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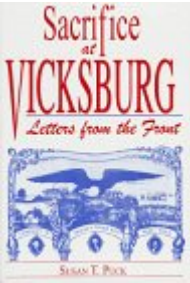

Susan T. Puck, ed. *Sacrifice at Vicksburg: Letters from the Front.* Shippensburg, Penn.: Burd Street Press, 1997. viii + 112 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57249-047-5.

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Growing up in Memphis, I took it for granted that everybody was descended from folks who fought in THE WAR. So many of us were. My mother's grandfather walked away from Chickamauga with less than 40 percent of the men he went in with. Her great-uncle rode with Nathan Bedford Forrest for four years. My great great-grandfather, a Missouri saddler before the war, rode with Joseph O. Shelby and was captured in that last great fiasco of a raid that Sterling Price should have let Shelby lead.

As I grow older and learn more of the facts about these me–my ancestors–a void appears, a void that grows in proportion to what I do know about them. I know all about where they were and what they did, but I do not really know them. I do not know what they felt, and I so badly want to. I will never really understand what motivated them. Why did they do what they did to end up where they were? There is no personal family record. There is no body of letters that has been saved and passed down for me to read. The closest thing I will ever have is a set of answers filled out by James Polk Knox Hogan to a 1912 survey conducted by the University of Tennessee. It is enlightening. It gives me something. It is, however, a far cry from the warmth of a letter or the honesty of a diary. I have a photograph of Daniel Zeno Harrison, my great-grandfather and Hogan's brother-in-law, made some time around the turn of the century. I have his likeness, but I do not really have from him what I want most; I do not have the clues that would let me know who he really was.

Even if I did, I am sure it would be of far more import to me than anyone else. If I were to edit a volume of those non-existent letters, I am not sure how valuable it would be, beyond providing information for genealogists or for those researching a particular unit or campaign. That is a problem with editions of Civil War letters. They can be of paramount importance to some but very limited in value to others. They are a mixed bag, and there is no good way around that sometimes. That letters are the source from which many a nugget has been mined, however, is and will continue to be true. Occasionally a new mine is opened, but whether it "pans out" is left to the reader.

Susan Puck, a retired English and education professor, has opened a small mine of her own in *Sacrifice at Vicksburg: Letters from the Front.* Her stepfather, Lawrence Palmer Richmond, who died in 1988, bequeathed to her a collection of letters and papers that had been passed down in the family since the war. The correspondents are three men from West Point, Wisconsin, who enrolled in Company H of the 23rd Wisconsin Infantry: Edgar Richmond, William Shurtleff and Thomas Townsend. They were writing to Richmond's older sister and brother-in-law, Adeline and Isaac Van Ness, and to Isaac's two younger sisters, Mary and Martha, or "Mat-

tie," Van Ness. Puck indicates that Townsend had a "more than passing interest" in Mattie, and all of his letters are to her (p. 2). Shurtleff's sister was married to another Van Ness, so he was well acquainted with the family. He wrote most of his letters to Mary, and Richmond wrote mostly to his sister, but both occasionally wrote to others.

Puck confesses from the outset that this was "not intended to be a history book," but rather a story, and that the "letters are the story" (p. v). The explanation of background, events and troop movements found at the beginning of chapters and between letters is solely for the purpose of telling casual readers who these men were and how the war affected their lives. Puck keeps her explanations focused and does not wander. Those well schooled in the conflict will think the explanations unnecessary, but the casual reader will find them useful. Puck transcribed the letters verbatim, which is most helpful. Edgar Richmond's letters show him to have possessed a more easy going nature than the other two. William Shurtleff seems to be the best educated of the three men, as his grammar is more correct, and his style more nearly approximates the stilted formality of Victorian letter writing. Thomas Townsend is clearly more careless with both his grammar and style.

The 23rd Wisconsin was mustered in late August 1862, and two weeks later, the unit was sent to Cincinnati. Braxton Bragg and Edmund Kirby Smith were eyeing the Ohio Valley, and Union troops were needed to protect "Porkopolis" from the threatening Confederates. Early letters from Ohio indicate the usual adjustments to military life, with complaints about sour bread and maggoty meat, and earnest requests for the folks back home to write regularly. The men also took pains to describe the Kentucky countryside and its crops for the benefit of those back home in Wisconsin. The men also learned to prefer picket duty over regular guard duty because those on picket could forage rather liberally and thus eat much better. When it came to Kentucky belles, the "candid opinion" was that the Wisconsin ladies would "take the lead so far as beauty" was concerned (p. 11). All of September was spent manning fortifications around Cincinnati. The men missed Perryville, but they were ordered south immediately after that battle.

Some of the most interesting aspects of the letters are the various opinions the men offered concerning slavery and blacks in general. Midwesterners were never noted for being fond of blacks, and some of that attitude is very apparent in the letters. Shurtleff took the high road, however, in an October 7, 1862, answer to Mary's question concerning Abraham Lincoln's emancipation proclamation:

> You speak of the Emancipation proclamation of the President and ask my views. I have no hesitation in saying that I believe him right. Years ago Jefferson advocated the emancipation of the blacks. Good men and true believed and hoped that it might be gradually and peacefully effected. But southern slavocrats have blindly and madly attempted to set up an empire on the ruins of our old republic with slavery for its foundation stone. With our views of right and wrong this is impossible for although we might tolerate slavery while there was a prospect for its ultimate abolition we can not uphold it when it attempts to override every other interest. No doubt all would be glad to have the question peacefully settled. The south now has the privelege of returning to the old union with all the rights heretofore enjoyed but if her usurping rulers hesitate they will inaugurate an era of the freedom of all races a freedom baptized perhaps in the best blood of the nation but if it is to be a step forward in the worlds progress we can but say amen [p. 17].

Shurtleff later refers to a fellow sergeant who attempted to coax "a little darky" to run away with the regiment on its southward march to wash and cook for them (p. 26). He also describes the feelings of many Unionists in the Upper South concerning slavery. Those he talked to were loyal to the Union, but they did not wish "to have slavery meddled with" (p. 26). As the men marched south, Edgar Richmond wrote to his sister, "now we began to get in to niggerism. we could see some kind of niggers head stick out of every window I went in to one house where we saw 6 or 8 of the most ragged little half breeds I have seen it was a deplorable sight" (p. 23). Puck explains this as Richmond's condemnation of miscegenation and the bearing of children out of wedlock, but one wonders if it is not just Richmond being honest in his expression of his feeling toward blacks, especially considering his later comments.

Eventually, in November, the men were transported downriver to Memphis in preparation for the campaign against Vicksburg. They boarded the boats at Louisville in a pouring rain, and Richmond came down with bronchitis. After a couple of weeks in Memphis, spent praising the hot food, the regiment was sent to take part in William T. Sherman's Yazoo Expedition. It is at this juncture that Richmond was separated from the 23rd Wisconsin due to his illness. He was eventually discharged but reenlisted in another Wisconsin unit later in the war.

Shurtleff complained that even with all the efforts at Vicksburg in December, "Nothing was accomplished" by the army (p. 41).

After spending Christmas on a railroad wrecking expedition in Louisiana, by early January, 1863, the 23rd was sent upriver to Arkansas Post. Thomas and Will both wrote to Mattie about the assault on Ft. Hindman. About half the regiment was sick from lying for "five days in a nasty low swamp without our tents" (p. 43). Combat was beginning to take its toll as well. During the assault, Thomas Townsend witnessed the effects of Confederate artillery up close. "A Cannon Ball came whizzing along just grazing the Captains leg and then Striking Corporal Yules Leg Shattering it so bad that it was taken off immediately. The Corporal was the next Man to me on my right hand and I thought it was pretty Careless shooting to throw the balls so close as that" (p. 43).

In the meantime, Edgar Richmond had been transferred to a hospital in Mound City, Illinois, where he had time to stew over the effect of the Emancipation Proclamation on midwestern troops. On the 28th of January, he wrote to his brother-in-law that "men from all these borded states are deserting & going home every day they say they didn't come down here to free the niggers" (p. 47). He complained that one Illinois regiment had "entirely broken up," with its colonel arrested (p. 47). Rumors abounded that freed blacks were flocking into Memphis where "they are of all ages from 8 years to 100 but not many of them are able to work. they are taken care of: the niggers are following up our armies wherever they are, consuming the food that our soldiers ought to have & defering on helping our armies back on their marches. Ike I think I am about as good as a nig & if I can get out of it I am a thinking it will be some time before they get me to enlist to free niggers" (p. 47). The next day in a letter to his sister, he suggested that people who had influence with the governor of Wisconsin should pull a few strings to get him sent home as he was "so sick of laying & sitting around here with nothing to do & have to think that this is all caused for a nigger that I cant stand it" (p. 49).

Shurtleff and Townsend spent the rest of the winter and spring campaigning around Vicksburg. They crossed the Mississippi at Grand Gulf and took part in the battles at Champion Hill and Big Black River. By the end of May, they had participated in another assault on Vicksburg, which Thomas said "was a Murderous thing" (p. 63). In a letter to Mattie on the 27th, Thomas broke the news that "Poor William Shurtleff is badly wounded" (p. 63). Nine days later, he followed with the sad communication that Shurtleff had died. His wound was a nasty one where the ball had entered near his nose exited behind the ear. "I tell you Mattie it is such Sights as are to be seen at the Hospitals that makes ones Heart sick and makes him wish that the Cruel War was ended" (p. 64).

At about this time, Townsend was detailed to assist in hauling ammunition, and he performed this duty until he was finally furloughed in August. By that time, he had contracted malaria and, instead of returning to Wisconsin, ended up in hospitals in Buffalo and later Rochester, New York, recovering from his "heavy shakes" (p. 72). He eventually rejoined the 23rd Wisconsin in March, 1864, but within five weeks he was discharged with a surgeon's certificate of disability. The 23rd went on to take part in the Red River campaign but without Townsend. By October he was back in Buffalo working in the post office.

With the 1864 election nearing, topics in the letters revolved around the upcoming vote. Edgar Richmond, who had reenlisted in the 42nd Wisconsin and would spend the remainder of the war in Cairo, Illinois, mentioned that the citizens there were all for George B. McClellan, but that the soldiers were evenly split. In an October 18th letter to Mattie, Townsend revealed his feelings about his sacrifice for the cause:

Well Mattie what do you think of the War now, do you not see that it is nearly at an end. I think I can almost see the End. Lincoln will be reelected and then the Rebels will see that there is still Power at the North. I hope it will be settled soon but in no other way than for the South to return to there allegiance so that we may have a United Government. I care not for Slavery. Although I do think slavery was the cause of all this Bloodshed. Some have told me that I fought for the Nigger. No Never. I fought to help put down the Rebellion and if by doing so I did help Free the Nigger I am not to blame [p. 78].

If Townsend did have more than a passing interest in Mattie, it came to naught, as they never married. In time, he went to work for American Express, but he resigned and moved first to Kansas and eventually to Norfolk, Virginia. Edgar Richmond, on the other hand, wed Mary Van Ness in September 1865 and founded a newspaper in Lodi, Wisconsin, where he died in 1903. Townsend's wife died in 1911. One can imagine Townsend in his final days as his thoughts went back to his youth, to those people he had lost contact with through the years. He wrote the Lodi postmaster a note in March 1912, asking for any information concerning the Van Ness family. The letter was forwarded to Mary who wrote to him. He recalled their kindness to a "strange boy in a strange land"

and confessed his youthful love for Mattie (p. 85). When Mary died a year later, he wrote to her children that "both your mother and her sister are some of the bright spots in my memory that Father Time has not managed to efface" (p. 88). Martha Van Ness never married. She lived in Nebraska for many years and eventually settled in Santa Ana, California, where she died in 1919. Thomas Townsend died in 1922 at age eighty-three.

Puck has given us a fine little volume that eloquently reminds us, in the words of the participants themselves, of the beliefs and attitudes, both good or bad, of one small group of people. She also reminds us, in bringing us their words, of the great cost charged to that generation for the preservation of the Union. If I had letters such as these, I am sure I would do the same. That there is a nugget here for everyone remains to be seen but is doubtful. That should not, however, slow down those miners who want to dig in this particular area.

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