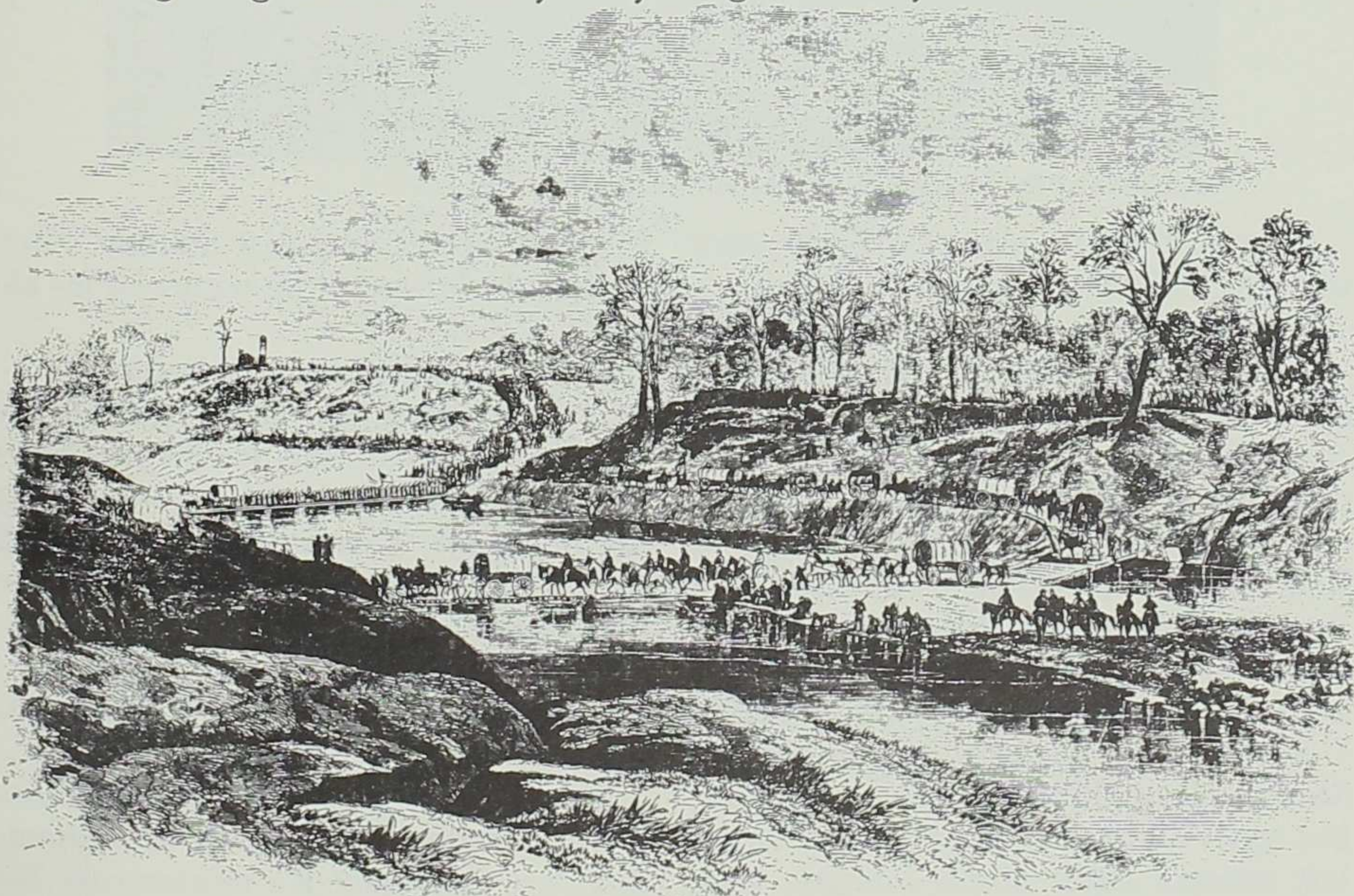
of artil., 117 wagon loads of ammunition, and over 60 wagons of the provision train. One whole brigade of Cavalry was also captured. The[re] is nothing of the 13 Corps left they are all taken prisoners. It was a total defeat.

"All the dead and wounded were left on the field besides any amount of small arms. When I was coming back over the field that night the wounded were groaning and grunting all over. The first [question] was sure to be have you any water. Yes, and you give him a drink. The next question is can't you take or help me off this field. Poor fellows were all left behind to fall into the hands of the rebels.

"Coming along the road next day every

thing could be picked up. I saw two forges or black smith shops thrown off the wagons.

"We reached here on the third night. This little town of Grand Ecore is on Red River. I believe we go back soon. The Rebs had over 35,000 men. Same time we left here the boats started up river until they found it blocked up by a sunken steam boat. They were making ready to blow it up, when a courier arrived ordering them back. But when they turned to come back the Rebs had a battery below them. It kept them there 3 days but did not do much harm for the gun boats were there. They stole by at night. This is just the outlines of it."



*Banks' army at Cane River (from Leslie's Weekly At the Front with the Army and the Navy, 44).*





Mementoes of Pvt. Hannan (courtesy of the author)

Private Hannan closed off his April 18 letter with this poignant wish:

"I would like some mush and milk."

Some time after the battle of Pleasant Hill, Private Hannan was taken ill, but records--Army and family--do not disclose the ailment. A short family history compiled in 1903 said he was "injured in Red River expedition." The May and June and July muster rolls of Company B listed him as "absent--sick in Hosp[ital], Memphis." The muster roll of Overton U.S.A. General Hospital in Memphis for May and June, 1864 listed him as present, but gave no clue as to his illness. In his last existing letter home--Sunday, June 14, 1864--Private Hannan said "my health

is much better than last Sunday." But, again, no clue as to the nature of his ailment.

Some excerpts from that letter:

"You see it in the papers there is not much stirring. Nothing new in the papers so I scarcely know what to say. One thing the summer is now at hand, and ye will soon be harvesting. I hope there will be an abundant harvest."

And his final salutation:

"I have not another word to say this time."

Records are sketchy from here on. Private Hannan was listed as "absent-sick" on Company B's muster rolls for July, August, September, and October



1864. Finally, on the muster roll for November and December, 1864 is this cryptic note: "Died of disease while on sick furlough home at Cairo, Ill., 28 July 1864." Apparently he had been given a furlough to go home and recuperate from his illness, but only got as far as Cairo, in the southern tip of Illinois, when he died. Even the exact date of his death is in question. The *Roster* of Iowa soldiers and the Company B Muster Roll list July 28. The Company B Muster-out Roll of November 30, 1864 says he died "about 27th July 1864," and on later

Company B Returns the date is given as "Aug. 1864." His discharge papers, dated January 20, 1865, say he died of "disease while on sick furlough, at Cairo, Ill., 18 July 1864." And the Inventory of his effects says he died in "the latter part of July."

Private Hannan was buried in a military cemetery at Cairo. After learning of the death of his son, Peter Hannan traveled to Cairo to see his son's grave and to pick up his personal effects: two cloth-covered buttons and five small keys. □

#### Note on Sources

The most important sources for this article were the private letters of Laurence Hannan. Family records and reminiscences and data from the National Archives in Washington, D.C. helped to fill in background and establish the context of the letters.

Material about the Civil War--especially Company B, Twelfth Iowa and Company I, Thirty-fifth Iowa Infantry Regiments--may be found in Maj. David W. Reed, *Campaigns and Battles of the Twelfth regiment, Iowa veteran volunteer infantry* (Evanston, Ill.: 1903); Addison A. Stuart, *Iowa Colonels and Regiments in the War of Rebellion* (Des Moines: Mills & Co., 1865); *Roster and Record of Iowa Soldiers in the War of Rebellion*, vol. 2 (Des Moines: State Printer, 1908-11); S. H. M. Byers, *Iowa in War Times* (Des Moines: W. D. Condit & Co., 1888); Jacob A. Swisher, *Iowa in Times of War* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1943); Mark M. Boatner, *The Civil War Dictionary* (N.Y.: D. McKay Co., 1959); and Ned Bradford (ed.), *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* (N.Y.: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1956).

In a few places I have used literary license to try to fill in some gaps, but these have been kept to a minimum. The spelling, punctuation and grammar of Private Hannan's letters have been changed to conform to modern English usage. Hannan's first name appears variously as "Laurence" and "Lawrence." The former, which appears on his letters, is used here uniformly throughout.