

## FROM THE FRONTLINES OF THE CIVIL WAR

Soldier's narrow escape, by Leslie Korenko

The Cahaba (also known as Cawhaba) Prison in Alabama where Union prisoners of war, including Jacob Rush, of Kelleys Island, were held captive.

Most of the soldiers who fought in the Civil War are just ghosts and faded memories, but their stories remain for those who want to listen. Jacob Rush is one of these soldiers.

Jacob was just 16 years old when President Abraham Lincoln called for volunteers in 1861. He immediately joined other men from Kelleys Island and signed up with the 3rd Ohio Cavalry.

Through his letters we experience army life through the eyes of a soldier, including his first saber charge, life in camp and some of the engagements in which he participated.



But his life's story changed drastically as he approached the end of his three-year enlistment.

On Oct. 1, 1864, just days before his release from service, Rush went on one last mission to deliver a request to Nashville for reinforcements in the face of Gen. Bedford Forrest's impending takeover of Columbia, Tenn. Declining to take a horse, Rush traveled by stage, which was set upon by the rebels. "I leaped from the stage to see what was the matter but only in time to find myself a prisoner..." Since he was wearing a new set of clothes, he was first accused of being a spy (and almost shot), then accused of being a

commissioned officer.

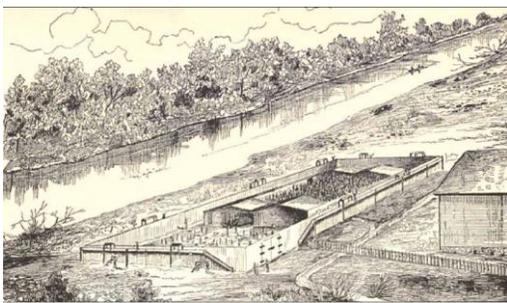
Rush was taken to Gen. Forrest for interrogation. "It did not seem possible that I was standing before the monster of the Fort Pillow massacre." He remarked that during the whole of his soldier's life, he "never received any kinder treatment than from the hands of this same Gen. Forrest."

But that kindness ended Oct. 13, 1864. At just 19 years of age, Rush was sent to Cahaba Prison, a prisoner of war. There he would live through eight months of the most brutal mistreatment found in a southern prison.

At first, conditions at the prison were terrible, but they got unbelievably worse as more Union prisoners were added to the small converted warehouse prison. Not one to sit idly by, Rush eagerly accepted the offer of Capt. Hanchett, another prisoner, to help organize an escape.

Great planning and secrecy was required, and the escape might have succeeded but for the physically and emotionally demoralized condition of the prisoners. At the crucial moment of the plan, many prisoners simply laid down, too fearful to help.

In spite of this, the small band of brave prisoners overcame the guards and captured their weapons. They got through the inner gates to the "artillery," but it was too late, the soldiers in the nearby town were already responding. All hope of escape was lost.



The prisoners were charged with conspiracy by the prison commander, Col. Samuel Jones. Dr. Jesse Hawes described Jones as "a sickening blotch upon

humanity.” Col. Jones, not willing to let this outrage pass, searched, interrogated, and attempted to bribe the names of the conspirators out of the prisoners. He was unsuccessful. Changing tactics, he withheld rations, as meager as they were, for two days, to force compliance. Still the soldiers stood fast.

The leader, Capt. Hanchett, was finally discovered because of a small wound he received in taking the guards. But even under the most terrible punishment, he refused to reveal the names of his co-conspirators. This infuriated the colonel.

When Hanchett was to be exchanged with a Confederate General, “Colonel Jones, who both hated and feared (Hanchett) selected two villainous men to act as his guard, and gave them instructions to find some excuse for shooting him while going from Cahaba to Selma....He was shot down in cold blood before he was a mile from town...” The names of the other conspirators were never revealed.

Meanwhile, Rush and the Cahaba prisoners were facing another disaster. On March 2, the Alabama River flooded the prison. For nine days, the prisoners lived in water up to 6 feet deep. Rations were brought in by boat.

The only way for the water to exit the walled prison was through a narrow fresh water ditch that ran through the prison yard and the water closet that carried waste to the river. It wasn't until March 11 that the water subsided enough to do any cooking. Hawes wrote: “It is true the misery and suffering at Andersonville was awful beyond description, and the tales of woe as related by its surviving inmates seem almost incredible, yet Cahaba was even worse, if human suffering from infamous and inhuman treatment could be worse.” These were the conditions Rush endured.

Less than a month later, on April 5, Rush, along with 700 men, were ordered to march out of the prison. The emaciated, sick men began a forced march that would lead them unknowingly to freedom, but at great cost.

After seven days of marching, the soldiers arrived at Vicksburg and told they were to be exchanged. While officials had expected their arrival, they had no idea there would be so great a number or that their condition would be so critical.

It should have been a joyous ending to the young man's story. At just 19 years of age, he was finally going home. But Rush would still face his greatest test.

On April 24, 1865, Rush boarded the steamer Sultana to begin his trip home. Two days later, at 1:30 a.m., the boilers of the Sultana exploded. There were 2,251 persons on board (2,000 of these were soldiers). Only 550 were rescued, and of that number, 150 died within 24 hours from injuries and exposure. Jacob Rush was one of only 400 survivors.

Rush eventually made it back to Kelleys Island and ... well, these are stories for another day.

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