

# The Adventures of the Nineteenth Iowa

by

Donald M. Anderson

**T**wo people in the Madison, Wisconsin area have an interest in a remote Civil War encounter, the battle of Sterling Farm, Louisiana.

It is Tuesday, 2:00 p.m. and Mrs. Dennis Martens is busy taking an X-ray of the writer's left upper molars. "It must be nice to live in the country," Mrs. Martens says. "My neighbor, Rose Evans, suggests that I go out and see the wild crocus on the hills around Springfield Corner." Wild crocus? Those are Pasque flowers. Now the X-rayed suspects that Mrs. Martens is not native to these parts. Where, then? Iowa. The victim's family had roots there. Where in Iowa? A farm near Washington. Aha, here are two strangers with ancestors on farms near Washington, Iowa. How far can we go with this nonsense?

Did Mrs. Martens have an ancestor in the Civil War? Oh yes, he was captured and escaped. This is crazy. Mrs. Martens' great-grandfather and my grandfather were in the same infantry regiment and had been captured at the same place. I told Mrs. Martens of the fact and asked her to let go of my teeth so that I could go home and confirm it. What was the fellow's name? Cocklin.

Until a few weeks before I had not known where Grandfather James Sturges Anderson had been captured, but a private in Company C, Nineteenth Iowa Volunteer Infantry Regiment, J. Irvine

Dungan, after the Nineteenth's dispersal from Davenport July 31, 1865, hurried home to write (in two months' time) a history of this regiment. Knowing that he would write the story of the Nineteenth Iowa, Dungan had saved newspaper accounts, interviewed successful escape artists, and afterward he went to Wapello to get a physician's diary.

The question was, did Dungan have the story of Cocklin's escape? First I had to get Dungan's story away from a high school ballad singer to whom I had lent my copy. When every moment counted there was a half-hour's delay as the girl's mother inflicted some hospitality on me. Good wine, though. Speeding home, I went upstairs and looked at Dungan's history. He had interviewed Cocklin, and the story of Cocklin's escape comprised Chapter Ten, worth 15 pages. Mrs. Martens' ancestor, Levi B. Cocklin, was some man. I called her.

**T**he Nineteenth Regiment Iowa Volunteer Infantry was organized after Lincoln's call for 300,000 men early in July 1862 and was mustered in at Keokuk between the days of August 17 and August 23. All three soldiers mentioned were in Company C, enrolled in Washington. Author Dungan enlisted on July 22, Cocklin on August 9, and Anderson on August 14. On September 3, the Nine-





(From Frank Leslie's *Illustrated Famous Leaders and Battle Scenes of the Civil War*, 327)

teenth Iowa went to St. Louis by boat and some of them marched out to Benton Barracks. Others rode the streetcar.

On September 11, the regiment left St. Louis by rail for Rolla, Missouri, and on September 16, the Nineteenth started a "toilsome" march of 125 miles to Springfield. On October 17, the Nineteenth Iowa began a fantastic series of marches in and around the Boston mountains in Missouri and Arkansas. Once the regiment travelled 100 miles in three days and three nights, pushing artillery pieces up the hills and running with packs and rifles. This prelude to the battle of Prairie Grove, Arkansas is taken from official

records in Des Moines, rather than from Dungan's book:

On the 3rd of December at 2:00 p.m., broke camp and started to reinforce the First Division under General Blunt, who was holding the enemy in check at Cane Hill, Ark.; marched 18 miles to Cane Creek and bivouacked for the night. December 5th, marched 24 miles to Pea Ridge, Ark. December 6th, marched 34 miles to Fayetteville and rested a few hours. Left Fayetteville at 5 a.m. December 7th, marched 12 miles to Illinois Creek. The Nineteenth Regiment was ordered into line of battle at 12 o'clock p.m. Here we met the enemy, under General Hindman, and fought the battle of Prairie Grove.

The battle lasted for several hours,



and in this encounter the Wisconsin Twentieth, a twin to Iowa's Nineteenth, had a rough time and the Nineteenth Iowa had to pick them up. The Wisconsin colors were in the mud, the bearer having been shot, but the Iowa men caught up the flag before the Confederates could get it. The Iowa Nineteenth lost 45 men killed at Prairie Grove. Ordered out at dawn of the next morning, the Nineteenth went looking for its enemy, but he was gone. Here the Iowa farm boys paused to bury their own and the Confederate dead. Dungan said it was not an easy thing to do with Southern women looking for their men.

The regiment went on to participate in other ventures, among them Vicksburg. Arriving at Young's Point June 10, 1863, the Iowa troops were put in line on Grant's extreme left. After Vicksburg, Grant's army was raided by his superiors, and the Nineteenth Iowa regiment was conveyed south down the Mississippi to become part of an expedition into Texas.

The Nineteenth regiment arrived at Port Hudson, Louisiana on July 26, 1863. Many men were sick in that camp, and when the regiment made its next move it had less than a third of its roster available. On September 5, there was an expedition to the mouth of the Red River, and the Nineteenth arrived at Morganza on September 7. The enemy was 12 miles away on the west side of the Atchafalaya River. On September 28, 260 men of the Nineteenth and about 240 men from the Twenty-sixth Indiana Infantry found themselves at Sterling Farm, acting as a screen for the Second Division. Dungan said the Federal position was bad and that General Herron, the Federal commander, had been told

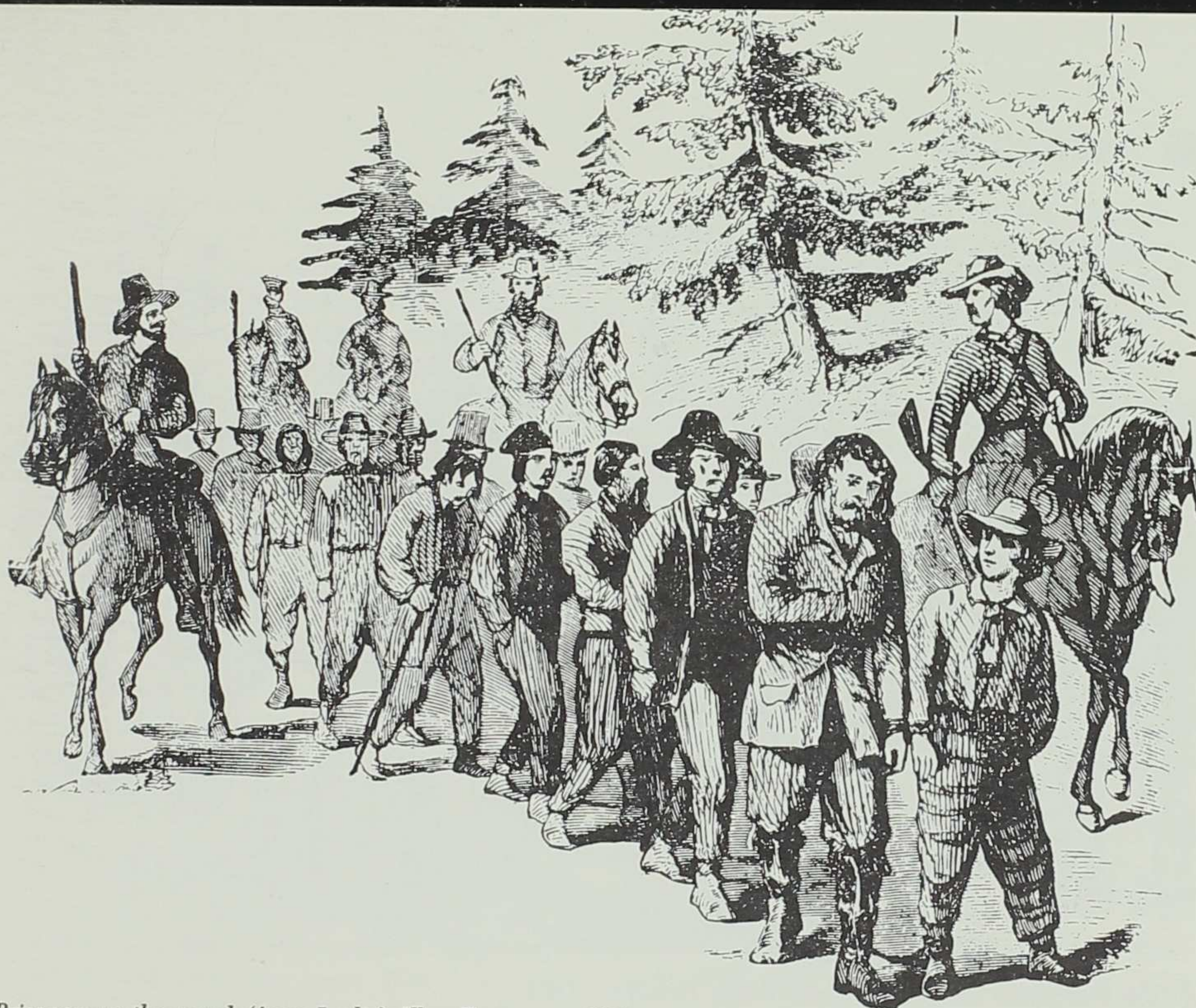
so. Dungan reported that Sterling Farm was vulnerable on two sides--a private second-guessing a major general. Dungan's view was this: if this position is so good, why are so many Confederates wandering around the Federal rear?

General Green, the Confederate divisional commander, then took matters into his own hands. Detaching three brigades (5,000 men) he led an attack on the Federal force. Dungan tells how it started:

The morning of the 29th of September was rainy and disagreeable. Near half past eleven, as we were preparing dinner, a shot was heard at the picket post north of camp, then three or four shots in quick succession, all from our one picket post, then a few shots from the cane beyond, the bullets whistling through our quarters. Col. Leake of the Wisconsin 20th, hastily belting on his sword, ordered his Adjutant General to have the artillery placed inside the gap, and to open across the canefield, then ran out to where the Nineteenth was in line awaiting orders, and commanded the line himself, to 'About face! Advance to the fence and commence firing!' which was done at once, the regiment having been in line sooner after the first shot had been fired, than these lines could be written.

The adjutant never got the artillery pieces into place and Col. Leake, after putting the Indiana Twenty-sixth into line, found men dragging the guns back of the Sterling Farm house. Scrambling, the Nineteenth could not protect all of the entries to Sterling Farm, leaving the center open. Cavalry appeared. Col. Leake's adjutant said they were Federal. Too late, the Iowa soldiers recognized the Confederate carbine. Exhausted, the Federals could not stop this move, and the Confederate soldiers, surrounding the Federal force from the rear, walked





*Prisoners on the march (from Leslie's Illus. Famous..., 537).*

up and took rifles away from the Northern men.

Not certain of their defeated condition, Federal men continued firing. Southern Gen. Green was furious. Riding up on his charger, Green shouted, "STOP THIS CONFOUNDED SHOOTING." It was a good thing nobody tried a potshot at Green. There might have been hell to pay. Col. Leake was lucky, if Dungan heard it right. "Col. Harrison of the rebels, said he had directed the attention of five sharpshooters successively to Col. Leake, and after seeing their fire ineffectual, had himself drawn his never failing weapon, but at the last moment refrained from firing, he knew not why." Of course both sides were taught to shoot officers first. Col. Leake's opposite number Major Boone, for example, was savagely riddled as he came through the line, losing first his arm, then three fin-

gers from his left hand, and finally his life.

After their capture, the men of the Nineteenth were marched back through the rain and mud to a ferry and shuttled across the river. The shock of defeat and capture was made worse by a drenching rain that did not cease for 48 hours. They had no food and no shelter. The next day, after an issue of raw meat but no cooking pots, the march began--it went on for 21 days until the prisoners reached Alexandria. There they were shut up (all 500 of them) in a room 24 by 36 feet. Then on to Shreveport. The men were half starved; they bartered away any remaining possessions to hucksters that offered bread, cakes, pies, and apples. Already their condition was going downhill rapidly, but worse was to come. As Dungan wrote, instead of parole, "...we were turned toward Texas, and the middle of





A Civil War prison camp (from Leslie's *Illus. Famous...*, 187).

October we were at Tyler, in a pen on a hillside with the great pine woods around us, and no shelter or means of making one over us. Lying out long cold nights, thinking of home, rain falling upon us frequently, these things begat thoughts of escape and many let their thoughts mature into plans and executed their plans."

Dungan, Horatio W. Anderson, and William McGregor, all from Company C, broke out of the Tyler pen on November 8, hoping to reach Fort Smith, Arkansas far to the north. With scant provisions the three ran, taking direction from the stars. Starving most of the time, Dungan and his two comrades used every trick to get back to Union lines.

The trio found an abandoned farmhouse and took temporary possession. After the scant prison fare the feast of fried pork and honey from a fat hog and

beehive found at the farm must have seemed like heaven. They put a feather bed down by the fire and slept soundly until three in the morning. Dungan borrowed paper and pen from McGregor and scribbled a bogus pass, forging the name of Gen. Steele, C.S.A. Armed with the flimsy paper, the men struck out again, and soon crossed over the Arkansas line, travelling rapidly from there along a state road.

The pass that Dungan had made worked once. Dungan's group got mixed up with all manner of people. In one friendly farmhouse they were surrounded by some armed bushwhackers. None too bright, it seems:

They entered the house, sitting around on chairs, beds and tables promiscuously, with shotguns and squirrel rifles. We could hear their rough talk from the kitchen and trembled at our probable fate but the crisis had to come, so putting on an unconscious



look, we arose from the table and entered the room. To meet the curious gaze of ten or twelve pair of eyes peering from out hairy faces of roughly dressed men, without flinching or changing color, was the task successfully accomplished. When one at last ventured to ask us who we were I, as spokesman, answered we were paroled Federal prisoners sent through to our lines by Gen. Steele, whose army lay in or near that part of the country we had passed over. Then one of them who plainly prided himself on his shrewdness and knowledge of business said, 'You'd orter hev a showin or paper.' 'Certainly' said I, drawing forth the pass and handing it to him. He took the slip of paper gingerly betwixt his thumb and forefinger, using it as though momentarily looking for it to evaporate, and turning to a small-eyed red headed man said, 'Judge, you're more on a skollard than we, read this,' and judge accordingly read it aloud pronouncing it 'all squar' which verdict being echoed by the others a mountain lifted itself from my heart. Not to seem hurried, we sat a half hour, promising to 'jog along a bit further fore night,' which promise we conscientiously kept.

This was a matter of luck. Had the Dungan threesome run into a Confederate officer, they probably would have been laughed into the nearest jail. Dungan listed himself as a student and one can guess he got his kicks out of this kind of mad caper. They tried it again and just missed, within a few miles of Federal picket posts:

The people received us kindly; we told them who we were and they got us something to eat, while sitting by the fire talking over the war, the clatter of iron hoofs was heard and in a minute the two doors were opened at once admitting three roughly clad brutal looking men each with a drawn revolver. Of course we surrendered, and were at once subjected to a searching ordeal of questions to determine if we were all right but with the aid of our forged pass we satisfied all of the party but one who knew too much, and he had us taken back

six miles to a house to find their Captain to see what disposition to make of us. During that midnight tramp, *Cook* several times promised us he would see to it that our blood and bones 'enriched Arkansas soil.

The recapture went hard. They were marched 70 miles in the next two days along muddy roads, finally to be lodged in the second story room of a county jail --along with 60 other men, some of them in the same room for months without a change of clothes or a bath. All kinds of miscreants were there: horse thieves, Union sympathizers, deserters, murderers, river boat gamblers, and any other sort of riff-raff. The conditions were so bad, Dungan and the others tried to escape again, dropping out of a jail window and fleeing for the woods with patrols everywhere in the streets. Fortune was not with them. Caught once more, Dungan was strung up by a rope and handcuffs and then beaten by a Confederate colonel who said, "That's the way we break our niggers, and that's the way we'll break all such damned nigger loving \_\_\_\_\_."

If Dungan's attempts were reckless at times, Cocklin and his friends went over the Shreveport wall with plenty of experience. Cocklin was a sergeant and went out with John Cary of the Ninety-fourth Illinois Infantry and L. Stone Hall of Company C of the Iowa Nineteenth. Cary was accustomed to frontier life and he was their guide. Cocklin and Lub Hall were to procure food. Comrades in Shreveport put in their rations until Cocklin, Cary, and Hall had a five-day food supply. "Many more would have attempted to escape if they had had clothes and shoes," wrote Dungan.

Soon, the five-day ration was gone



and the three men were desperate. "Over twenty-four hours we laid in the water, there not being a dry thread on us. Truly I believe that we suffered more during that time than we would, had the weather been cold enough to freeze us to death." Now there was a new anxiety, starvation. The three decided that it was imperative that food be obtained at the next farmhouse and Cocklin was chosen to make the attempt. He was let into the house where he found a farmer, his wife and, in the front parlor, a Confederate Captain! Cocklin started this man off with the truth, explaining that he had jumped the Shreveport pen. The officer said, "It is my duty to arrest you." Cocklin replied that the officer just might have some trouble in getting that done.

This was the prelude to a one-act drama. Cocklin knew that the Confederate officer would not kill him in cold blood, and the Confederate officer knew that he could not get Cocklin out of the house. Cocklin's ploy would not have worked on a backwoods bushwhacker but now the Confederate officer, in effect disarmed, began to talk and in a verbal battle lasting two hours Cocklin slowly turned his man around. "Do unto others as you would have done to you," said Cocklin, and the Southerner, having no answer, told Cocklin he was free to go.

The farmer could give Cocklin no food. He explained to Cocklin that such an act would put two lives in jeopardy. The captain denied this but the man would not act. The farm woman solved the dilemma by meeting Cocklin at the door with a dish of cornbread, meat and gravy, and a bottle of syrup. She knew the Confederate captain would not turn her in. She wished Cocklin well, and

the officer appeared at the door saying, "Federal, I advise you as a friend to avoid all roads for we have scouting parties out all the time." The captain's vulnerability seemed to lie in his membership in the human race.

The trio went on and on, having a frightful time crossing the great swamps and rivers. The waters were cold. At one farmhouse Cocklin lifted 12 ears of corn and the party lived on these for seven days until Cary killed a duck. It was skinned and eaten raw, "Without salt," Cary mourned. They were very nearly done. Hall was getting spells of blindness and could scarcely walk. Cocklin, without any sensation in his legs, felt his mind creeping off in escape. They finally went to the nearest farmhouse. Lub Hall went in first and then the other two. They were getting warm at the fire when the man of the house entered and told them to leave by the back door as a Rebel force was about to enter through the front door. The three were taken to Negro quarters and given supper.

After this close call they reached the Mississippi above Morganza. Cary hailed a Federal gunboat with his shirt on a pole, and they were ushered on board March 16. On March 26, Lee Cocklin was in New Orleans writing his account of the escape to his wife Eva back in Washington County. Cocklin and Hall rejoined the Nineteenth regiment and Company C in Brownsville. On May 3 Cocklin was promoted to lieutenant. Loveridge (Lub) Hall was made corporal. John Cary's luck goes unrecorded here, since he was in an Illinois regiment.

**B**ack in the desolate Tyler stockade the prisoners of the Nineteenth never recovered from a bad start. In the



first 48 hours at Tyler the prisoners had no shelter of any kind and no food. "Then they received ten days' rations of cornmeal, but nothing to put it in, and for over thirty days had no vessels in which to cook the meal furnished them except what they could borrow from their guards. The weather was cold, only a few of the men had blankets and all were poorly clad, many of them being without shoes." This from the Adjutant General's reports in Des Moines.

When the prisoners were not in Tyler they were being marched back and forth between Tyler and Shreveport four times, clocking over 800 miles in these futile trips. Each time there was a hope of being exchanged but each time the men were disappointed when plans fell through. As the weeks droned into the spring of 1864 it must have appeared to the men that they were doomed to die at Tyler. The exchange program had

been working well, but now Grant was letting the program expire. Grant figured the exchange program helped the South, which was down three to one in manpower.

Bad as conditions were, they were now to become terrifying. The incompetent Federal General Nathaniel P. Banks, in command of the Red River campaign, was beaten at Mansfield and Pleasant Hill, Louisiana early in April of 1864. Prisoners from Mansfield and other places came streaming into Tyler. Captain S. F. Roderick, Company K of the Nineteenth, was at Tyler. In an official report he wrote: "At this time the scenes of human misery and suffering are beyond my power of description, and will only be known when some abler hand than mine shall write the history of the stockade at Tyler, Texas." Dungan was that abler man. He was back in Tyler now, after the failure of his brazen es-



(From Leslie's *Illus. Famous...*, 187)



cape ventures. He describes one of the marches:

Our guard was mounted, and had only one wagon in which were their cooking utensils and a few days' rations, not any transportation for the sick or those who might give out. With brutal thrusts and blows with gun and saber the lagging ones were quickened and when an old man, gray-haired, fell fainting by the wayside, Alford kicked him prostrate and a lariat was tied around his neck and secured to the pommel of the saddle, by which they hastened on the weak old man urging him to half run when he could keep his feet and dragging him by the neck, when through exhaustion he would sink to the earth. Another, who had been sick, lying down declared his inability to go further. Alford drawing his revolver shot him, inflicting a severe, perhaps mortal wound, and annoyed at the groans of the wounded man, he forced his negro slave to get a rail and beat out his brains.

.....  
Our weary waiting again ended in disappointment, for we were marched back to Tyler, where we found between four and five thousand prisoners, most of them without even huts. Men of every tribe and tongue and nation, from every State of the Union, or out, old and young, and Indians of every tribe, were assembled here; ragged many of them, while many were *not blessed with a rag*,--a blanket thrown over their shoulders protected them from the heat of mid-day and the chill dews of the night. There were men literally *swarming* with body-lice,--'greybacks'--and sick men lying on their backs in the hot sand under a burning sun, breathing out their life in all this squalor and misery.

Instead of the last kind words or prayers, fell on his ear curses and rough jests. Idiocy, and as heart-sickening as anything,

was the passive indifference with which these things came to be regarded. Men standing by laughed at some drivelling wretch praying for something to eat. When one was sick the stomach refused the coarse corn dodger, and in this way came starvation--*not* to the strong men who could have endured scanty fare, but to those who were sick and weak, --to those who would lie near the sinks day and night, their clothes stiffening with their own filth, maggots and lice crawling over them till they died.

The men of the Nineteenth Iowa finally were exchanged on July 22, 1864. At Alexandria they camped near the dam Joseph Bailey made to let Porter's boats out of the Red River. The next day the men walked around the falls and took other steamboats at the Alexandria wharf. The prisoners, free at last, floated out onto the broad waters of the Mississippi. On board the *Nebraska* the men were given hardtack and coffee. Here Dungan says, "The change was greater than ever before experienced."

On July 24, still in rags and barefoot, the exchanged soldiers were paraded in New Orleans for propaganda purposes. This was on a Sunday morning when many New Orleans citizens were either on their way to church or returning home from church. Surely many of these citizens were shocked at this dismal and bizarre charade though many believed the soldiers to have been Southern soldiers now in Union custody. At least one reporter was a witness to the pitiful march and his story appeared the next day. In part it read: "Decency forbids us to describe the utter nudity of these men, officers and soldiers. Many of them had



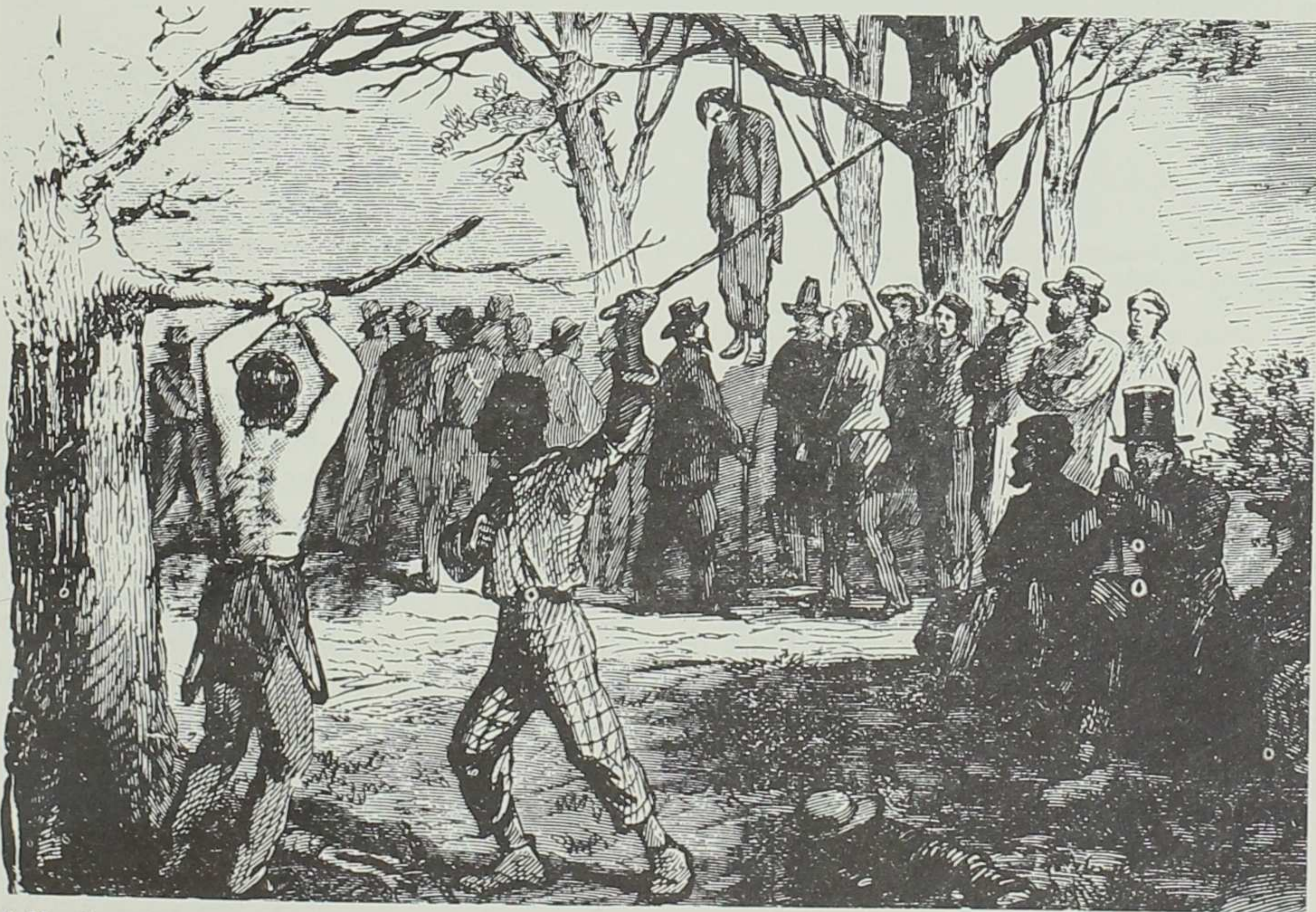
not rags to be ragged with, and as their bare feet pressed the sharp stones, the blood marked their tracks. Animated skeletons marching through the streets of New Orleans."

Perhaps this report was slightly colored by outrage, but on that same Sunday the Tyler men were lined up once more, officers seated in front, and their picture was taken. Several other pictures were taken that day showing, in fact, the troops were not very well uniformed that day. The anonymous reporter from the *New Orleans Delta* assured his

readers that "representatives of the Western Branch of the Sanitary Commission, with agents of Iowa and Indiana, addressed themselves busily to the work of ameliorating their condition. Before night they will be clad and their immediate wants cared for."

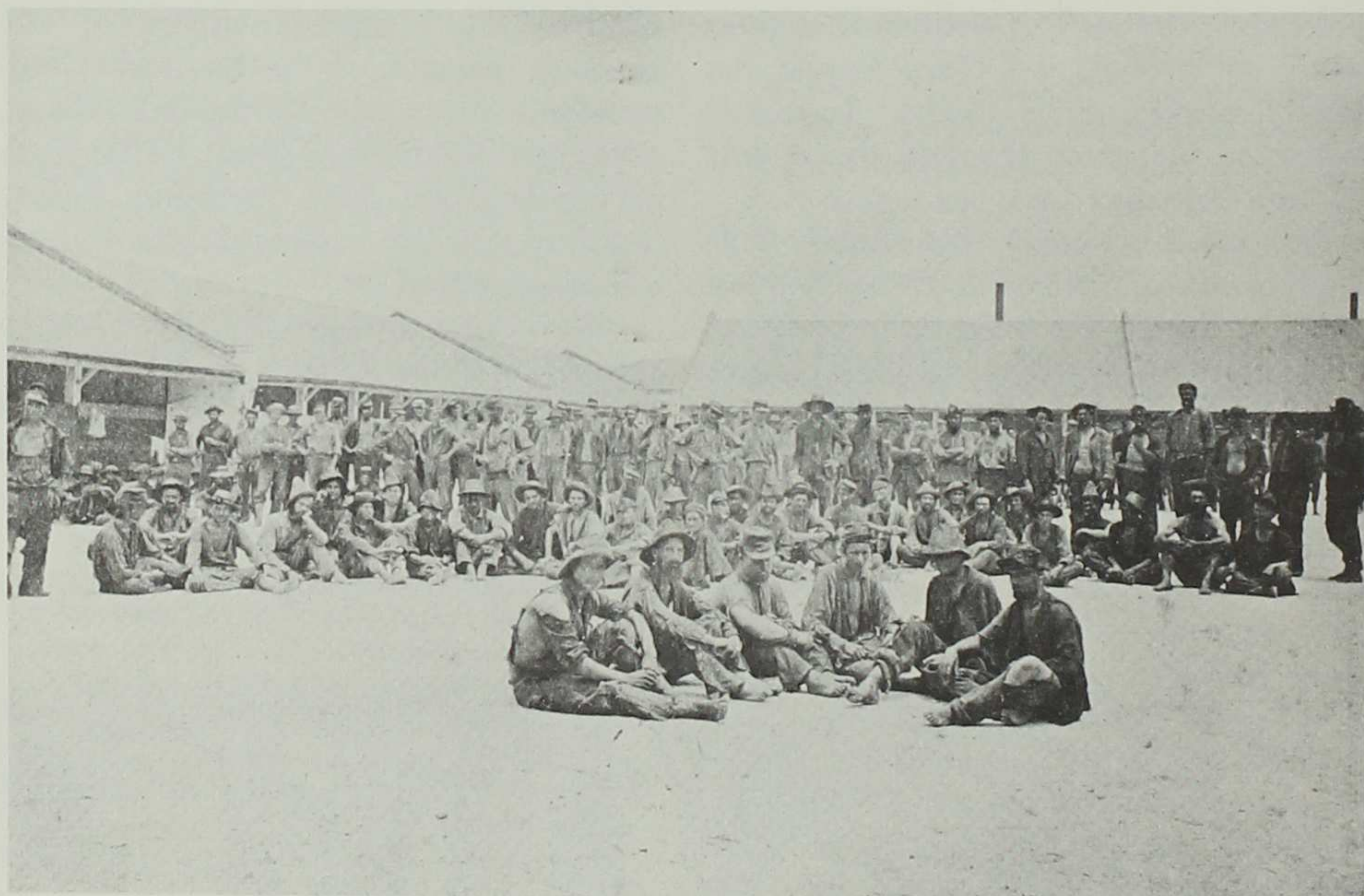
After this propaganda duty, Dungan reports that the Quartermaster did indeed issue new clothing "at once," and the Iowa and Indiana men were put into Camp Carrollton, probably without the aid of any Sanitary Commission.

Now the Nineteenth regiment was



A Northern depiction of Southern cruelty (from Leslie's *Illus. Famous...*, 537).





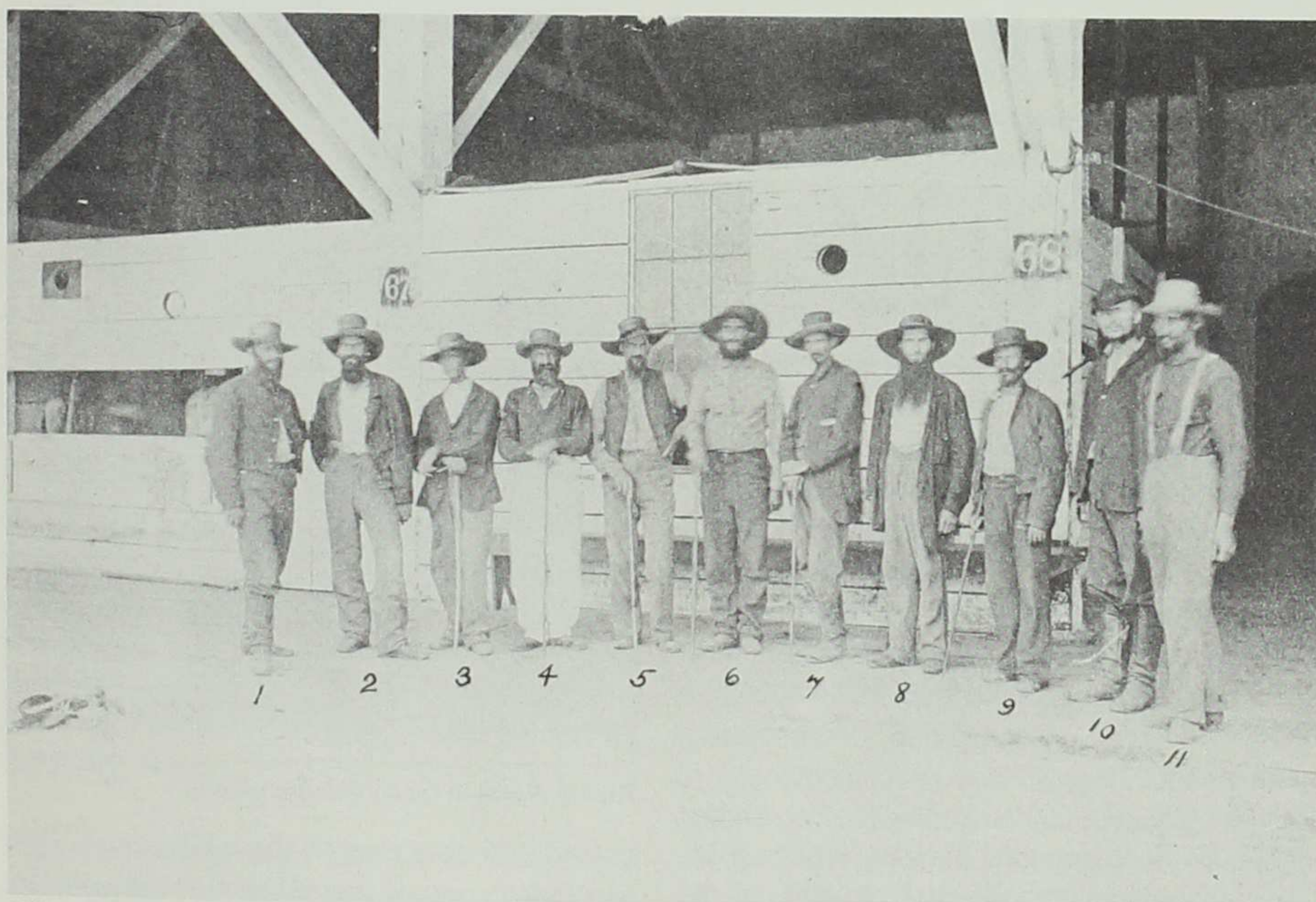
Men of the Nineteenth Iowa in New Orleans on July 24, 1864, shortly after their release from captivity (courtesy Fairfield Public Library Museum).

going home. After a brief expedition to Brownsville, the regiment had gone to Mobile, where its veterans mustered out and waited several days for a boat to New Orleans. Put aboard the dilapidated *White Cloud*, with two other regiments, things were crowded. Then the Quartermaster attempted to put a herd of horses and donkeys aboard and the troops yelled like hell. The Nineteenth regiment was removed and the animals were put aboard. Back in camp for several days the men "pondered the folly of getting in a passion." At last the men

of the Nineteenth were put on board another vessel but a boiler burst and the soldiers slept in nooks and corners of the Mobile wharves. They were finally put aboard the *Landis*.

At New Orleans the Iowa men, ex-soldiers, lost not an hour and on the *R. J. Lockwood* steamed up the Mississippi past Morganza. Here some of the men must have crowded the port side. With a better vantage point they could have seen Sterling Farm. Past Vicksburg for a last look, then into Cairo and the railroad to Davenport and a celebration with





Officers of the Nineteenth Iowa in New Orleans after repatriation. The photos of the returned prisoners were credited to McPherson & Oliver "Photographers" of No. 132 Canal St., New Orleans. Photographs of the western campaign after Vicksburg are moderately rare (courtesy the Fairfield Public Library Museum).

lots of buggies in town, the more affluent camped out in Davenport hotels. Here Lt. Col. John Bruce addressed his command for the last time on July 31, 1865.

Then James Anderson went home. Lee Cocklin went home to Eva and two little boys. Loveridge Stone Hall went home. And J. Irvine Dungan went home to write his remarkable story of the Nineteenth Iowa Infantry Regiment, which the two people in Madison, Wisconsin now share. □

#### Note on Sources

The primary source for this article is J. Irvine Dungan's account, *History of the Nineteenth Regiment Iowa Volunteer Infantry* (Davenport, 1865). Also helpful were *The History of Washington County* (Des Moines, 1880) and *Roster and Record of Iowa Soldiers in the War of Rebellion...* (Des Moines, 1910). Biographical information came from John M. Henderson, *The John McClenahan Folk* (Pittsburgh, 1912). A letter to his family from Levi Cocklin was used through the courtesy of Mrs. Dennis Martens, Madison, Wisconsin.