

## **January 1865 - One Soldier Is Still Imprisoned At Cahaba**

One soldier, however, had not made it home yet. He was still in a Southern prison. By now, Jacob Rush (3<sup>rd</sup> Ohio Cavalry) had been a prisoner at Cahaba Prison, Alabama, for over three months. Conditions were overcrowded, cleanliness was unheard of, rations were barely enough to keep a man alive, and morale was at its lowest.

Rush continued his story. "Shortly after the Battle of Franklin, Tenn. there were about 400 added to our number and new recruits kept coming in constantly. These men were received with the following words of welcome as they entered prison yard. 'Fresh Fish! Lie Down, put your hands on your pocket book!' 'Say, don't take that fellows blanket, let him go. We will have it tonight,' etc. Those who survived the first three or four weeks generally made out to live, but it was like the Paddy's horse that he fed on gravel. Just as he got used to it, he up and died.

These reinforcements to our already crowded prison soon made it a scene of horror. So on the first day of January 1865, with the approval of the Rebel authorities, 20 of our men were made police officers. We were to make our own rules and regulations and the Rebels were to support us in carrying them out. After an hour's consultation, we came to the conclusion that the first thing necessary was to make everyone clean his person and have his hair cut. One thing that added to our comfort was a stream of water which ran through the prison yard. But we found difficulty even then in making the men wash themselves. In many cases we had to drag them to the water by main force and if we had not had the Rebels to back us we would not have succeeded, either in this or in keeping order, as the men were getting so demoralized and almost beyond control. The Rebels seeing that we had finally conquered and were getting the men under our control began to give us more privileges, and at our request gave us a small stove that we might cook for the sick."

Rush represented his time at Cahaba with careful words, but fellow prisoner Jesse Hawes pulled no punches in his descriptions. He also mentioned the unclean men and the lice that plagued them. "There was another pest as persistent as hunger, more disgusting than rats, a pest that crawled upon our clothing by day, that crawled over our bodies, into the ears, even into the nostrils and mouths, by night.

In the whole prison I do not think there were 20 combs, and certainly I never saw a single fine-toothed comb. I had no comb, it was appropriated by Forest's men and I did not know a friend who had one. There was not in the whole prison, to my knowledge, a pair of scissors. A razor was an unknown article, so our hair became long and tangled. Some one occasionally obtained from without the prison a pair of scissors; but most men who wished to trim the hair and beard had recourse to a jack-knife or burned away the ends of the hair and beard by means of little firebrands and coals.

These statements properly precede what we must say upon the loathsome subject of lice. The subject fills one with disgust, and among respectable persons the bare mention of the name puts into the mind a feeling of repulsion and loathsomeness. Persons who have for a lifetime been surrounded by the neatness and comforts of home life can hardly comprehend that any except the scum of society should bear upon their persons these insignia of degradation and filth.

These vermin were in the prison when we entered it; and as Castle Morgan had been used for a prison for many months, doubtless all who had been there confined had had the same experience as ourselves. Even the sand, warmed by the sultry summer's sun, swarmed with the crawling pests; and any person who lay down, sat down, or stood within the prison grounds during the warm, oppressive weather was sure to become conscious of their loathsome presence."

"The plague of lice visited upon an ancient people could hardly have been much worse than was our condition. No Aaron had stretched forth his hand and changed the dust to lice, but the result was the same. One day one of our mess washed his shirt, and to kill all animal life that might be present, he put it into a bucket and poured upon it an abundance of hot water. Shortly after he went to his bed of sand and lay down to rest. A half hour later, conscious that he was again infested, he took care to count the number that had crawled upon the garment from the sand in that short time, and counted sixty-nine. How many had journeyed onto his pants, hat, hair, and elsewhere upon his body, can only be guessed.

I have seen men too sick to give themselves any attention, with hair so full of lice that if the original color of the hair was black, the head of the person would be gray; and if they had

scratched their bodies with their finger-nails, it would be hard to find an inch of skin free from scratches and resulting scabs and scars.

I remember numerous instances where men, reduced by disease and miserable food, would scratch the skin, especially of the head, and a small abrasion would result. To such abrasions (especially as a large number of the men had no hats) flies would be attracted, and upon the scratch would deposit their eggs. Maggots in a short time would be found burrowing under the scalp, and collecting together in bodies beneath the skin, would form tumors, from which when punctured, quantities of larvae, from a few drops to a tablespoonful, would flow out.

I repeat, it is painful to write these facts, it is disgusting to read them; but these pages are the true story of a prison life, the story of hardships endured by men, that their country might not be wrecked."

Rush's description of the prison's source of water, a stream that flowed through the prison grounds, made it sound like the only bright spot in the camp, but Dr. Hawes painted a different picture. He described this stream in more detail. "While the water-supply of Castle Morgan was fairly abundant, since it came from an artesian well of the town a few blocks away from the prison, it was, unfortunately, warm, of a sweetish taste, and impregnated with a sulphur gas (sulphuretted hydrogen), strongly suggestive of eggs 'too ripe.' To many of the inmates the water was nauseating and cathartic; if, however, we could have been assured of its purity the objections to it would have been fewer. Doubtless, the majority of those who drank it attributed all bad tastes to the mineral with which it was known to be impregnated, but from the report of Confederate Surgeon Whitfield, mentioned [earlier], I quote the following: "The supply of water for drinking, cooking, and bathing, as well as for washing, is conveyed from an artesian well along an open street gutter for two hundred yards, thence under the street into the prison. In its course it is subjected to the washings of the hands, feet, faces, and heads of soldiers, citizens, and negroes; in it are rinsed buckets, tubs, and spittoons of groceries, offices, and hospitals; in it can be found the filth from hogs, dogs, cows, and horses, and filth of all kinds from the street and other sources." The prison surgeon, E. H. Whitfield, filed formal complaints about the supplies, sanitation, wood, water and the sleeping bunks at the prison.

"The water entered the prison through a covered trough, or pipe, passing under the west wall near its centre. This trough was covered within the prison until it reached nearly the centre, where a ditch a foot deep, two or three feet wide, and 20 or 30 feet in length, was excavated. Sunk in the ditch were two barrels, placed on their ends, separated from each other by a few feet, with the upper ends open; water remained in the ditch at all times a foot in depth and in the barrels was deeper.

At the east end of the ditch, the water again entered a covered box, by which it was conveyed under the east wall and beneath the water-closet, which was placed outside of and against the brick wall, but enclosed by the stockade. The water-closet, placed against the outside of the prison wall on the southeast corner, was about 15 feet long, 8 feet wide, and 9 feet high, its top covered by a shed roof. The waste water from the inside of the prison passed in an open box beneath the seat of the water-closet, and served as a vehicle to carry away the fecal dregs. The open box extended only a foot or two beyond the walls of the privy, then its contents passed in an open ditch directly to the river."

Even with these 'improvements' in their living conditions, the worst was yet to come. An escape plan was being put into motion.