

Flashlights on Vicksburg

Over on Bank Street in Webster City is a plain, two-story dwelling whose lines bespeak the architecture of pioneer days. Old settlers point to this house and say, "There is the first courthouse of Hamilton County." But in this locality the story of the man who now lives in the old seat of justice is of far more interest than his historic habitation.

On a summer day, John V. Kearns, now an aged man, may be seen sitting on the lawn. His shoulders are bowed. One sleeve is empty. But his eyes are clear and his cheerful stories of the past never fail to attract a circle of attentive listeners. Sometimes the group around him is composed of children; but most often it is men of maturity, who attend the court of a genial and entertaining story teller.

That empty sleeve arouses curiosity. When and how did this veteran of the sixties lose his arm? What were the terrible vicissitudes through which he passed? As nearly as may be, this is his account.

It was in the spring of 1862 that I enlisted in the Thirteenth United States Infantry — General Sherman's regiment at the beginning of the war. I was nineteen years old. A good many of the Dubuque boys had joined the Sixteenth Iowa Volunteers and left for the front in March. But it was not until

after the bloody battle of Corinth that the first battalion of the Thirteenth arrived at Memphis, Tennessee, and joined the fifth division under General Sherman at Fort Pickering.

These forces, together with some forty thousand other troops scattered along the northern border of Mississippi, were under the command of General Grant. Opposed to us was a Confederate army of about the same size under General J. C. Pemberton. The Mississippi River was open as far south as Vicksburg which remained the principal strategic stronghold of the enemy in the West. If the Union forces could gain complete control of the river, the power of the Confederates would be seriously reduced. Sherman was prepared to advance by boat while Grant marched south by land. The coöperation of Admiral Farragut's gunboats from below would contribute to the success of the campaign. Thus the plans were laid.

But who would carry the information to the naval forces on the Gulf and lower Mississippi? The messenger would have to pass through unbroken Confederate territory and must, therefore, be able not only to act but to talk like a Southerner. Sherman asked for volunteers. There were three of us fellows who tried out for the dangerous job, but my mother had come from North Carolina and I had grown up in Indiana along the Wabash, so that my inflection and accent were found to be more typically southern than the others, and I was chosen to go.

Dressed in citizen's clothing, I started out, mounted on a mule. Supposedly I was a mule trader and, having brushed up all my knowledge of the tactics of mule traders to good advantage, I arrived safely, delivered the dispatch, and started back with the reply that Farragut would assist in the attack by water.

Hurrying as fast as it was possible to go without attracting attention by my haste, I got about half way back without trouble. Then one day, being very hungry, I stopped at a restaurant. A group of roistering rebel soldiers came in, some of them quite drunk. Of course they noticed me and, seeing my clothing was plain, at once began to question me. "Seems to me you're old enough to be in the army", said one of them. "Yes, fellers, here's a recruit." They quite surrounded me. I didn't get much to eat, but I tried to bluff them by expressing my willingness to join, only I wished first to go and say good-bye to my folks who lived thirty miles away. This ruse did not work, however, as they sent two of their number along with me. Of course they soon detected my deception and arrested me as a spy.

I was hustled off to a small log prison on the bank of a river. My cell was about seven by ten feet in dimensions, and its walls were thickly lined with railroad ties, while there was a partition, also of ties, separating me from a fellow prisoner. The floor was of stone, and the man in the next room said he was chained to this floor. I expected to be chained

thus, but the old man who brought our meager supply of food did not fasten me to anything, though he left the chains on my feet.

Fortunately for me, I had the use of my hands and my captors had not discovered my dispatch and a small knife that I carried. Creeping about the floor on the side nearest the river, I found a stone that could be moved. With much effort I slipped it out and began digging. The earth was carefully padded into my old hat and transferred to a toilet in one corner. The days and nights passed quickly, and my tunnel grew very slowly, but at length I broke through the earth to the edge of the river. Bound as I was and unable to do more than crawl, my joy was nevertheless greater than my fear. I had tried to get to the other man but he was chained tightly and told me to go on and save myself.

I crawled along the bank of the river until I came upon an old plow. With the file I found in the tool box I made short work of my chains. When my stiffened ankles were freed, I swam the river, walked northward, then went swimming again, and landed about dawn. Seeing a man ahead in the dim light, I did not know what to do, but as it became lighter I saw that he was a negro and called to him. He said he knew I came from the "hen coop over the river" and consented to hide me safely at his house during the day.

I was not slow in reaching the cabin, where a trap door admitted me to the cellar. I stayed very quiet,

for they told me not even to touch the floor above. I was very hungry, but the good mammy passed down some delicious corn bread and 'possum which I devoured eagerly.

Staying in this place until about ten that night, I then crept out, and the faithful negro walked north with me until two o'clock. When the poor fellow left me he begged that I should not tell who had aided me if I were captured. I heartily assured him that I would keep the secret. I kept my course northward all night and by daybreak found myself in a dense woods. Climbing a big tree, I perched there all day, thankful that I was sitting on the limb, not hanging from it.

The next night I went on as before, guided by the stars, and sought the shelter of another tree before dawn. After a while I heard mules and feared that I had strayed into a rebel camp. Keeping very quiet, I dozed on my perch, but awakened suddenly at the sound of a bugle call. There, through the trees, floated the stars and stripes!

Climbing down, I walked into the Union camp where they were at first suspicious of me, but when I produced my report I was given a horse and guide and sent with all haste to Memphis. What a pleasure it was to be among my own comrades again. Before long the whole command started on the expedition against Vicksburg. The Thirteenth Infantry battalion embarked on the steamer *Forest Queen* with General Sherman and the headquarters staff.

Before New Year's we had fought our first battle at Chickasaw Bayou.

It is history now — this story of one of the many attempts to seize Vicksburg which proved fruitless, for Grant could not get through, Farragut could not pass Port Hudson some two hundred miles down the river, while Sherman fought for two days and a night against insuperable odds before retreating up the Yazoo River. Mr. Kearns and his comrades occupied an advanced position where they acted as sharpshooters.

From the repulse at Chickasaw Bayou, the attention of Sherman's army was directed to the reduction of Arkansas Post on the Arkansas River, a Confederate stronghold that threatened the control of the Mississippi River. The Thirteenth Infantry was in the thick of the fighting which ended victoriously. Thereafter the campaign against Vicksburg proceeded slowly but invincibly. Canals were dug, levees constructed, and roads built. Occasional skirmishes with the enemy contributed an element of excitement to the otherwise laborious routine. The low, swampy condition of the country made military maneuvering unusually difficult and bred no end of malarial disease.

Just before the battle of Grand Gulf, Mr. Kearns was made captain of a negro regiment, a position which he held for only four days and then resigned, because the "rooky niggers" were so easily flus-

tered that they were as apt to shoot friend as foe. The captain had no desire to be their target or to waste his energy in trying to make this "Ben Butler contraband" into soldiers.

While stationed below Vicksburg, he acted as cook for a time. A negro woman came every morning and begged for the coffee grounds. Supposing that she steeped them for her own use, he gave her all there were. At length, however, he questioned her and discovered that she dried and sold them again to the soldiers, sometimes making as high as four dollars a day.

During the first fortnight in May, Grant crossed the river below Vicksburg, captured Grand Gulf, beat the enemy at Port Gibson, pressed forward to Jackson, and on May 14th established his headquarters in the State House of the capital of Mississippi. Meanwhile Pemberton advanced to assail the Union army at Champion's Hill, only to be repulsed with heavy losses. Thereupon Grant swung westward, occupied the high ground at Haines's Bluff, and laid siege to Vicksburg.

Within three days after the battle at Champion's Hill, the Confederates had been driven behind their fortifications and Vicksburg was completely invested. The campaign had progressed so swiftly that Grant felt justified in attempting to capture the city immediately by a sudden spirited assault. But the Confederate entrenchments were strongly manned, and the enemy fought stubbornly.

At the extreme right, General Sherman sent G. A. Smith's brigade, including his favorite Thirteenth regulars, to storm the works. At three o'clock on May 19th, after some heavy cannonading, the order to advance was given. Under a heavy fire the line moved across a succession of deep and wooded ravines which were almost impassable. A few succeeded in reaching the very parapet of the enemy's position while others, becoming entangled in the brush and fallen timber, took such shelter as the ridges, stumps, and logs afforded. There they remained until darkness ended the engagement. The intrepid first battalion of the Thirteenth United States Infantry reached the Confederate breastworks in a body, planted their colors, and held their ground, sustaining a loss of more than forty-three per cent of their numbers.

The gallant battalion commander, Captain Edward C. Washington, fell mortally wounded on the parapet. After dark some Confederate soldiers came out with the evident purpose of plundering the dead and wounded.

"Hello, boys," called the leader, "here's old Sherman." The captain, being yet conscious, informed them of their mistake and gave his name.

"What? You ain't old General Washington, be you?"

"No, but I am a descendant of his kin," replied the captain.

Being ordered to surrender, he gave up his side

arms, but refused to hand over his money. He declared that he had surrendered as a prisoner of war and did not propose to be robbed. Nevertheless they proceeded to remove his clothing. Suddenly he drew a derringer from his pocket and shot the rebel at his feet. One of the others lunged at him, intending to run him through with a sword, but another knocked the weapon aside, saying, "No! You can't murder such a man as that."

Mr. Kearns fell close to his commander, also grievously wounded in five places. Five bones were broken. Sometime in the night his comrades carried him back to the military hospital where his condition was thought to be hopeless. Upon the yellow parchment of the certificate of "First Honor" awarded to members of the first battalion of the Thirteenth United States Infantry for conduct and loss "unequaled in the army" is written the official statement of his terrible experience in these words:

"John V. Kearns was wounded in five different places and placed in the mortal row, receiving no attention or care until the 23rd of May, at which time the maggots infested the wounds in a reeking mass by hundreds. The surgeons, thinking it impossible [for him] to get well, they cared for those less unfortunate but the indomitable courage and persistence that characterized him brought him out of this fearful condition."

When the surgeons at last turned their attention to his case, since he persisted in living, they decided

to amputate his arm and both legs as the only possible chance of saving his life. In spite of his suffering, Mr. Kearns emphatically protested, though the surgeons were inclined to ignore his desires. At this juncture he managed to send a negro boy with a note to General Sherman whose reply was to the effect that the legs should not be taken off without Kearns's consent. That consent was never obtained, and for more than sixty years he has enjoyed the use of the condemned legs. But one sleeve has hung empty, for the arm could not be saved.

Little wonder that the old courthouse on Bank Street is now really a court of honor, with Uncle John Kearns presiding. And those who sit reverently in his presence, listening to his stories of the war between the States, see him as a youthful hero-patriot who went to the edge of the grave for his country.

BESSIE L. LYON

First Battalion 13th U. S. Infantry

FIRST HONOR



AWARDED

General Order
No 64

Head Quarters 15th Army Corps

Board on Inscriptions

Camp Sherman, Miss., Aug. 5th, 1863.

A Board of Officers composed as follows:

Brigadier General Hugh Ewing, U. S. A., Col. F. A. Williamson, 4th Iowa Inf. Vols.,
Col. J. H. Blood, 8th Mo. Inf. Vols., 1st Lt. W. H. Sergeant, Recorder, 8th Wis. Inf. Vols.

Will convene at Headquarters on Wednesday, August 12th, 1863, at 12 o'clock P. M. to receive and examine all claims under circular from Department Headquarters of date August 1st, 1863. Commanders of Regiments, Batteries and detached Companies will submit their claims in writing, supported by official documents and other proofs.

By order of Major General W. D. Sherman,
(Sgd.) R. W. Sawyer, Chief Adjutant General

The Board being organized, established the following rules of guidance:

I. Troops that have participated in a battle or siege with credit, are entitled to its name on their colors.

VICKSBURG

II. Art. 1st. The Regiment that in force planted its colors on the parapet, and suffered the greatest relative loss, shall have inscribed on its banner

FIRST AT VICKSBURG

Art. 2d. Those engaged in assault with credit, suffering loss, shall have the inscription

Vicksburg Siege and Assault, May 19th and 20th,
Vicksburg Siege and Assault, May 19th (or 23d)

Art. 3d. Troops in reserve and in the line of circumvallation, shall have the inscription

SIEGE OF VICKSBURG

The Board, after a careful examination of the papers and evidence submitted in support of claims, decided unanimously the following commands entitled to the inscription appended to their respective titles:

EXTRACT

In Battalion 13th U. S. Infantry,
Chickasaw Bayou
Arkansas Post
Champion Hill
First at Vicksburg
Jackson.

The Board find the 13th U. S. Infantry entitled to the "First Honor" at Vicksburg, having in a bold and gallant and maintained its colors on the parapet, with a loss of 40 per cent, including the gallant commander, who died at the parapet. Its conduct and loss the Board, after a careful examination, believe unequalled in the Army, and respectfully ask the General commanding the Department to allow it the inscription awarded.

The Board believe it has discharged its duty in accordance with the testimony adduced, and has the honor to submit this report.

(Sgd.) Hugh Ewing, Brig. Gen. U. S. A., President.
F. A. Williamson, Col. 4th Iowa Vols.
J. H. Blood, Col. 8th Mo. Vols.
W. H. Sergeant, 1st Lieut. 8th Wis. Vols., Recorder.

John V. Kearns
enlisted in Company H, 13th U. S. Infantry,
at Dubuque, Iowa, under
Capt. C. J. Felt on the _____
day of _____ 1862, and was dis-
charged therefrom as
on the 10th day of September
1863, at Vicksburg, Miss.,
by reason of _____
by _____
at _____

And during said service participated in the following engagements:

Chickasaw Bayou, May 22
Arkansas Post, May 23
Champion Hill, May 23
Siege of Vicksburg, May 19-20
Siege of Vicksburg, May 19 (or 23)

REMARKS

John V. Kearns was present at the battle of Chickasaw Bayou and placed in the ranks of the 13th U. S. Infantry on the 23rd of May 1862. He was discharged from the service on the 10th of September 1863, at Vicksburg, Miss., by reason of _____

COURTESY OF JOHN V. KEARNS

THE CERTIFICATE OF HONOR