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Eloquent Brevity: The Arkansas Campaign Diary of Henry Elliott Thompson

KIM ALLEN SCOTT

A GREAT DEAL OF MEANING CAN be conveyed with a simple cliché, which probably explains why people are so fond of using them. "Words fail me" is a hackneyed phrase so loaded with implications of wonderment or horror that most listeners have little trouble filling in the blanks from the context in which it is uttered. The well-known reluctance of combat veterans to later reflect on their experiences often results in similarly brief expressions, requiring historians to provide contextual understanding by using documentation created closer to the time of the referenced action. A good example can be found in an 1880 letter that Capt. Augustus H. Pettibone, a Civil War veteran of the 20th Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry, wrote to an old comrade. "I always cry when I think, or rather try to talk, about Prairie Grove."¹ While Pettibone's comrade fully grasped all that was implied in that terse phrase, those of us in the twenty-first century who would comprehend its brevity must dig further. Fortunately, Pettibone's correspondent, Cpl. Henry Elliott Thompson, provided the means to do exactly that. By a remarkable combining of diary and reminiscence, Thompson left a record that adds to a body of enlisted men's stories from the Civil War's

¹Augustus H. Pettibone to Henry E. Thompson, October 8, 1880, box 1, folder 4, Thompson Family Papers, Collection 2493, Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections, Montana State University Library, Bozeman.

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Trans-Mississippi theater, which one historian has described as "scarce as hen's teeth."²

Henry Elliott Thompson, a Wisconsin farmboy who joined Mr. Lincoln's army in 1862, encountered such a variety of locales and conditions during his enlistment that he may be considered as something of a generic Civil War enlisted man. Thompson's service took him from the Ozark Mountains to the Vicksburg bluffs and from the chaparral desert of the Rio Grande frontier to the sandy beaches of Mobile Bay, a journey of more than 7,000 miles over the course of the war. In each place he recorded his experiences, making his surviving testimony interesting in the aggregate but particularly important for the study of the war's prosecution in Northwest Arkansas, for which a dearth of enlisted men's diaries appear to have survived. Before taking a closer look at Thompson's story of the Prairie Grove campaign, though, we need to understand the circumstances from which it emerged, and how he composed the document that allows us to get a glimpse of what Captain Pettibone could not bring himself to utter.

As with so many foot soldiers, we know very little about the specifics of Thompson's life before and after the Civil War. Henry and his twin brother, Joseph, were born on March 13, 1841, the fourth and fifth children of Hugh and Martha Thompson of Cooperstown, Pennsylvania. A tailor by trade, Hugh Thompson moved his growing family from Pennsylvania to Ohio before settling in Pleasant Valley Township, Marquette County, Wisconsin. At that time, the Badger State had yet to shed many of the characteristics of its frontier stage of development. Throughout the 1850s, settlers continued to penetrate the dense hardwood forests surrounding its scattered western settlements to carve out subsistence farms. Shortly after their arrival in Pleasant Valley, the Thompsons were lured to the broken country flanking the Bad Axe River in the far western portion of Wisconsin. There, the Thompsons established a farm in Vernon County near the hamlet of Springville. Henry and his brother grew to manhood clearing the forest, plowing the soil, and performing all the other backbreaking labor required on a newly established farmstead. Apparently, they also found time to attend school, since Henry's diaries evidence a literate man of some artistic talent.³

During the presidential election of 1860, Wisconsin for the most part embraced the newly minted Republican party and the candidacy of Abraham Lincoln. Aware of the likely consequences of a Republican victory,

²Edwin C. Bearss, "Foreword," in *"A Rough Introduction to this Sunny Land": The Civil War Diary of Private Henry A. Strong, Co. K, Twelfth Kansas Infantry*, ed. Tom Wing (Little Rock: Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, 2006), xi.

³John Nevin Thompson III, "A Thompson Historical Genealogy," box 1, folder 5, Thompson Family Papers.

residents formed various local militias in the months preceding the balloting. La Crosse, the largest town near Vernon County, saw the mustering of a volunteer artillery battery, manned by prominent local volunteers such as Albert Webb Bishop, a transplanted New York attorney and tireless worker for the Lincoln candidacy.⁴ Few Vernon County residents enlisted in Bishop's 1st Independent Battery, but when the attorney resigned his commission to gain a captaincy with the 2nd Wisconsin Cavalry he apparently succeeded in convincing the first member of the Thompson family to enlist in the Union army. Joseph traveled to La Crosse on November 14, 1861, to join Bishop's company. Henry remained at home that winter, probably feeling anxious about his brother's safety and perhaps a bit eager to share in the great adventure his sibling had begun. Joseph's experiences could have easily demonstrated to his twin brother one hazard that the Civil War shared with all of America's previous conflicts, a greater death rate among soldiers in camp than on the battlefield. Service in Bishop's company had taken Joseph to Benton Barracks outside of St. Louis where he first became ill in late March 1862. By May, when the 2nd moved out for the southwest corner of the state, Joseph was too sick to accompany his comrades and was evacuated to a hospital at Mound City, Illinois.⁵

As Joseph's health deteriorated in the early summer of 1862, President Lincoln called for 300,000 more soldiers and ordered the various northern states to voluntarily meet their quota obligation or eventually face the politically unpopular option of conscription.⁶ Henry's diary simply states he enlisted on July 19, as recruiters for the 20th Wisconsin Infantry regiment combed the backcountry of Vernon County looking for volunteers. There is no indication of why he joined. Perhaps Henry, aware of his brother's continued illness, felt the Thompson family owed the Union cause at least one able-bodied soldier, or perhaps the threat of the draft convinced the young farmer he would have to go sooner or later. Bounty money, a special payment offered to those willing to don the uniform, also likely played a part in Henry's decision, as well as the promise of being able to continue his work in harvesting crops before actually having to join the new regiment at Camp Randall in Madison, Wisconsin.

⁴A. W. Bishop, *Loyalty on the Frontier; or Sketches of Union Men of the South-west: with Incidents and Adventures in Rebellion on the Border*, ed. Kim Allen Scott (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003), xiii.

⁵Joseph C. Thompson, Certificate of Service, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, issued August 12, 1998, in author's possession.

⁶Carolyn J. Mattern, *Soldiers When They Go: The Story of Camp Randall, 1861-1865* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin for Department of History, University of Wisconsin, 1981), 70.

Camp Randall had been established outside of Wisconsin's capital city early in the war and quickly gained the reputation of being one of the best Union training posts. Regiment after regiment were processed through its facilities. The command staff of the newly formed 20th regiment took up their duties at Camp Randall on July 11, but the new recruits took weeks longer to arrive. Like Thompson, many men took time to finish their farm work before taking the road to Madison.⁷ Thompson's introduction to army life on August 16 consisted of watching his barracks burn in a disastrous fire, right after receiving his uniform, equipment, and twenty-five dollars in bounty money. His enlistment papers provide our only description of the twenty-three-year-old farmer. He stood five feet nine and one-half inches, with a ruddy complexion, blue eyes, and brown hair; slightly taller but otherwise conforming neatly with historian Bell Irwin Wiley's description of the generic Billy Yank—a farmer of western European heritage in his early twenties.⁸

The 20th Wisconsin did not spend as much time in basic training at Camp Randall as had preceding regiments, but active service quickly filled the void in their military education. Initially raised in response to a need for troops to guard Washington, D.C., the 20th did not reach its full complement of enlistees until long after the need had passed, and the volunteers were instead assigned to duty in the Trans-Mississippi theater. The Ozark mountains of Southwest Missouri and Northwest Arkansas had already been the scene of two major battles and dozens of vicious guerrilla encounters, and by the fall of 1862 the Union army needed the 20th to help reassert federal control in the area. Assigned to the third division of the Army of the Frontier, Thompson and his comrades moved from St. Louis to Springfield, Missouri, in early September.

Brig. Gen. John Schofield, the commander of the Army of the Frontier, displayed a dismaying tendency to respond with "excessive alacrity" to the Rebel army's movements that fall of 1862.⁹ Confederate forces probed toward Missouri several times, even briefly occupying Newtonia in early October before two divisions of Schofield's army drove them back south. The Union commander pushed his soldiers hard in the weeks leading up to the Prairie Grove fight, ordering them back and forth across the rugged landscape to check the next real or imagined enemy threat. Although none of these forced marches resulted in fighting for the 20th Wisconsin, all the

⁷Ibid., 69.

⁸Bell Irwin Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union* (1952; Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 303-304.

⁹William L. Shea, *Fields of Blood: The Prairie Grove Campaign* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 66.

tramping over the muddy Ozark countryside helped weed out the less fit while strengthening Thompson and those who remained.

If Thompson and his comrades needed spiritual toughening, they received ample opportunity for that too. They visited the Wilson's Creek battlefield several times and saw the bleaching bones of soldiers killed during the 1861 fight, a grim reminder of their possible fate once marching ended and fighting began. Spiritual toughening took a personal turn for Thompson when, in the midst of the exhausting campaign, he learned of his twin brother's death in the Mound City hospital and could only allow himself the luxury of a single evening to grieve.

The 20th Wisconsin finally saw the elephant on December 7, 1862, at the battle of Prairie Grove, Arkansas. Brig. Gen. James G. Blunt, who had assumed command after illness temporarily forced Schofield to relinquish it, led his Kansas division to Cane Hill, Arkansas, where he pushed back a Rebel cavalry force on November 28. Blunt called for reinforcements when it seemed as if the Confederates were massing in his front for a counterattack. Gen. Francis G. Herron responded by forcing his division, which included Thompson's regiment, to cover the distance from their camp south of Springfield to Fayetteville, Arkansas, in a grueling march of 116 miles in three days. Maj. Gen. Thomas C. Hindman, commanding the Confederate army, planned to meet Herron's division south of Fayetteville and defeat them before turning back on Blunt's rear. But the Union army failed to cooperate. After meeting advanced portions of Hindman's army, Herron's forward movement stalled and a brutal standing battle developed on a wooded ridge near Prairie Grove, which allowed time for Blunt to march to Herron's relief. For the 20th Wisconsin, the baptism of fire before the arrival of Blunt's division was particularly horrendous. Ordered to form a standard double-rank infantry charge against a Rebel battery deployed on top of the ridge, the Wisconsin soldiers gamely advanced over an open field, gained the objective, but were then forced to withdraw when Hindman's reserves opened a withering crossfire while recapturing the battery. Thompson suffered a buckshot wound to the neck and was left behind when his company commander, Capt. Augustus H. Pettibone, led a retreat of the survivors as the regimental line gave way. In a matter of about fifteen minutes, more than 200 men of the 20th Wisconsin had either been killed, wounded, or captured—nearly half of the regiment present that day. On other parts of the field, the Rebels did not achieve such lopsided success and by day's end Hindman prepared to withdraw his forces, realizing they lacked the strength to continue the fight.

Thompson returned to the regiment after a night in enemy hands and joined in their subsequent march to the Arkansas River in pursuit of

Hindman's battered army. During that march to Van Buren and the withdrawal back into southern Missouri, Thompson and his comrades periodically encountered guerrillas and continued in the well-developed practice of preying on civilians for food. Throughout the Prairie Grove campaign, the Army of the Frontier confiscated apples, livestock, and other suspected secessionist property to such an extent that the high command issued several futile directives to halt the practice, but the men had no qualms about destroying civilian infrastructure they felt contributed to the enemy's strength. By January 12, 1863, the 20th Wisconsin had reached Forsyth, Missouri, where it awaited its next assignment.

Out of the dozens of letters and drawings he specifically mentions creating, Thompson's sole surviving literary testimony of his service are the letter he received from Pettibone in 1880, a wartime letter he wrote to his parents published in a Wisconsin newspaper, and two small pocket diaries inherited by his great-grandson, Nevin Thompson of Groveland, Florida, and now housed in the Thompson Family Papers at Montana State University. The first diary volume, which records Thompson's experiences during the Prairie Grove campaign, is a small brown leather covered memoranda book with ruled pages marked with Thompson's identification information. Inside the back cover are five seemingly experimental impressions of a rubber stamp label, "H. E. Thompson." These were probably added decades after the war when Thompson worked as a surveyor and would likely have possessed a desktop marking device for the conduct of his daily tasks; the stampings look as if the user was idly testing its impression. Inside the front page is the handwritten "colophon" Thompson wrote the day he decided to use the little book to transcribe the entries he had previously scribbled in another booklet, perhaps deteriorated to near illegibility after sixteen months residence in a greasy haversack. Regardless of the reason for copying the contents of the discarded original, Thompson began his work while stationed at Brownsville, Texas, on December 29, 1863. Internal evidence suggests the transcription attempted to be a faithful rendering of the original because of Thompson's consistent repetition of the date headings at the top of every page and his preservation of the present tense. There are a few important exceptions, though, specifically in the account of the battle of Prairie Grove. The entry is a curious mix of present and past-tense composition, and Thompson gives a detailed list of his company's casualties shortly after writing, "I am a prisoner on the field." Obviously, it would be impossible for him to have recorded such details at the time, and when he got to that part of his story he simply elaborated with the luxury of hindsight.

The following transcription of Thompson's entries cover the period from his first joining the regiment in Madison, to his arrival with the rest of the 20th Wisconsin at Forsyth, at the conclusion of the Prairie Grove campaign. In editing the text, I have corrected the spelling of every proper name and added punctuation and capitalization for reading clarity. I have also copied the dates the way Thompson wrote them, usually giving the month, an abbreviation of the weekday, the date number, and finally the year. Concern over preserving the authenticity of Thompson's voice convinced me to forgo correcting any other spelling errors, however. Thus, to Thompson "today" is always "to day," and "cavalry" is always "cavelry." Many of Thompson's spelling errors seem to be the result of carelessness in transcribing rather than a poor education; his rendering of "bivouac" actually corrected itself as he continued with his copying. Numerous repetitive entries, which contain no substantive information, were also purged since often Thompson would record little more than a one line weather report for his daily summation or simply repeat "nothing of note occurred to day."

Whether Thompson's diary can best be considered a contemporaneous account or a retrospective memoir, his voice has been preserved in its most important aspect: a steady use of the present tense, even in the later copying of his first diary. As with so many anonymous warriors throughout history, grasping the immediacy of a soldier's existence is an important part of understanding his story.

* * *

Frid. August 15, 1862

Bid farewell to my parents, sister and brother and take up my line of march for my regt. at camp Randall. Arrive at Bad Axe City at 12 m. Wait there til 12 o'clock night. Take Str. Northern Light down the river.

Sat. 16

Reach Prairie du Chien this morning. Take the cars for Madison. Reach camp at 12 m. The barracks take fire. A large share of them burned. I am detailed for guard.

Frid. 29

Report that we are to leave for the seat of war to morrow.

Sat. 30

Strike tents before daylight. Leave camp at sunrise. March through the city. Take the train for Chicago. Arrive there. Take the cars for Alton.

Sun. Aug. 31, 1862

Pass through Springfield, Ill., arrive at Alton 4 p.m. Take the boat to St. Louis, Mo. Land at dark. March to Benton Barracks 5 miles. Awful dusty and hot.

Tues. 2 [September]

One of the 20th shot while leaving camp, likely to recover.¹⁰

Thus. 4

Start for Rolla, Mo. to day by rail. Pass through two tunnels. Arrive at dark.

Frid. 5

Strike tents this a.m. March 3 miles west of Rolla. In camp.

Sund. Sept. 7, 1862

Have preaching in the woods by Capt. of Co. F.¹¹

Sat. 13

Receive orders to march to Sand Springs, 5 miles west of Rolla. Reach there at 2 a.m. In camp.

Mon. 15

On guard to day. Receive marching orders. Rained. Liet. York, of my Co. is promoted to regimental quarter master.¹²

[Thompson made no entries for the next eleven days, during which time his regiment marched to Springfield, Missouri.]

¹⁰The rosters show at least three soldiers deserted the 20th Wisconsin in the month prior to the wounding of the man Henry describes here. The shooting apparently did not discourage others from taking "French leave." Jacob R. Johnson of Company G deserted just three days afterward. *Roster of Wisconsin Volunteers, War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865* (Madison: Democrat Printing Company, 1886), 2:148, 155.

¹¹Nelson Whitman was a Methodist minister from Dodgeville, Wisconsin. Whitman attended school in Vermont and, after moving to Wisconsin, taught school and was a pastor at the local church. He joined the 20th Wisconsin on August 18, 1862, and took an active part in recruiting others for the regiment. He remained at the head of his company for the remainder of the war and in 1876 became a real estate dealer. *Roster of Wisconsin Volunteers*, 2:152; Marcia Buffett, "Descendants of Isaiah Whitman of Wells," www.rootsweb.com/~nyhamilt/bios/whitman.html (accessed August 6, 2007).

¹²William H. York joined Company A, 20th Wisconsin, on August 2, 1862, listing Prescott as his hometown. *Roster of Wisconsin Volunteers*, 2:141.

Sat. Sept. 27, 1862

Battalion drill to day. Boys confiscated Secesh apples. Receive letter from home.

Sund. 28

Raining this a.m. P.M. preaching by Chaplin, text Heb's 41, 8.¹³ Prayer meeting at 7 p.m.

Mond. 29

On guard to day. 20th Iowa Inf. left for Wilson's Creek. 20th Wis. and 14th Ill. go to work on fort No. 7, quit at 12 m. on account of being short of rations.

Tues. 30

Get a pass this a.m. Go up town. 1st Bat. 2d Wis. Cavel. came in. Saw several boys whom I new. Tidings of my brother.

Frid. 3d Oct. 1862

Worked on fort to day. Regt. fires their guns. One of the rear rank's guns bursted close to my head.¹⁴

Sun'y. 5

Detailed as escort to a funeral. The deceased name is Burel Sterne, Private, Co. "H", 1st Ark. Inf.¹⁵

Mond. 6

Working on the fort, as usual. Refuse to go out on dress parade.¹⁶

¹³There is no such chapter or verse in Hebrews.

¹⁴The Austrian muskets issued to the 20th Wisconsin at Madison were obviously of inferior quality and equally dangerous to the target and the shooter. "Men ought to be shot or hung who knowingly would put such weapons into the hands of our brave Wisconsin boys," wrote one disgusted member of the regiment. An exchange of the weapons for Prussian smoothbores manufactured in 1764 was, in fact, hailed as an improvement. The final exchange for the standard .58 caliber Springfield rifle musket occurred on October 30, as Thompson records. "Correspondence of the Wisconsin Volunteers, 1861-1863," vol. 6, p. 118, Edwin B. Quiner Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

¹⁵This identification is in error. While the 1st Arkansas Cavalry was being organized at Springfield, Missouri, during this time, the infantry regiment was not formed until 1863. The name Sterne does not appear on the roster of either regiment's Company H.

¹⁶Thompson's meaning here is unclear. There is no record of his regiment balking at appearing on dress parade, and his own "refusal" would have to have been justified by illness or another assignment.

Tues. 7

Co. A. Detailed to guard colege prison in town. Two prisoners over power one of the guards, take his gun, and escape.¹⁷

Wedn. 8

Relieved at 9 a.m. Returnd to camp. Have our guns exchanged. Co. A gets Enfield rifles, reg. draw Prussian muskets. Our Co. get no bayonets.

Thurs. Oct. 9th 1862

Raining to day. Go to a house. Got breakfast. Walked over the ground where Fremont's body guard charged the Rebels near Springfield.¹⁸

Frid. 10th

Receive marching orders for Cassville [Mo.]. Packing up.

Sat. 11

Decamp at 7. Com. A advance guard. Cross Wilson's Creek and in camp near the battle ground. We have marched 10 miles. Left Capt. and 2nd Lieut. At Hq.

Sund. 12

Was on guard last night. Go to the Brig'd train get behind regt. Help a sick comrade to get into camp. Met two families going north. Arrive at camp at dark. Camp on Crane Creek.¹⁹ March 17 miles.

¹⁷A temporary prison had been established in Springfield by the Union army in an abandoned two-story brick academy. Circumstantial evidence suggests security at the makeshift jail left much to be desired. One soldier even reported taking an "intelligent" prisoner to the rooftop one afternoon for a sightseeing tour. "Correspondence of the Wisconsin Volunteers," vol. 6, p. 117.

¹⁸Following the battle of Wilson's Creek on August 8, 1861, Maj. Gen. John Charles Frémont led a Union force to Southwest Missouri to disrupt the enemy and bolster his own sagging reputation as a combat commander. While camped at the Pomme de Terre River on October 24, Frémont ordered Maj. Charles Zagonyi and a three-hundred-man cavalry contingent to stage a raid into Springfield, about fifty miles distant. The following day Zagonyi's troopers brashly charged the 1500 Confederates who occupied the town and scattered them. U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 70 vols. in 128 pts. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), ser. 1, vol. 3, p. 251 [hereinafter cited as OR].

¹⁹Crane Creek flows southwest into the James River, a tributary of the White River. It intersects the road to Cassville about twenty-five miles southwest of Springfield.



Courtesy Kim Allen Scott.

Mond. 13

Decamp at 7 a.m. March 13 miles to Flat Creek. In camp at 7 p.m. Go hunting with revolver, find nothing to shoot.

Tues. 14 Oct. 1862

D'cp at 7. Marched 12 miles. In camp 12 m. Near Cassville, Mo. Forced march.

Wedn. 15

In camp today. Go to see the 2d Wis. Cav'l, which is camped three miles beyond town. Get some apples.

Thurs. 16

Drill, inspection at 2 p.m. Bat. drill at 4. 9 p.m. alarm. Fire in town. Long roll beat, fall into line. Sutler's stores burned.

Frid. 17

Decamp at 8 a.m. March 3 miles. In camp. Cook rations tonight for two days.

Sat. 18

Decamp at 6 a.m., pass through Keitsville, arrive at battle ground of Pea Ridge. Mo. State Militia refuse to cross the state line. Inf. fix bayonet, militia conclude to go.²⁰ We cross the line at 3 p.m. In camp on Sugar Creek, Ark at dark.²¹ Lay on arms all night. Fell in line once in night. Marched 30 miles.

Sund. Oct. 19, 1862

Waked up at 3 a.m. Stand in line till day light, expecting an attack from rebels, who are 5 miles off.²² 8 a.m. firing in woods. False alarm. P.M. enemy in full retreat.

Monday 20

On guard. Decamp at 5 p.m. March in pursuit of enemy. Start at dark, march all night. Cross Pea Ridge. Nothing to eat.

Tues. 21

No breakfast this morning. We are marching over the Ozark Mountain. The scenery among these rocky cliffs is grand and imposing. Halt at dark on the banks of White River and cook supper. After supper we cross the

²⁰The troopers of the 7th Missouri Cavalry felt their service was conditional on remaining in the state, and their commanding officer failed to convince a "hard core" of mutineers to follow orders. Although Thompson's regiment was ordered to force the malcontents to comply, he could not have personally been a part of the demonstration since he lacked a bayonet for his Enfield rifle. Shea, *Fields of Blood*, 19.

²¹Sugar Creek is a stream that flows to the west, intersecting the road to Cross Hollow about four miles southwest of Elkhorn Tavern.

²²Following the rout at Newtonia on October 4, Brig. Gen. James S. Rains, who commanded the Confederates during the temporary absence of Maj. Gen. Thomas C. Hindman, gathered the bulk of his army near Huntsville, Arkansas. Smaller contingents were located nine miles north of Fayetteville on the road to Elm Springs, ten miles southwest of Fayetteville at McGuire's Store, on the Arkansas-Indian Territory line at Maysville, and in the area around Elkhorn Tavern. Col. Joseph Shelby commanded the cavalry force in the latter area, and would have been much too weak to directly attack the Union column. Edwin C. Bearss, "The Federals Raid Van Buren and Threaten Fort Smith," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 26 (Summer 1967): 126.

river by ford and bivoick. Cook rations for tomorrow, then sleep till morning.²³

Wedn. 22

Decamp at 5 a.m. Road lays over mountains as yesterday. Cross a tributary of White River. Rest a few minutes to rest at noon. Move on. Stop at dusk. Cook supper. Start off in another in another way at 8 pm. March all night.

Thur. Oct. 23, 1862

Fell out of the ranks at 2 a.m. completely exhausted. Lay down by a fire. Laid my head on a rock and went to sleep. Awake at sunrise. Start on. Came to White River. Got a ride of 5 miles. Walk on with a cavelry man. He gave a ride of three miles. Pass through Mudtown, Ark. Reach camp at sunset. Encamped at Cross Hollows, Ark.²⁴

Frid. 24

In camp to day. Write home. Gen. Blunt has a fight with the enemy. Captures 8 pieces artillery and 500 prisoners.²⁵

²³General Schofield wanted to move troops forward toward Huntsville to support an attack on Confederates in the area and ordered the 20th Wisconsin's division to march east from the Telegraph Road. They moved toward Huntsville for two days until it was determined that they would not be needed after all; the Rebels gave up Huntsville when pressed by other elements of Schofield's command. The 20th followed a circular route that would eventually take them over fifty-two miles on a pointless march that ended nearly where they started from. As a result, they did not technically cross Pea Ridge, but rather the divide separating the Sugar Creek drainage from the White River. Janet Hewett, ed., *Supplement to the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot Publishing Co., 1994-2001), vol. 76, p. 197.

²⁴Cross Hollow had been the location of military encampments since the early months of the war and was used intermittently by both sides. It is located in an area "extending for two miles from the intersection of Old Wire Road and Cross Hollows Road east to Monte Ne on Beaver Lake in Benton County." Jerry Hilliard et al., "A Confederate Encampment at Cross Hollow, Benton County," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 67 (Winter 2008): 360.

²⁵On October 22, 1862, Brig. Gen. James E. Blunt's Kansas division of the Army of the Frontier attacked the Confederate garrison at Fort Wayne, Indian Territory, a few miles west of the north Arkansas border town of Maysville. After a "spirited engagement of less than an hour," the Union forces routed the Rebels, capturing much of their supplies and several pieces of artillery. Although Blunt wildly overestimated the enemy's strength as somewhere between four to seven thousand effectives, the actual numbers engaged were much smaller. Thompson's assertion that five hundred rebels were captured is also an exaggeration. Blunt officially reported thirty Rebel prisoners after the fight and his own casualties as four killed and fifteen wounded. *OR*, ser. 1, vol. 13, p. 325.

Sat. 25

Two inches of snow today. Cold. Got tooth pulled. Broke jaw. Man in Co. E shot in leg by accident.

Tues. 28

Warmer. On guard. Six rebels brought into camp.

Wed. 29 Oct. 1862

Have battalion drill. March 1 ½ miles. One wagon master shot by guerrillas. Write letter home.

Thurs. 30

Alarm this morn at 4. Fell into line of battle. Pickets drove in. Stand in line till after daylight, no attack. Change over our guns for the Springfield rifle musket. Discharge the old guns.

Frid. 31

Muster for pay. Send several prisoners to Springfield by train. Weather fine.

Sat. Nov. 1

Commenced drill, heavy infantry. Fals alarm at 10 p.m. Fall into line.

Mond. 3

On guard. Weather still cold. Several prisoners brought in.

Tues. 4 November 1862

Election day. Vote. Decamp at 10 a.m. March back in direction of Springfield. Bivoick at dark on Pea Ridge battle ground. Weather cold. Had to march back 1 ½ miles to camp ground. March 12 miles.²⁶

Wedn. 5

Decamp at 6 a.m. Weather cold and windy. Rheumatism trouble me. Fall out. Pass Kietsville at noon. It is burned down. Get into camp at Cassville at dark. March 22 miles. Receive a letter from home containing news of my twin brother's death in 2nd Wis. Cavalry. Leave camp, wander out

²⁶The Kansas and 2nd Missouri divisions of Schofield's army had been successful in driving most of Hindman's army back toward the Arkansas River Valley, but the Union commander responded quickly to orders from his superiors to check a rumored Confederate advance from Yellville, Arkansas, to Springfield. Instead of a measured withdrawal from Arkansas, the 20th Wisconsin joined in a hasty forced march back to meet the imagined threat. Shea, *Fields of Blood*, 62-63.

alone in the night lamenting my great loss. Return to camp later in the night.

Thurs. 6

Decamp at 7 a.m. Make a forced march of 35 miles. In camp at Crane Creek 10 p.m. Tired and hungry. Train late in coming in. Luit. Kusel hurt by horse in a.m.²⁷ The longest march we ever made in the same time.

Sat. 8

Still in camp. Weather cool. Kinny of Co. A died in camp hospital²⁸

Sund. 9

Still in camp. Gen. Inspection at 9 a.m. 11 a.m. discharge our guns. 2 p.m. preaching. 4 p.m. funeral, one of Wis., two of Iowa, all buried at one time. 6 p.m. dress parade.

Mond. 10

Decamp 9 a.m. March 18 miles to James River. In camp. Weather cool. On guard. Rheumatism.

Tues. 11

Have some apple butter for breakfast. Something new for a soldier. Decamp 8 a.m. March 16 miles. In camp at Ozark.²⁹ Saw a few prickly pears. Weather rainy.

²⁷August Frederick Kusel (1843-1934) of Company E, 20th Wisconsin, was born in Domnitz, Mecklenberg, Germany, and moved with his family to Watertown in 1849. Appointed a first lieutenant on August 18, 1862 and seriously wounded at Prairie Grove, Kusel returned to Wisconsin to recuperate and resigned his commission on October 2, 1863. Watertown Historical Society, "Kusel's of Watertown," 2007, www.watertownhistory.org/Articles/Kusels.htm (accessed August 15, 2007); *Roster of Wisconsin Volunteers*, 2:150.

²⁸Warren O. Kinney listed Ellsworth as his hometown when he joined Company A of the 20th Wisconsin on July 18, 1862. The official roster lists his date of death as November 9, 1862, at Crane Creek, Missouri. *Roster of Wisconsin Volunteers*, 2:142.

²⁹Again concerned about a rumored Confederate force advancing on Springfield from the southeast, Schofield ordered the 20th Wisconsin's division on another pointless circular march, this time to the town of Ozark, about fourteen miles south southwest of Springfield. Thompson and his comrades would tramp eighty-three miles in a route beyond Ozark to the northeast and back again before returning close to their original position on the Telegraph Road southwest of Springfield. *Supplement to the Official Records*, vol. 76, p. 198; Shea, *Fields of Blood*, 66.

Wedn. 12

Write home. Clear of hard ground. Have dress parade. Get some straw which is a fine thing in camp.

Thurs. Nov. 13, 1862

Drill. Orderly S. P. Jackson got his commission as 2nd Lieut.³⁰ Regt. presents a sword to Col. Pinkney, presented by Lieut. Col. Burtram at dress parade.³¹

Frid. 14

Decamp 10 a.m. March 16 miles to Sawyer's Creek. In camp at sunset in a meadow. Weighed myself today. Weigh 152 lbs.

³⁰Samuel Pitts Jackson (1829-1895) was from Illinois and moved with his wife to La Crosse, Wisconsin, sometime prior to the outbreak of the war. Jackson first enlisted in the 2nd Wisconsin Infantry and took part in the battle of Bull Run on July 21, 1861, where he was wounded, captured, and paroled. He returned to Wisconsin where he enlisted in the 20th Wisconsin on August 25, 1862, and received a warrant for first sergeant of Company A. He got a commission as a second lieutenant on October 14 rather than the date Thompson provides in this entry, and was promoted to first lieutenant on December 31. Although he acted as the company commander, Jackson's final promotion to captain of Company A was not official until August 25, 1863. He remained in that position until the end of the war. *Roster of Wisconsin Volunteers*, 2:141; Dennis Moore, *Order of Execution: The Trial and Execution of Private John Carroll, Company D, 20th Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry* (Manitowoc, WI: Bivouac Publications, 2006), 71-72.

³¹Bertine Pinkney (1824-?) was appointed the colonel of the 20th Wisconsin when the regiment was formed. Born in New York City, Pinckney moved to Rosendale, Wisconsin, in 1847. When the war started he accepted a commission as major in the 3rd Wisconsin, but took over the leadership of the 20th when that opportunity opened. He did not head the regiment for long. Illness forced his resignation on December 6, 1862, the day before the battle of Prairie Grove, and he returned to Rosendale. He moved to Peabody, Kansas in 1871 and became postmaster in 1877. *Roster of Wisconsin Volunteers*, 2: 140; William G. Cutler, *History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago: A.T. Andreas, 1883), 1263. Henry Bertram (1825-1878) was born in Germany and came to the United States shortly before the Mexican War. He enlisted during that conflict and gained the rank of sergeant. Bertram lived in Watertown, Wisconsin, before the Civil War and initially joined the 3rd Wisconsin Infantry in 1861. He accepted a commission as lieutenant colonel of the 20th on July 1, 1862 and, following Pinkney's resignation, became its colonel. At Prairie Grove, he was wounded and had his horse shot from under him. After the war, Bertram returned to Watertown where he served as both postmaster and mayor. An admiring military colleague described him as being "of medium size, stout built, with light hair and light blue eyes of the Saxon, with complexion fair and ruddy, he was the picture of soldierly vigor." F. A. Bird, "Gen. Henry Bertram," *Watertown Daily Times*, October 10, 1914.

Sat. 15

Orders to march at 8 a.m. Cook breakfast before daylight. Strike tents. Ready to start at 10 a.m. order countermanded. Pitch tents. Remain in camp.

Sunday 16

One of guard is sick. I am called up at 2 a.m. to stand guard. Raining. Stand 2 hours and return to tent.

Mond. 17

Orders to march to the relief of Blunt at Cane Hill, Ark. Leave camp ground 11 a.m. Pass Ozark at dark. March all night. Rain and mud. Fall out 12 midnight on account of rheumatism in leg.

Tues. Nov. 18, 1862

Awake at daylight, wet through. Still raining. March on. Nothing to eat and Mud! Mud!! Mud!!! Overtook regt. five miles further on. Waiting for train, which did not come up till noon. Cook coffee. Start on at one. March to James River. In camp a little before dark. The whole thing stuck in the mud! We got straw to make us beds or we would have all died as indeed a good number did.

Wedn. 19

News comes that Blunt has whipped the enemy at Cane Hill, Ark.³² Rains all day and we remain in camp. Get a mail with letters from home.

Thur. 20

Weather fine today. Have dress parade. Three corporals appointed in Co. A., Brown, Mooer and Wilkenson.³³

³²Thompson's information regarding the Kansas Division was in error. Scouts reported a large Rebel force at Cane Hill on November 14, and Gen. Blunt telegraphed for support in meeting the threat. As it turned out, Confederates cavalry had simply been in the area collecting forage and quickly withdrew once they filled their commissary wagons. Adverse weather prevented Blunt from sending an "all clear" message until after the 20th Wisconsin and other regiments had been dispatched to the rescue. Once word reached the regiment that the threat had passed, Thompson believed the Confederates had been "whipped." Shea, *Fields of Blood*, 70-71.

³³Two soldiers in Company A were named Brown, Reuben A. Brown of Wauzeka and Joshua D. Brown of Maiden Rock, but the latter was already a sergeant when Thompson made this entry. Robert M. Mooer listed La Crosse as his home town when enlisting on July 22, 1862. He was discharged for disability on April 18, 1864. William Wilkinson of Beldenville, Wisconsin, enlisted on July 18, 1862. He eventually became first sergeant of the company but on January 17, 1864, accepted an officer's commission with the United States Colored Troops. *Roster of Wisconsin Volunteers*, 2:141, 142, 143.

Frid. 21

Weather still pleasant. Co. drill a.m. Battalion drill from 2- 4 p.m. Ordered to move in morning.

Sat. Nov. 22, 1862

Decamp at 9 a.m. March 6 miles and in camp at Camp Curtis, Mo. at 2 p.m.³⁴ Forded the river on our march. Capt. Pettibone paid us a visit.

Sun. 23

The whole division (2nd) is encamped here. Co. inspection at 9 a.m. Go up to 2nd Wis. Cavalry, return to camp.

Mon. 24

Drill commenced today. Examined by surgeon for vaccination. Get mail.

Tues. 25

On brigade guard. Formed an aquain with Corp. Washburn of Co. K.³⁵

Wedn. 26

Went out to see Wilsons Creek battle ground. Visited the spot where Lyon fell.³⁶ Ingrave my name on a stone and laid it upon the pile which had been gathered together by visitors. Saw the sink hole where sixty Iowa men were buried by the rebels. Could see bones bleaching in the sun. Return to camp too late to drill. On guard again.

Thursday, Nov. 27, 1862

While standing post before Gen. Herron's tent, I saw Gen. Totten. He, I am sorry to say, was rather too much under the influence of liquor to appear

³⁴Camp Curtis was the name given to the encampment located adjacent to the Wilson's Creek battlefield.

³⁵Franklin H. Washburn enlisted in Company K of the 20th Wisconsin on August 13, 1862, listing Shullsburg as his residence. Thompson's new friend would be killed at Prairie Grove. *Roster of Wisconsin Volunteers*, 2:163.

³⁶Brig. Gen. Nathaniel J. Lyon commanded Union forces at Wilson's Creek. A West Point graduate and ardent abolitionist, Lyon had served in the Mexican War and in various frontier posts prior to the Civil War. He aggressively worked to keep Missouri in the Union by harassing the Confederate-sympathizing legislature and pursuing enemy forces to the southwest corner of the state. His leadership style cost him his life at Wilson's Creek, when in spite of his wounds he continued to direct troops from a high point on the field known afterward as "Bloody Hill." Stewart Sifakis, *Who Was Who in the Civil War* (New York: Facts on File, 1988), 401-402.

well in company.³⁷ The weather was cold.

Sund. 30

Gen. inspection a.m. Travel out into woods. Dress pr'd. Get mail and a likeness of Mary.

Mond. December 1st

Weather cold. On guard. Find some boys from Penn. Rec'd more mail.

Wedn. Dec. 3, 1862

Co. Drill this a.m. 12 m. rec'd orders to march to Gen. Blunt's division at Cane Hill, Ark., 125 miles distant where he had been attacked by overwhelming numbers of the enemy. Decamp at 1 p.m. March to Crane Creek in 18 miles. In camp at dark.

Thur. 4

Decamp at 5 a.m. March to near Cassville. In camp at sunset. March 25 miles. 30 men detailed in battery "L" 1st Mo.

Frid. 5

Decamp at 4 a.m. March to Pea Ridge, Ark. In camp at dark. March 25 m. Hard march, boys tired.

Sat. 6

Decamp at 4 a.m. March 35 miles. Arrive at Fayetteville at midnight. Rest 4 hours. Several houses on fire when we arrived. The town was full of soldiers. The roaring of the flames, the crash of falling timbers, the hum and noise of moving thousands, the glitter of bayonets, all presented an awful scene.³⁸

³⁷James Totten (1818-1871), a Pennsylvania native, graduated from West Point in 1837. He began his career as a regular army artillery lieutenant and had risen to the rank of brigadier general in the Missouri militia by the time Thompson saw him. Although Totten gained honors for a few of his actions during the war, his postwar career suggests his alcoholism adversely affected his performance. He was dismissed from the service in 1871 for disobedience and bad conduct; Sifakis, *Who Was Who in the Civil War*, 658-659.

³⁸Fayetteville suffered terribly during the Civil War as it endured occupation by both sides at different times. Confederate soldiers had purposely set fire to many buildings during a retrograde movement prior to the battle of Pea Ridge in early 1862, hoping to deny the pursuing Union forces any supplies. The fire Thompson describes here was likely started by accident, however, since Herron's rapidly marching division had no real motivation for destroying the place.

Sunday, December 7, 1862

Leave town at 4 a.m. March until sun rise toward Cane Hill, when we hear the boom of a cannon in front. We are now in a beautiful valey about one mile wide running nearly north and south. In this valley are several large plantations. On our left (the east side of the valley) is a high range of hills or mountains. On the west side they are not so high. This valey is watered by the Illinois Creek, a small stream. About 8 a.m., the 1st Arkansas Cavelry run into an ambushcade of the enemy in the thick timber on a ridge, over which the road ran, and were driven back on the main colum. We meet them (the 20th Wis. Inft being in advance) as they retreat with the enemy's cavelry in hot pursuit. Skirmishers were thrown out who drove the enemies cavelry back on there main force. The div'n was formed in a corn field commanding the road, the 20th Wis. on the right. The battery fired three shots from here, and then wated for our scouts to come in. Here we laid down in line and I made out my journal up to that time and while listening to the skirmishing in front, I fell asleep. I was awaken by the order "forward!" and we moved by flank to the road and started duble quick for the rebels position which was on a ridge. Between them and our position, which was on the bank of the creek in a wood, was a broad field about 80 rods wide. After shelling the woods awhile, the 20th Wisconsin and the 19th Iowa infantry made a bayonette charge on the rebels batteries on the hill. We streket a cross the field into the woods, up the hill in the face of the battery, drove the enemy from their gunes and on after them when the rebels, having massed several regts of inft. against us, opened on us at short range. Nearly half of both regts fell. Still, we closed up our broken ranks and held them in check for a few minutes, and the roar of battle was now awfull. Our men were falling on every hand. The enemy was recieving reinforcements. No support came to us and the Now Glorious 20th & 19th fell back to our batteries at the creek, leaving me wounded and a prisoner among the enemy. It is now about noon. Totten has just come up with his div'n, and is now pouring shot and shell into the rebel ranks from his batteries on our right.³⁹ I am a prisoner on the field. Herron's and Totten's div'n is sending death and destruction among the rebels from their first position. So continued the battle till 4 p.m. when Gen. Blunt came up from Cane Hill and fell on the enemies left flank. And now Herron's command charged the hill with the wildest cheers. The roar of battle became once more awfully grand and fearful along the whole line, and continued so till darkness came down upon the scene and found the enemy in full retreat, my friends vic-

³⁹Thompson misidentified the commander of the army's Second Division. Totten had been relieved of command on November 27 and replaced by Col. Daniel Huston, Jr.; Shea, *Fields of Blood*, 72.

torious and me wounded and in a rehell hospital near the field. I will here record the names of the noble dead and wounded of my company and the loss of my reg't.

Killed of Co. A, 20th Wis.
 Color Sergeant L[indsey] E. Teal
 Private S[amuel] L. Bowen
 " Peter Huntsinger
 " John. B. Parr
 " Frank Perzifall
 " Wm. Riley
 " R[obert]. C. Taylor
 " John [H.] Weston
 Marker Frank Rice

Wounded, Co. A
 Sergeant Joseph Frame, mortally
 Corporal Lewis Smith
 Private Wm. Hines
 " J[erry] Brandon
 " H. E. Thompson
 " Robert Welshouce
 " Jos[eph B.] Posey
 " Geo. Shaffer
 " Milton J. Paine
 " J[erimiah] D. Chandler
 " Patrick Dean
 " [Erland] W. Hesselroth
 " E[dwin] W. Blake
 " Geo. Pettingill
 " Wm. Brownlee
 " Wm. Morrisson
 " Moses [H.] Philmalee
 " Anthony [Andrew?] Huddelston

Total killed on field 10
 To. Wounded 18
 " Loss to Co. A 28

20th Wis. Inf. Lost Killed 51
 " wounded 145
 " missing 8

total loss 204⁴⁰

Mond, 8th 1862

Gen. Blunt's ambulances came to the hospital and brought away the Union wounded. On our way back looked out of ambulance at the battleground as we pass. The dead strew the ground in every direction and the broken artillery and caissons lay on every side. I see rebel Col. McDonald.⁴¹ Join my company, bury the dead. I found 7 of my company unhurt.

⁴⁰Thompson's compilation of casualty statistics for his company and regiment compare favorably with the official record, as might be expected since it was embellished a year after the battle. There are, however, important discrepancies. Missing from Thompson's list of those killed was James Crawford, the company's first sergeant. Those wounded who died during the following days at the Union army's hospitals in nearby Fayetteville were: Joseph B. Posey, Robert L. Welsouce, and Jeremiah D. Chandler. Wounded men listed as recovering but discharged months later for disability were: Lewis Smith, William Hines, Erland W. Hesselroth, Milton J. Paine, and George B. Shaffer. The wounded who recovered to either transfer or muster out with the regiment were: Jerry Brandon, Patrick Dean, Edwin W. Blake, George Pettingill, William Brownlee, William T. Morrison, Anthony Huddleston, and, of course, Henry Elliott Thompson. Although listed by Thompson as having been wounded, Moses H. Philmalee cannot be confirmed. However, another soldier was wounded that Thompson may have intentionally omitted. James H. Underwood was hit, but after recovering he deserted the regiment on August 10, 1863. The totals from Thompson's company as he recorded them are therefore accurate: ten killed and eighteen wounded, to make a total of twenty-eight. The returns of the entire regiment as recorded in the *Military History of Wisconsin* lists 82 killed outright or mortally wounded, and 123 wounded, a total of 205, a casualty rate of 49 percent. E. B. Quiner, *The Military History of Wisconsin* (Chicago: Clarke & Co., 1866), 675-685; *Roster of Wisconsin Volunteers*, 2:140-143.

⁴¹Emmet MacDonald was a Confederate cavalry brigade commander at Prairie Grove. Originally from St. Louis, MacDonald gained notoriety at the opening of the Civil War when he was captured with other Confederate-sympathizing Missouri State Guard troops at Camp Jackson near St. Louis and subsequently refused to take the oath of allegiance to qualify for a parole. After gaining his freedom by means of a lawsuit, he rejoined the Confederate army and gained further fame by his chivalrous treatment of the remains of Nathaniel Lyon after the battle of Wilson's Creek. MacDonald provided a safeguard for Lyon's body back into the Union lines, an act that led a writer to later state, "The war produced no more knightly a soldier." At the time, Thompson saw him, MacDonald was probably in the Union camp under a flag of truce, a ploy used rather unchivalrously by Hindman to cover the withdrawal of his badly battered army. MacDonald was killed at the battle of Hartville, Missouri, on January 11, 1863. R. I. Holcombe, ed., *History of Greene County, Missouri* (St. Louis: Western Historical Company, 1883), 357, 360; Michael E. Banasik, *Missouri Brothers in Gray: The Reminiscences and Letters of William J. Bull and John P. Bull* (Iowa City: Camp Pope Bookshop, 1998), 143.

Tues Dec. 9, 1862

Still burying the dead. My wound is rather sore. It is a buck shot in my right shoulder near the neck. Three (3) bullets passed through my clothes cutting nine (9) holes, and one (1) struck my cartridge box.⁴²

Wedn. 10

Detailed as ajutant's orderly to day. Dead not all yet buried. Write letters.

Sat. 13

Began to rain this morning. Rain all day. Promoted to corp. at sunset. Still raining, and as our camp is on a low piece of ground we are nearly drowned out of our tents. River so high the train from Springfield can not cross to day.

Sund. 14

Remove camp to a drier place. Wade through mud and water waste deep.

Mon. Dec. 15, 1862

Two wounded boys return to Co. from hospital. Comp. drill. Weather pleasant.

Tues. 16

Hines, Wm. comes back to camp.⁴³ Comp. drill. Bayonet drill. Scouts bring in several prisoners. Dress parade at 6 p.m., first since the battle. Regt. looks small.

Tues. 23

Rained all day and spoiled our grand review, which to have come of to day.

⁴²Thompson's account here conforms with the description of wounds and near misses he gave in his only surviving Civil War letter, dated December 9 and published in an unidentified Wisconsin newspaper. "Correspondence of the Wisconsin Volunteers," vol. 6, p. 125. "My clothes are full of bullet holes—there is one through the sleeve of my over coat, one through my pants below the knee, four through my cap, one through the collar into my neck (that was buckshot, but it is not a dangerous wound) and one through my cartridge box."

⁴³William Hines was a printer's devil for the *La Crosse Weekly Republican* and joined Company A when he was sixteen years old. Wounded in the head at Prairie Grove, he recovered to participate in the Vicksburg campaign but was discharged for disability on November 12, 1863, when the regiment was in Texas. *Roster of Wisconsin Volunteers*, 2:142; "Correspondence of the Wisconsin Volunteers," vol. 9, p. 318.

Thurs. 25

Spend Christmas playing tricks on each other. Have no drill today. Raining all day.

Frid. 26th

Battalion drill. Practice street firing for the first time, for we are going to start for Van Buren tomorrow.⁴⁴

Sat. 27

Leave camp at day light for Van Buren, Ark.⁴⁵ March all day. Road rather muddy. Halt at sunset, cook some coffee, rest. Move on at dark. March till 1 o'clock. Bivouac on bank of a rapid river [Lee Creek]. Weather fine. Our road has been over a mountainous country.

Sund. 28

Move on a daylight. Cross the river. The infantry are carried over on the cavalry horses. Co. A. thrown out as advance guard. Move on and join Blunt at the fork of the road at 10 a.m. Rest. Move on at 12 m. 3 p.m. halt to rest in mountain gorge. Fired on by bushwackers, no one hurt. One horse killed. Throw out skirmishers who drove the rebs off. Move on. 5 p.m. our advance attacks the enemy at Dripping Springs, ten miles from Van Buren and drove them back into town and across the Ark. River. Cannonading continues till 9 p.m. when we halt and bivouac within four miles of the place. Two cannons fired during the night by rebs from south side of river.

Mond. Dec. 29, 1862

Leave camp at 8 a.m. March into town to the tune of "Arkansaw Traveler." March through the principal street and stacked arms on the river bank. Returned to last night's camp ground, got supper, and start on our return at dark. Marched till 2 o'clock next morning. Halt. Bivouac.

⁴⁴"Street firing" is Thompson's term for of a tactical maneuver whereby a regiment advances or retreats by a narrow column rather than a regimental line of battle or a column of companies. While executing the tactic, the front ranks would discharge their weapons, split into two single files and pull back to the rear of the column by trotting along its flanks. This allows the next two ranks to fire, and so on. Thompson's mention of the drill suggests that Blunt and Herron expected resistance on the streets of Van Buren.

⁴⁵After allowing their troops a few weeks, Blunt and Herron wanted to push their advantage and complete the job of driving the enemy from north of the Arkansas River. In late December, they had received word that most of Hindman's army had already crossed the river and camped near Fort Smith, leaving Van Buren lightly defended. The rapid movement of the Union forces allowed capture of the town and several boatloads of supplies. Bearss, "Federals Raid Van Buren," 133.



From *Harper's Weekly*, March 7, 1863. Courtesy Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

Tues. 30

Move on at daylight. Crossed river as before. Bivouac on the summit of the Boston Mts. in the snow a la Napoleon Bonaparte this night. Weather cold.

Wednesday, Dec. 31, 1862

Move on at daylight. Weather still cold. As we were passing a farm house a woman came to the gate and wanted to see the "Old flag once more." Capt. Orme of 94th Ill. was accidentally shot by one of his own men within a few miles of Prairie Grove.⁴⁶ We arrive at camp at 3 p.m. Muster for pay.

⁴⁶Capt. Charles E. Orme, Company H, 94th Illinois Infantry, joined the regiment on August 20, 1862. He survived his accidental wounding at the Prairie Grove camp but died at Jonesboro, Illinois, on January 23, 1864 from unrelated causes. Illinois USGenWeb Project, "Illinois Civil War Rosters from the Adjutant General's Office," www.rootsweb.com/~ilcivilw/r100/094-h-in.htm (accessed July 30, 2007).

In the last five days we have crossed the Boston Mts. in the face of the enemy, have captured Van Buren, drove the enemy across the Arkansas River, captured and destroyed a large amount of army stores, three steam boats, and took a large no. of prisoners with a very small loss. Adieu to 1862.

Jan. Thurs. 1st 1863

Grand parade before Gen. Herron's Hd. Qtrs. Have rebel flag hoisted under the Stars and Stripes, union down. Salute from Battery "E" 1st Mo. L[ight] A[rtilillery]. The Gen. treats the div'n.

Frid. 2

Decamp this morning. March through Fayetteville. See some of the boys at hospital. In camp at 4 p.m. on King River.⁴⁷ March 14 miles. Weather fine.

Saturday 3

In camp today. Receive letters from home. Not very well. Weather fine.

Sund. 4

Sergt. Brown starts for home. Send some letters by him. Weather fair.

Mond. 5

Grand review of this div'n by Gen. Schofield. Had a fine time marching through weeds. Weather fine.

Tues. 6

Ordered to Huntsville. Decamp this morning. Cross White River several times while building a bridge. I fall in. March 12 m. In camp.

Jan. Wednesday 7, 1863

Decamp at 9 a.m. Strict orders issued to boys about confiscating personal property. Gov. [Edward] Salomon's praise for our conduct at Prairie Grove read to us. March to Huntsville. In camp 4 p.m. Distance ten miles.

Thus. 8

Whole regt. paraded under arms to hear orders. Orders of yesterday repeated. Cheers for Col. Burtram. Get straw for beds.

⁴⁷The regiment had actually camped on the West Fork of the White River. The Kings River is east of Huntsville and would not be crossed by the 20th Wisconsin until January 10.

Friday 9

In camp. Unwell. Skirmish drill. George Pettingill fires his gun.⁴⁸
Mail.

Sat. 10

Marching orders. Strike tents at 9 a.m. March 15 miles. Bivouac for the night in woods. Weather fine. Laid down on ground to sleep. Fine place to study astronomy.

Sunday 11

Fall into line at daylight. March five miles. Scouts come back, report enemy in front. Halt. Draw up in line of battle. Expect an attack from Marmaduke, but he did not come, so we move on at noon.⁴⁹ It proved to be a false alarm. March 10 miles. In camp at sunset.

Mond. Jan. 12, 1863

Decamp at 4 a.m., March Carrollton, 7 miles. In camp at 3 p.m. near place. The country has been mountainous to day.

Tues. 13

On guard. Have 2nd relief. Raining. Rather unpleasant time to be on guard, but then it is military.

Wedn. 14

Relieved from guard. Still raining. Write to friends. Turns cold this p.m. and begins to snow. Marmaduke has cut us short of rations.

Thursday 15

Still snowing. Buy a pair of gloves of suttler.

⁴⁸The unauthorized firing of a weapon in camp was a serious matter. George Pettingill, the soldier who had the accident, listed La Crosse, Wisconsin, as his home when he enlisted in the 20th Wisconsin on June 14, 1862. Wounded at Prairie Grove, Pettingill survived the war to muster out with the regiment on July 14, 1865. He served a sentence of public humiliation by being paraded before the regiment on March 29, 1863, while encumbered with a ball and chain, a punishment imposed in hopes of instilling a healthy safety consciousness among his comrades. Moore, *Order of Execution*, 137-139; *Roster of Wisconsin Volunteers*, 2:142.

⁴⁹Brig. Gen. John S. Marmaduke, commanding Confederate forces near Lewistown, Arkansas, started a bold dash into Missouri about the same time as Blunt's expedition to Van Buren was concluding. Marmaduke reached Ozark, Missouri, on January 7, 1863, destroyed the Union outpost there, and then threatened Springfield the next morning. Repulsed by the heavily fortified Yankee garrison, the Rebels withdrew east before returning to Batesville, Arkansas, on January 25. During the raid, the supply trains for the column Thompson was marching in were disrupted. *OR*, ser. 1, vol. 22, pt. 1, pp. 178-211.

Frid. 16

Marching orders. Strike tents at 9 a.m. Get ready to march. Order countermanded. Pitch tents, remain in camp. Weather cold, rations short.

Jan. Saturday 17, 1863

Train comes in. Draw rations this a.m. Decamp at noon. March till dark. Ford a river. A little cold. Jayhawk some honey. Bivouac in woods.

Sunday 18

Move on at 8 a.m. March 18 miles over a mountainous country covered with pine timber. Bivouac at dark near saw mill. Get lumber to sleep on. Rained and snowed all night and we slept under the open sky with nothing but a blanket over us.

Mond. 19

Woke up this morning blanket covered with snow and ice. Some of the boys had their hair frozen to the boards. Detailed for camp guard. Had some corn mush (as the natives of this region calls it) for breakfast. Move on at 8 a.m. March 16 miles. Had dinner from what was left from breakfast. In camp at dark on south bank of White River, opposite to Forsythe, Mo. Snowed all night. Had a rough time on guard.

* * *

Following their service in the Trans-Mississippi, the 20th Wisconsin traveled to the entrenchments surrounding Vicksburg, Mississippi. When Vicksburg fell on July 4, 1863, the 20th, now part of the Union Army's XIII Corps, spent a few weeks in other minor campaigns in Mississippi and Louisiana before Thompson ceased writing on August 15, 1863. He would not resume keeping a diary until May 11, 1864, long after he had been assigned to yet another distant field of operations.

The town of Matamoros, Mexico, stood on the south bank of the Rio Grande, across from Brownsville, Texas, about thirty miles upstream from the river's mouth. Matamoros had become an important part of the Confederate government's supply system, and Union commanders knew the only way to efficiently disrupt the Matamoros trade would be by the occupation of Brownsville. An invasion force of nearly 7,000 men, in-

cluding the 20th Wisconsin, arrived in Brownsville after its Rebel defenders fled on November 6, 1863.⁵⁰

Thompson's company had a lot of fatigue duty to perform during their first months in Texas and little else. Most of the time the Wisconsin infantrymen either worked on fortifications with pick and shovel or simply loafed. Their morale suffered as they realized they had been shuffled off to a peripheral theater of the conflict, and the close proximity of the Brownsville cantinas simply fueled their resentment. One study of the 20th Wisconsin reveals that twenty-five soldiers of a single company committed offenses resulting in court martial hearings during their time in Texas.⁵¹ Thompson himself was temporarily reduced to the ranks on December 15 for undisclosed disciplinary reasons, but he got his chevrons back six weeks later. Thompson found ample time to copy his first diary and discard the original.

By the end of July 1864, Union strategists decided to abandon Brownsville, and Thompson's regiment boarded seagoing transports for a temporary return to Louisiana. They would be needed in the war's final campaign to capture the city of Mobile, Alabama. Two forts guarded the opening passage to Mobile Bay. Fort Gaines, on Dauphin Island, overlooked the west side of the channel access to the bay, while Fort Morgan covered the east side from the tip of a long, sandy peninsula. A heavy bombardment helped convince the Confederates to surrender Fort Gaines on August 8, just about the same time Thompson and the 20th Wisconsin arrived from New Orleans. The Union commander, Maj. Gen. Gordon Granger, turned his attention to Fort Morgan and ordered the 20th Wisconsin to land on the north side of the sandy peninsula to begin siege operations. Their successful capture of Pilot Town, a hamlet just out of range of Fort Morgan's guns, allowed Thompson and his comrades to land all the necessary siege paraphernalia for reducing the bastion, forcing its surrender on August 23.

For the next eight months, the 20th Wisconsin participated in maneuvers to eliminate the remaining defenses of Mobile. The town still had the protection of two strong forts in the northeast corner of Mobile Bay, Fort Blakeley and Spanish Fort, and preliminary movements in that direction sent Thompson's unit on several raiding expeditions. In the midst of these maneuvers, Thompson composed his last entry in his second diary on February 15, 1865, leaving no personal record of the most

⁵⁰Jerry D Thompson and Lawrence T. Jones, *Civil War and Revolution on the Rio Grande Frontier: A Narrative and Photographic History* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2004), 60.

⁵¹Moore, *Order of Execution*, 54.

significant action of the campaign, the struggle to capture Spanish Fort and Fort Blakeley. The regiment joined a long march along the eastern edge of Mobile Bay on March 10, and the investment of Spanish Fort continued into April, with the Union soldiers methodically excavating their way to victory. In all, Thompson's division dug 10,500 yards of entrenchments during the siege, advancing their protective earthworks within a few hundred yards of the enemy's ramparts.⁵² By April 8, the determination of the besieging army had convinced the commander of Spanish Fort to abandon the position, and the campaign drew to a successful completion on April 12 with the capture of Mobile itself. The 20th Wisconsin would travel by steamship an additional 490 miles to Galveston, Texas, before they were mustered out on July 18, 1865.

Ironically, Thompson discovered during this final campaign, just as his twin brother had, that disease proved a more dangerous hazard than Rebel bullets. Thompson reported suffering fevers and chills as early as 1862, but in 1865 his symptoms sent him to the regiment's surgeons twice in March and almost continuously for the month of April.⁵³ After these debilitating episodes, he always returned to post, although in May he spent two days in the hospital before being returned to duty. After mustering out with the rest of the regiment, Thompson arrived home that summer a much weaker man than had left in the summer of 1862.

The buckshot wound in his neck healed to the point that Thompson could earn a living as a carpenter, but the malarial episodes periodically interfered with his ability to work. He followed his trade to La Crosse and Chicago, and at the latter city, on August 18, 1867, he married Mima Jane Odell. The couple moved to Hebron, Indiana, where the first of their four children was born in 1869. All this time, Henry's constitution would suffer from occasional attacks that left him weak and emaciated. One old army comrade who encountered Thompson in Hebron, William H. Adams, recalled in 1901 that "the man looked like a dead man and I did not think he could live six months." Even allowing for rough soldier's humor and possible sympathetic hyperbole in filling out a disability affidavit for a comrade, Adam's other remark seems particularly startling. After he questioned Thompson's ability to hold a job, Adams told the ailing carpenter that "he better get a shovel and dig his grave and so save us the trouble."⁵⁴

⁵²Chester G. Hearn, *Mobile Bay and the Mobile Campaign: The Last Great Battles of the Civil War* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1993), 187.

⁵³Henry E. Thompson, application for pension, 1901, Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Bureau of Pensions, RG 15, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

⁵⁴William H. Adams, pension affidavit, 1901, *ibid*.

The malarial bouts may have convinced the carpenter to move his growing family back to Wisconsin in 1871, but he still had trouble keeping steady work. Robert Gray, a Vernon County neighbor, testified on a pension affidavit that he contracted Thompson to build a house there in 1872 but that he was "unable to work all the time" and had been "troubled a good deal with ague."⁵⁵ Thompson managed nevertheless to earn his living as a carpenter in Vernon County until 1879, when he applied for an invalid's pension, but at that time he did not specify malaria when filling out the boilerplate application form. The blank form specifically provided space to describe the petitioner's wounds, and Thompson simply filled in the facts of his Prairie Grove injury as the basis for the requested stipend.⁵⁶ He would in the 1890s have to provide specific testimony regarding his malaria to the pension board in order to continue his payments, which were a pittance at best.

Apparently, the neck wound did not entirely deter Thompson from swinging a hammer because in 1880 he moved his family to Parsons, Kansas, where he worked another four years as a builder. During his time in Kansas, however, Thompson prepared himself for a less demanding occupation by learning surveying, along with taking the prudent course of any man with middle-class aspirations by joining a number of fraternal groups such as the Grand Army of the Republic, the Grange, the Freemasons, and the Good Templars. By the time he moved again in 1884, Thompson had gained sufficient proficiency in his new profession to gain an appointment as the Holt County, Nebraska, county surveyor. Though working with sighting scopes and chains proved easier on his neck, Thompson continued to suffer malarial episodes. By 1888, he turned over most of his office duties to his deputy. He resigned as county surveyor the next year when he got an appointment as postmaster at Stafford, Nebraska.

The Thompson family moved once more in 1895 to Belle Fourche, South Dakota, where Thompson worked as a surveyor and court clerk. His pension continued to be a necessary part of the family income, and, just a few months before he died, on November 17, 1912, from heart failure, Thompson reapplied for a general service pension that entitled him to an extra fifteen dollars a month.⁵⁷ Thompson left a small estate, which, after the 1916 death of his wife, was mostly consumed by back taxes and liens. Only the headstone marking his grave, erected by the local GAR post in Belle Fourche's Pine Slope Cemetery, and a few scattered documents remain to speak of Thompson's diverse Civil War experiences be-

⁵⁵Robert Gray, general affidavit, June 21, 1895, *ibid.*

⁵⁶Henry E. Thompson, petition for pension, July 9, 1879, *ibid.*

⁵⁷Mima Jane Thompson, widows pension petition, 1912, *ibid.*

fore he slipped into the same historical obscurity that marked his early years.

Far from the most detailed account of Civil War service, the testimony that Henry Elliott Thompson left is nevertheless an important resource that provides a context for veterans who could not, or would not, speak afterward of the horrors they had endured. Even Thompson's terse entries can help us understand by inference how soldiers viewed their sacrifices at the time they occurred. The best example comes from the final page he wrote during the war, composed while his regiment had ample time to reflect on the hazards they would face in the push to capture Mobile. Thompson and his comrades clearly knew the war was drawing to a close, and the coming ordeal must have been particularly painful to contemplate. Like soldiers in all wars, Thompson's motivation for continuing the fight to the end came from a fierce loyalty to his comrades as much as devotion to the cause they served. However, when Thompson tried to put into words his feelings about facing the last test of his regiment's courage, he managed to incorporate both impulses into verse and by so doing, provided a coda of eloquent brevity to his story:

Comrades lets be gay and happy
Let sadness never our motto be
Soldiers should be gay and jolly
Never thinking what may be

Our last campaign is now before us
And we'll bravely see it through
Four our country's banner is over us
And to that we all are true

The traitors power has got to crumble
For Columbia's sons have again
Have formed their lines of battle
And their honor knows no stain

Though Mobile's wall[s] do frown upon us
We will prove U.S. soldiers brave
We'll nobly strik and win us glory
Or we'll win a soldiers grave

Then let the cannons boom their thunder
We will conquer, have no fears
And those men, [who] fall in battle
This shall be a nation's tears

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