

Reminiscences of the Civil War; Escape From Fort Tyler Prison*

BY HORACE B. LITTLE, Danville, Ind.

If I remember correctly, it was on the second day of April, 1864. We (43rd Ind.) with the 77th Ohio and 36th Iowa were detailed to escort a wagon train back to Little Rock after supplies. This train consisted of 350 to 400 wagons, which reached out over two miles. Each wagon was pulled by from four to six mules. Our regiment was greatly scattered out in acting as a guard for the train. The first thing we knew the rebels were upon us. General Bank's army had been defeated by them and then their main force came back on us. We were not a very large army and it was scattered out over two miles. But we held them from early morning until about noon, when we were surrounded by very superior forces and a great many of us were made prisoners. A large part of our regiment were wounded or killed.

Our captors marched us from Camden, near Mark's Hill, to Camp Ft. Tyler, Texas—Smith county.

We were young, and had no maps. We did not know just where we were. You heard me say Smith county, Texas, but that does not give you any idea of what portion of the state it is in. That was the condition we were in.

The prison was a stockade with high walls, built of long timbers, with stations where guards with guns could look over and keep an eye on us. We found some five or six thousand prisoners already confined there when we arrived. There was no shelter and only two trees within the enclosure.

* Mr. Little enlisted from Rockville in Co. K, of the 43 Ind. Vol. for the three-year service. His regiment was part of the command of General Steele, who was seeking to make a junction with Gen. Banks, who had set out on an expedition from New Orleans. Shreveport was the objective of both wings. Mr. Little was with the so-called Arkansas wing, which was moving south from Little Rock to join with Banks. The army had reached Camden, when the events began that are the basis of Mr. Little's story. This story appeared substantially as here given in the *Danville Gazette*, Dec. 7, 1916.

We were permitted to roam around in the enclosure during the day, but at night each man had a certain spot—just enough to lie on—where he was expected to stay and sleep at night. During the day, after roll call, we mingled with the other prisoners and got acquainted and talked over the situation. There were boys there from all over the United States. For food we had corn meal, issued to us dry. Once or twice a week we were given a little meat. When we got tired of eating our corn meal dry we would mix it with a little water, place the cake on a board and prop it up before a fire to bake. There were but few camp kettles and we had to take turns in using them. These were the only things we had to eat while we were there. We had nothing to do except look for a way to escape, if inclined that way. There seemed no way to get out; yet some did, and I never gave up hope of getting away. The ground was so level that digging under the stockade did not offer a good chance, as the distance necessary to dig would have been too great. Besides the soldiers were camped all about the stockade. The stockade had two gates—one on the south and one on the west. These were used by the guards and by the prisoners who went after fire-wood under guard. They went in bodies of from 50 to 100 after fire-wood, and once in a while some of the boys succeeded in concealing themselves and making their escape that way.

A few days after I arrived at the stockade I began to plan some way of escape. I devised a number of plans, but could never form one which would seem to lead to success. When run down to the extreme, in my mind, nearly every one would fail. One had to consider the guards watching us and the pickets and the camp surrounding us.

Frequently wagons would be brought within the stockade to haul out the trash. One of my thoughts was to get a man to cover me over with trash and haul me out that way. If I could bribe him to keep still long enough I felt I might get safely away. But others were also watching that means of escape and I never had the opportunity. Some actually got out of the stockade that way, but every one of them but one was captured and returned during the three months I was confined there. Finally I asked some of the recaptured

men how it was that they did not succeed after getting outside the stockade. They all said it was on account of having to go to farm houses to get something to eat. They became victims of their appetites. There were no surplus provisions within the stockade and a man could not provide himself with food. When hunger drove him to a farm house he was reported and the bloodhounds were put on his trail.

I resolved that if ever I succeeded in getting outside I would not be caught that way. It was three or four hundred miles to our lines, but I believed I could manage without going to a house for food. The lesson learned by questioning the returned prisoners saved me when I did escape.

On the west side of the stockade was a clapboard shed which was used for a hospital. It was not much of a hospital as they were known in the north, but it served that purpose. Prisoners who became so ill that there was no danger of them trying to escape were removed from the stockade to this hospital. Union soldiers, also prisoners, were detailed to nurse them. They were made trusties and were allowed to come and go in the stockade to examine the sick. These were reported to the surgeon in charge and by his permission and that of the post commander they were placed on a stretcher and removed to the hospital.

A friend of mine by the name of Jake Thomas, who enlisted from Parke county, was one of the nurses. He had a pass and could come into the enclosure to look after the sick. He had two assistants who always came in with him. These two men carried the stretchers. Mr. Thomas frequently came around and talked to me. One day I asked him how he got in and out. He told me he had a pass. I had thought it likely that he did have one. I asked him if he would let me see it and he finally consented. After I had read it I asked if he would let me use it for a little while. He thought it was too risky, but I urged so strongly, and promised to return it safely, that he finally gave in. I had previously learned that a man from a New York regiment had pen and ink and I intended to have him make me an exact copy of the pass. He was a good penman and when I made my request he agreed to try. I told him to dot the "i's" and cross the "t's" just like he found them on the copy. He was a

good scribe and he succeeded in making an almost exact copy. I then returned the pass to Mr. Thomas and jokingly told him I was coming out to take dinner with him soon. He warned me never to attempt it.

Now the question was how to use my pass. The dead-line prevented me from going closer than ten feet to the gate. The guard had orders to shoot every one who came within ten feet of the stockade walls. The guards had plank walks up near the top of the stockade where they could walk around and watch us inside. It was impossible for me to use the pass without crossing this dead-line. Mr. Thomas repeatedly warned me never to attempt that, but I told him that winter was coming on and that I would about as soon run the risk of getting shot in that way as to remain in the stockade without food or shelter.

Then I set about developing my plans. Mr. Thomas had two assistants, and it was up to me to get two men to go with me on the venture. I went to a comrade and told him what I had in mind, and showed him my forged pass. He would not join me and warned me against attempting it. Then I went to the meanest oneriest man in our company—James Steele. He immediately said he would tackle it. I knew he would because he was no coward. He was not a genial companion, however, and if there was anything around to drink there was no putting up with him. But I knew he could not get anything to drink around there. I next went to a young fellow by the name of Neavins, who lived southeast of Rockville. (I have since learned that he was a relative of Harvey Neavins of Danville.) He was also a member of my company. He was not educated—could not read nor write—nor swim. He also consented to go, as I had anticipated, because he was daring.

Up to that time I had no definite plan in view, and had fixed no date for the attempt. There was one thing I did want, though, in carrying out my plans. There was one guard whom I wanted at the gate when I presented my pass. I don't know why I wanted him to be there, because I had never said a word to him and could only see him from a long distance off.

Mr. Thomas came in one Saturday afternoon and we talked about other things. Just before he went away I told

him I was coming out to take dinner with him the next day—told him this in a joking way. He again warned me not to attempt it, but my mind was made up.

The next day came and I told some of the comrades what was in the wind and what I wanted them to do to hide the escape until I could be out long enough to escape the bloodhounds. We had to answer roll call every morning. If I did not respond to my name the bloodhounds would soon be on my trail. It was customary every morning to line the prisoners up in companies and call the roll. It happened there were many sick and if one failed to respond to his name it furnished an excuse. I arranged that I was the one to be missing at roll call the next morning and was to be reported sick. The second day some one was to respond to my name and one of the other boys would be missing. It was so arranged that neither of the three was to be reported missing two days handrunning. This deception was kept up for eight days, and we by that time had got beyond danger from the bloodhounds—but that is getting ahead of the story. In explanation, however, once every month all the prisoners were lined up for general muster and roll call. Every man had to be in place, or if sick, accounted for. This came on the eighth day after we made our departure. The guards asked the boys where the missing men were. They said:

“When we got up this morning they were gone.”

They got out the bloodhounds and tried to trail us, but the hounds came back.

About one or two o'clock—we had no time-piece—Sunday afternoon I decided to start for the gate. Some of the boys knew we were going. They watched us, but kept back in the crowd so they would not be noticed. The guards were always watching for anything of that kind which might indicate movements to escape.

We started in single file for the gate, I holding the pass in my hand. The guard I wanted to be on the job was there. Without question he took the pass and read it.

The pass, which was on a piece of paper about the size of my four fingers, read: “Please permit Mr. Thomas and two assistants in and out as nurses.” The writing covered

about all of the paper and the surgeon barely had room to sign at the bottom and the post commander had countersigned it on the back.

When the guard had read the pass he said: "You will have to have that countersigned by the post commander before you can get in and out of here."

Then I knew he had never seen Mr. Thomas' pass. My heart was right up in my throat and I could hear it pound. How to speak was more than I could tell. I did not want him to suspicion anything was wrong and was afraid my voice would betray me, but I had to answer. I blurted out: "It is countersigned on the back, if you will just turn it over and read."

That threw him off his guard and he folded it up, returned it and allowed us to pass out.

We found ourselves in a worse shape than ever. Soldiers were all around us; those who were on guard and those who were not. In addition there were many citizens. Why they did not catch on has always been a mystery to me. We were ragged and dirty and were not carrying a stretcher. But the guard let us out and we resolved to put on a bold front.

We had to pass right by the post commanders' headquarters. He was sitting by a log cabin surrounded by soldiers. It was the only way we could get out. We had to be bold to avoid suspicion. We made a polite bow to the commander, which he answered, and we went on. We always supposed that everyone took it for granted we would not have been there unless permission had been granted.

We went up to the hospital where Mr. Thomas was and he was very much surprised to see us. He did not know what to do with us at first, as he was not willing to expose himself to the danger that would come to him and us if detected. In the meantime I had put the pass in my mouth and chewed it up. I did not want to have it about me if recaptured.

As soon as he had recovered from his surprise, Mr. Thomas called attention to some old haversacks hanging near the shed hospital, and to disarm suspicion he told us to get those haversacks and go with him to gather some

grapes. It was then the 14th day of August and grapes were just beginning to get ripe.

He led us down into the woods until we came to a hollow. Stopping by a brushpile he told us to stay there until dark and he would return with food if he could. He would not promise for sure. He said he would give a certain whistle. We crawled under the brushpile and after dark we heard his whistle. We crawled out and he gave us some cornbread. We relished it very much.

He then bade us farewell. It was dangerous for him to go with us for he would have been shot if recaptured. He was very much afraid for us. He never thought we could get through the pickets, which were all about the woods. After bidding him farewell we started north, crawling on our hands and knees. We had some trouble deciding which way to go when we got out. Mr. Steele wanted to go south, but for some reason I wanted to go northeast. I did not know why, but something seemed to tell me that safety lay halfway between east and the north star. We decided to leave it to Mr. Thomas and he said to go towards the north star.

I do not know how many miles we crawled on our hands and knees. It was very tiresome. Finally we decided we were beyond the picket lines and had not been discovered. Then we arose to our feet and made fast tracks to get as far away from the stockade as possible and find a hiding place before daylight. We went through brush and wood. When it began to get daylight we began to hunt a hiding place. Fortunately we happened to find a tree overgrown with green vines which hung down and spread out over the ground. The vine had thorns on it. The tree resembled our umbrella tree, only it was larger. The vine was very thick. We parted these vines and crawled in around the trunk of the tree to rest after our first night's march towards home. We could see out but no one could see inside and we felt pretty safe if the dogs did not come. The bloodhounds were thick down there, everybody having some, but we resolved to keep out of their way if possible. We lay there during the day with nothing to eat.

While we were marching the first night out we came to

a road which was going our direction. It was a great temptation to take it, as we could make double the speed on it that we could across the country. We finally concluded we would follow the road so long as it went our direction. We had not gone far until we heard some one in front of us. We could not tell whether or not we had been discovered, but knew it was useless to run from the road because the motion would be heard and then the dogs would come. We held a hurried consultation and decided to drop down at the side of the road and take our chances. The approaching men were a party of soldiers returning to camp. They walked past us without discovering our presence. We then got up and went on but resolved to avoid roads after that. The next night we stayed entirely in the woods.

Before we had left the stockade we had vowed to each other that we would starve before we went to a house to get anything to eat. This forced us to live on corn. Corn was then just a little past the roasting ear stage. We could break off the grains and eat as we walked along. That was fifty years ago, however, and corn fields were not as plentiful as they are now, and there were days at a time when we could find no corn. The next thing we did was to dig up the moist roots of certain trees and get the juicy bark. That was our food for days.

Later in our travels we saw a squirrel run up a tree while we were hiding out one day. The squirrel ran into a hole but left his tail hanging out. One of the boys was a good climber and after trying to club the squirrel out he clambered up and killed it. The next thing was to decide what to do with it. We had no fire and no way to cook. I happened to have an old knife—I have it yet at home in a trunk—which was spared to me in this manner: When first captured we had good oil-cloth haversacks, while the rebels had only cheap cloth ones. They forced us to trade with them. The man who made me change with him had an old piece of dirty fat meat in his haversack. It was so dirty no one would touch it to take it out. I had taken this piece of meat and made a hole in it, in which I had placed my knife, a little money and some trinkets. I then put dirt over the hole and put the meat back in my haversack. Whenever I was

searched the chunk of fat meat was left alone because it was so dirty, but it was the same as a bank to me.

I whittled some sticks with this knife and we took turns about rubbing them together to make a fire. We worked for a considerable time but never succeeded in getting a blaze. The sticks would smoke but not blaze. We had to give this up. We thought maybe we could run across a bed of coals where some one had camped and we carried the squirrel along with us. We did not find a place where we could cook it, so we decided to eat it raw. It was very good and we wished we had another one.

We found a few grapes, but after we got into Arkansas they were not ripe enough to eat and we had to live on corn and roots.

To add to our troubles our clothes began to come to pieces. We tore them more every night. Now we had to fix that, so we peeled bark from trees and darned the torn places. At the end of 21 days of our journey our clothes were mostly bark.

We had a great many streams to cross, including Wichita and Red River. When we came to Red River it was up very high and in places was out of its banks. Mr. Neavins could not swim and we had to make a raft. The water was so high we were afraid to attempt crossing at night. In making our raft we used cypress rails. That wood is very light and the rails were made very large. We struck the bank of the river near an old cotton ware-house and we cut the rope off cotton bales to use in lashing the rails together. We tied each rail separately and then fastened another layer cross-wise. We first tried the raft with three rail depth, but it would not hold up our weight. We added a fourth layer. We got three boards and used two for oars and the third for a rudder. The water was very high and we were carried quite a distance down stream, and when we got to the opposite side we could not find a place to land, having struck a canebrake and slough filled with underbrush. We spent the night on the water and as it began to grow light we heard a chicken crowing. We decided that if there was a place for a chicken around there, there was also a place for a man.

Drawing the raft up into the mouth of a small stream

we abandoned it and set out across the marshy country. Hiding by day and traveling by night the journey was continued. While trying to get across some backwater we saw some men wading toward us. Hastily drawing to one side we stooped in the water until it all but covered our heads. The men passed without discovering us. They brought us good news. If they could come in that way we could get out that way. It was a cypress knee swamp and the traveling was hard. Frequently we came to deep places and we would have to put Mr. Neavins on a log and push him across. We came to many lagoons which forced us to go out of our way to get around them. Some of them looked like small lakes.

When we got out of this backwater we found ourselves in a big corn field. We sat down and had a feast. I remember I ate three ears of corn without stopping. Before this we had eaten a few grains at a time as we walked along.

About this time Mr. Neavins began to fare badly. To begin with, he had no shoes, having thrown his away before he had been put in the stockade. When I first proposed to attempt to escape he hesitated because he had no shoes. I had an extra pair of shoes, having purchased an extra pair in anticipation of winter, with a little money and some buttons. The Confederates wanted buttons more than anything else. I offered Neavins this pair of shoes. He wore No. 6 shoes and I wore No. 7. The shoes had lain out in the rain and sun and had become very hard. He took the shoes but after we had marched several days they began to rub his feet and made them sore. He decided he would go barefooted. It was the worst thing he could have done, as his feet became poisoned and began to swell up. He said he did not believe he could continue with us.

We had made an agreement before we left the stockade that if any one found himself unable to travel the others were to go on, and the abandoned one was not to go near a farm house until the remainder of the party had been gone long enough that the hounds could not pick up the trail.

"You go on," he said. "I will try to travel by day and get my feet well." It was very sad to leave him sitting there with his feet sore, and sick; and he had nothing to eat, but we pushed on. I have never heard of him again from that

day to this. His grandparents over in Parke county were dependent upon him. They afterwards made application for a pension on his supposed death, and the government has sent examiners to me and Mr. Steele to tell them the story of how it happened. This is the only story to substantiate his death. The government in after years granted the old people a pension—\$8.00 per month, I think.

But we pressed on. Many times in crossing a stream we found we had landed in a canebrake which had been there for years and years. The cane was thick and very hard and brittle. It broke easily and made a splinter which was dangerous to travel over. The cane fell over and new cane would grow up through it. One could not walk on the fallen cane. The only way to go through a cane brake was to get down and crawl under it. We tried that several times, but invariably we came out to the stream near where we had started in. We could not see the north star for guidance and crawled in a circle. It was impossible to keep a straight road. We were always lost. We had to go a long ways out of our path on account of these obstacles.

One day as we were walking along through some wood, something looked strangely familiar to me and I said to Mr. Steele: "I've seen this before." I could not give a description of any one thing, but knew there was something familiar about it. Steele did not believe me, and we went on.

Soon we struck a river, but we could both swim. This was on the 5th of September, as we afterwards learned, and the 20th day of our march. As we swam across the river darkness had just fallen. On the opposite bank we encountered a high fence and soon discovered that we were in a stable lot. We were tired, wet and hungry, and decided if we could find anything in that lot to ride we would spend the night riding and would turn our mounts loose the next day to return home.

We went into the stable, but could not find a bridle or even a strap. We then decided we would make a bridle out of bark, but in the darkness we could not find the bark, so we gave up the project.

We supposed there was a house near and we were watching out for it. In glancing to one side we discovered what

appeared to be an open door through which came a flickering light. We could hardly see the outline of a house, but only a flicker of light. We were wet, and hungry, and the temptation to investigate was strong. We crept closer. Listening closely, we heard voices. A rail fence ran close to the door through which the voices came and we decided to creep up to it. From the voices we determined the occupants were old people and only two in number.

We decided to cry "hello," and keeping in the dark, see what would happen. The old man answered. He asked us in and the temptation to accept was strong. The old man was lying on the floor with his feet poked through the doorway. The old woman was sitting before a fireplace knitting by the light of a pine knot. That was all the light they had.

As the couple were very old we decided to take a chance and walked up to the door. Looking across the room I saw an old-fashioned gun and a powder-horn above another door I walked across the room and took the gun. I explained that I was doing it for our protection and that he was in no danger so long as he told us the truth. We then had quite a conversation, and finally he asked us if we were hungry. We were glad he asked the question.

Up to this time the old woman had said nothing, but had continued her knitting before the fire-place. The old man told her to get something to eat. She replied she was willing to divide with us, only she did not like to be fooled. The bushwhackers and others had preyed on them.

The old lady got up and went to the kitchen and I told Steele to go with her, so she would not have the opportunity to betray us. I stayed to entertain the old man. I asked how far we were from the closest Confederate camp, and the old man said he did not know of any. "But," he said, "at Pine Bluff—21 miles away—the Union troops are there."

My heart bounded at the words, but I had to be cautious. But we were in safe hands. We became very well acquainted and I found there was no truer Union man in the north than he was. Soon supper was ready. We had corn coffee, some very fat meat swimming in a bowl of grease and some corn cakes made from unsifted meal. But never before had I sat down to such a feast!

They insisted that we stay until morning and have the same kind of breakfast. It had been twenty days since we had tasted food, so we stayed.

They conducted us to the kitchen again, where there was an old-fashioned high bed with straw tick and feather bed. It was a great treat to climb up on that bed with a full stomach and rest!

Next morning the old man told us where we were. He said he knew every section of land between his home and Pine Bluff, and it was just six miles across the country where we had been captured. Then I knew why it was that the place had seemed familiar to me. The old man said it would be safe for us to make the rest of the trip during the day time if we kept to the woods.

I had four dollars in greenbacks still stowed away in the chunk of fat meat. I took them out and gave the old couple two dollars.

"This is of no value to you now, but when the war is over you can use them," I said.

The old couple seemed greatly pleased with the greasy old greenbacks and said they would retain them as keep-sakes.

We then struck into the woods and traveled all that day. About sundown we came to a stream, but the banks were so steep we could not get down to the water and it was necessary to go up or down stream to find a place to cross. We found a road which went the way we wanted to go and we followed it. Presently it led to a bridge over the river, but we were afraid to risk crossing until after dark. We started to turn off to one side to wait for night, when we saw some soldiers come out in the road ahead of us. They were a long ways off but we knew we had been discovered. We could not tell whether they were Union or Confederate soldiers, but all we could do was to wait for them to come up. Before they got to us, however, we could see they wore the blue. They proved to be our own men on picket duty. We were 40 miles below Little Rock.

When they escorted us back to the picket line they would not consent for us to go on until we had told our story. We did not want to stay out there with the outposts. We had been through too many dangerous experiences to risk cap-

ture when that near to our camp. We insisted that we be sent in. They sent two men to conduct us to the inside picket lines. We did not feel safe out there.

It was very near sundown on Sunday evening. We escaped on Sunday and had arrived at our lines on Sunday. They had had a dress parade and the companies were drilling before the citizens. Our two guards marched us along. The citizens wanted to know why they had brought us there. They thought we were rebels and yelled for the men to string us up to the first tree. The troops had had a skirmish that morning with some roving bands and a Union soldier had been killed. The citizens and some of the soldiers followed us with cries of "string them up."

But the guards knew their business and marched us to headquarters. They called the commander. He asked us the necessary questions to determine who we were and to what command we belonged. He knew our officers and knew of the incidents we related of our fight and capture. He turned to the growing mob and made a short speech, relating the true situation briefly.

I never before saw such a change in a body of people. Before they were wanting to hang us and now they wanted us—dirty and ragged as we were—to stay with them, and they wanted to give us things to eat and wear. But we preferred to stay with the soldiers. There was no government supply of clothing there, but the boys fitted us out: one gave a shirt and another a pair of pants, etc.

Mr. Little concluded his story at this point. To those who are curious about how he got back to his command it might be said that at the time of his capture his three-year enlistment had expired and he had signed up for another enlistment. The members of the regiment who had escaped wounds or capture, and who had signed up for another enlistment, had been transferred to Indianapolis, where the regiment was being recruited up to its normal strength. Mr. Little was accordingly given the customary 30-day furlough and went to Indianapolis and rejoined the regiment.