Every Dark Cloud Has a Silver Lining

By Gene Eric Salecker

On April 27, 1865 the worst maritime disaster in the history of the United States occurred when the sidewheel steamboat Sultana burst her boilers seven miles above Memphis while carrying a load of 2,400 passengers, most of whom were released Union prisoners from Rebel prison pens. Of the total number between 1,500 and 1,700 would lose their lives and while this terrible disaster would forever haunt the memories of those few that were lucky enough to live through it, the inimitable spirit of the American soldier continued to shine through. In spite of the fear and terror of the moment, many soldiers could look back on that awful night of horror and recall a humorous incident or funny event that would help to ease the pain and draw a chuckle at the different reunions held years afterward.

The 2,100 released prisoners were put on the Sultana at Vicksburg, Mississippi on April 24, all day the 25th, and finally docked at Memphis at about 6:30 PM on April 26, 1865. Despite orders to remain on board the Sultana while a shipment of sugar was being unloaded, many soldiers "jumped ship" to have a look around the city or stop in at one of the fourteen saloons along Memphis' infamous "Whiskey Chute." A number of the soldiers helped to unload the heavy hogheads (large casks) of sugar and in the process the soldiers found one of the casks broken open ("as soldiers always do find", remembered Stephen Gaston, 9th Indiana Cavalry.) Many of the soldiers swarmed around the open cask like ants at a picnic, filling anything and everything they had with the sweet substance. Andrew Poudre, 50th Ohio Infantry, filled up a three-quart bucket and carried it away to share with his friends on the second deck while Gaston took so much up to a friend that he estimated that they ate "about two pounds of sugar each" and still had enough left over to store at their heads for the rest of the trip. It was no wonder he was able to say that his "evening dreams were sweet!"

Of the many soldiers that went into town for a taste of liquor, none gave the guards more trouble than a tall, lanky Tennessean (quite possibly Richard M. Pierce, 3rd Tennessee Cavalry). The soldier was brought back to the Sultana rip-roaring drunk and had to be forced back on board the boat at the point of a bayonet. William McFarland, 42nd Indiana Infantry, recalled that the man was so inebriated that he could hardly walk and stumbled about the crowded hurricane deck as he sought a place to sleep it off. Being only twenty years old at the time, McFarland thought it was funny to tease the man and watched as the angered Tennessean tried to get at him and only received a number "of hard licks for his trouble" as he drunkenly stumbled over the other reclining soldiers. Little did McFarland know that he would soon be seeing his drunken friend again.

After leaving Memphis, the Sultana took on a load of coal and proceeded upriver. When she was seven miles above the city, the boilers exploded and the boat caught fire. Despite the panic and the fright, a few humorous incidents were witnessed by some of the survivors.

Jesse Martin, 35th Indiana Infantry, had gone to sleep in the cabin at the rear of the main deck far away from a small collection of livestock. Blown across the deck by the explosion he awoke to find himself on his knees by the side of a cow, looking for all the world like he was getting ready to milk her!

Another person who slept in the stern cabin on the main deck was Sgt. Andrew T. Peery, 3rd Tennessee Cavalry. Peery and a number of friends had removed much of their clothing and had been asleep when the explosion occurred. Hearing and feeling the explosion Peery and most of the others jumped to their feet and ran to the edge of the boat, thinking they were still at

"I could hear the boys that had got into the trees, as it began to get daylight, crowing like roosters...!"

- Joseph Norris, 51st Ohio, talking about his comrades who lived through the Sultana explosion and found themselves in the treetops along the flooded river.
Memphis and would be able to get off. Prey later recalled that Joseph Lackey, 3rd Tennessee Cavalry, did not run with the others but instead stood beside the abandoned piles of clothing and called for everybody to come back and get their things. He swore up and down that if everybody did not get their clothes then they could lay there, for he would not carry them for the rest!

Lewis McCory, 100th Ohio Infantry, must have looked a ridiculous sight as he struggled in the water to save himself and his belongings. McCory had jumped overboard with a heavy iron bound pocketbook containing over a hundred dollars clutched between his hands and the valise holding a "good suit of civilian's clothes" in one hand. Because he could not close his mouth, McCory swallowed a bit of water but "still managed to get along pretty well". Switching the pocketbook to his right hand and holding it "with my little finger and the one next to it" he swam along as best he could, switching the valise from hand to hand as one arm and then the other would grow tired. It was only after he saw one of his friends drown that he finally threw away his water-soaked valise but never his precious pocket book!

One soldier to get off of the Sultana did so in a most unusual way. While the other survivors clung to pieces of the wreck, William Lugeneal, 135th Ohio Infantry, remembered that the crew of the Sultana kept a pot alligator as a mascot in a large wooden crate beneath the main stairway. Knowing that the wooden crate would make a great little raft, Lugeneal killed the alligator with his bayonet and dragged the box over to the edge of the boat. Jumping in chest deep, Lugeneal kept his feet out behind to propel him through the water while he hung his arms over the side and used them to paddle. "So you see", he would write, "I was about as large as an alligator".

While Lugeneal paddled downriver towards Memphis an enterprising soldier figured that he may be able to catch a ride on the floating alligator crate and called out in the darkness, "Here goes your old tug boat." As Lugeneal remembered, "I had tug enough of my own."

Other soldiers also thought about the alligator, but not in the same way as Lugeneal. Ben Davis, 7th Kentucky Cavalry, said that while the boat was burning "the (thought of the) alligator troubled me almost as much as the fire."

Joseph Elliott, 124th Indiana Infantry, remembered an incident that he thought would have been ludicrous at any other time: As several men were floating down the river holding to a log, a horse that had been on the boat swam up and, needing a rest, stuck his nose over the log. As Elliott recalled, in the darkness the soldiers took the long slender nose of the horse to be the snout of the alligator "and rather than keep his company they let loose and gave him full possession" of the log!

Joseph Elliott

A soldier who saw a man using a barrel as a float was George Robinson, 2nd Michigan Cavalry. Robinson remembered the soldier would crawl up a little too far on the barrel and over he would go, still hanging on. The soldier did this a number of times, each time getting a dunking. Finally Robinson heard the man exclaim, "Damn this thing, it will drown me yet!"

Truman Smith, 8th Michigan Cavalry, swam close to the river and heard a strange noise. As it drew closer he could make out the words and see the source. A large tree that had been uprooted by the Spring flood was floating down the river and in the exposed roots he saw three or four men, all gleefully singing "The Star Spangled Banner!"

To make it easier to swim, William Warner, 9th Indiana Cavalry, had stripped off all of his clothes except a long undershirt. Now, as he floated along, he found his wet head getting cold. Suddenly he spied something in the water and swimming closer, he found it to be a stiff hat, similar to the kind worn by President Lincoln. When Warner was finally rescued he must have been a ridiculous sight walking around in his stiff hat and long undershirt.

And who do you think William McFarland, 42nd Indiana Infantry, the soldier who had teased the tall drunken Tennessean should find himself floating next to in the river? None other than the Tennessean himself, still drunk! "A guilty conscience needs no accuser," McFarland thought and figuring that the man "would drown me if he caught me" swam in the opposite direction as fast as he could and his tired arms would take him.

As soon as they could, the majority of the survivors tried to reach the Arkansas shore but found that the low banks had been swallowed up by the floodwaters of the Mississippi. Only the tops of trees stood above the flowing waters and the men were forced to climb up into the branches to draw themselves out of the water. As the sun slowly rose on Thursday, April 27, 1865, many soldiers found ways to make fun of their ludicrous situation: Wilson Fast, 102nd Ohio Infantry, recalled that from sunup till noon he could hear "the boys who were scattered up and down the river...indulging their humor in a great variety of ways." He said some soldiers were "singing old and familiar army songs and patriotic airs; some Negro melodies; some mocking the birds and some sitting upon the rocks, and conscious of their ridiculous plight, raised a laugh among their companions by mimicking frogs!" In fact, Fast remembered, "every living thing that raised its voice above the sounds of the waters...was quite sure to find an imitator of the sound it made."

Up in a tree himself, Lewis Deerman, 3rd Tennessee Cavalry, said he could hear the boys, all up and down the river banks on the logs, bushes and drift, smacking and rubbing themselves to keep warm, and crowing like chickens" while Joseph Norris, 51st Ohio Infantry, remembered that all the time that he was holding onto his perch he could hear boys that had got into the trees, as it began to get daylight, crowing like roosters, and crying "Here's your mule!" (an army expression used to tease someone and suggest that an infantryman was sometimes no better than a mule, always carrying everything and doing the work normally given to a mule).

Being a bit chilled and tired Norris admitted that "it was about seven o'clock before I was able to crow."

As William McFarland sat in his tree
and watched the rescuers going from tree to tree, who should he spot but his old friend, the drunken Tennessean, seated comfortably on a log. As the rescuers drew close the Tennessean asked how far it was to Memphis. When hold that it was only a mile downriver, the soldier told the rescuers, "Go to Hell with your boat; if you couldn't come to help me before now, you had better have stayed away!" With that, the soldier slid off his log and went swimming past the astonished rescuers.

Lewis McCrory, 100th Ohio Infantry, the survivor that had jumped into the water with his pocketbook between his teeth, was helped onto a steamboat and given a drink of "hot sling" to help revive him. Needing more, McCrory went to the bar of the boat and called for brandy as he was one of the few soldiers who could actually pay for it. The bartender gave him a small glass and a bottle but McCrory called for a bigger glass and was finally handed a large beer tumbler. Filling the glass to the brim, McCrory drank the liquid down and then opened his wet pocketbook. "No," the bartender said, "it is free to Sultana survivors." Astonished, McCrory looked at the man and told him that if he was disposing of it wholesale then he ought to charge something!

Joseph Elliott, 124th Indiana Infantry, was taken out of the water wearing only a shirt. His rescuers cut the wet shirt off of him, wrapped him in a blanket and set him near a fire. In a short time Elliott felt well enough to give his blanket to someone else who needed it more and then went to have coffee with the firemen - naked as a jaybird! He was still in his birthday suit when the boat docked at Memphis and a couple of women from the Sisters of Charity came on board. Not wanting to be spotted in his altogether, Elliott hid behind some machinery. Then, as he put it, "here I was protected on only one side, and one of the sisters came in on my flank." Spotted, he was given some clothes and shipped off to a hospital.

While getting off to be a rescue steamboat and climbing into an ambulance to taken to a hospital, William McFarland saw his lanky Tennessean friend again. McFarland was amazed to see that the man "was still under the influence of liquor, after all the excitement of the night." He watched as a couple of rescuers tried to get the man into a hack to be driven to the hospital. Unwilling to go, the Tennessean started a scuffle and knocked two or three of the men to the ground. Finally a detachment of armed guards were detailed to escort him to the hospital.

As McFarland's luck would have it, the ambulance that he was in just happened to go up the same street as the detail of guards. The street contained a number of secondhand clothing stores and as the tall Tennessean was passing by he would snatch up "boots, shoes, hats, caps and other articles from the signs hanging in front." McFarland watched as the Tennessean, carrying his newly acquired wares, was followed up the street by the shouting merchants.

"Dot ish my goat!"; "Dose vas my shoes!"; "Gif me back my bantsl" When the Tennessean finally reached the door to the hospital he turned and threw the items at his feet. "There, help yourselves," McFarland remembered the soldier shouting and as the merchants rushed forward to claim their property the tall Tennessean kicked them in the pants and "knocked them left and right."

When finally released from the hospitals, the survivors continued on their way home and even then their sense of humor remained. As Simon Chelf, 6th Kentucky Cavalry, and a pal walked up the streets of Columbus, Ohio, a man stopped them and asked them what regiment they were with. Instantly Chelf's companion exclaimed, "no regiment at all; just a detail of Wilson's cavalry sent down the Mississippi to catch alligators."

Years later, many of the survivors were able to look back on their experiences and remember the humorous incidents as well as the horror. At many of the Knoxville annual reunions the survivors would recall how Sam Pickens, 3rd Tennessee Cavalry, had traded a live horse that refused to swim away from the boat for a dead mule that floated past. Pleasant Keeble, 3rd Tennessee Cavalry, would recall, "We afterwards laughed with Sam about this. Sam said that swapping a live horse for a dead mule was the best trade he ever made."

Alexander Brown

Alexander Brown, 2nd Ohio Infantry, years later wrote words that could have been written by any of the survivors. "Now, when I hear persons talking about being hard up, I think of my condition at that time - up in a tree in the middle of the Mississippi River, a thousand miles from home, not one cent to my name, nor a pocket to put it in - and, to contrast my appearance into today reminds me of two Irishmen who, on meeting, each thought he recognized an old acquaintance, afterwards found out they were mistaken and one said to the other: 'You thought it was me and I thought it was you, but bejabbers, it was neither of us!'"

In spite of the horror of the night, the indomitable spirit of the American soldier had shone through!

NEW SUBSCRIBERS

Gwen Altwein (desc. of John Dixon, 3rd TN Cav), 3126 Garth, Baytown, TX 77521
Frieda Lindberg (possibly Thos. Botts, 7th OH Cav), 12621 Old Highway 169, Hibbing, MN 55746
David G. McDonald (desc. of Elias R. Kennedy, 4th Kentucky Inf.), 503 W. Lathrop Road, Columbia, MO 65203
Walter R. Shock (desc. of Wm. H. Shepard, 35th Ohio Inf.), 54 Benson Ave., Millersville, MD 21108
Kathy Slack (desc. of Peter Rosselot, 50th Ohio Inf.), 6658 Poage - es Mill, Roanoke, VA 24018
Anne Rosselot Clayton (desc. of Peter Rosselot, 50th Ohio Inf.), 5365 Oxbow Rd., Stone Mountain, GA 30087
Lenore Rosselot Masselos (desc. of Peter Rosselot, 50th Ohio Inf.), P.O. Box 355, Belle Mead, NJ 08502
"The Ghost of Cap'n Mason" *
by Capt'n Billy

Since 1865, Capt'n J. Cass Mason's ghost
has roamed the Mississippi River's muddy shore-line;
and he's been seen from Helena to Mound City, Arkansas,
'round in Devils' Elbow to the Point of Brandywine.

With a dim'lit steamboat lantern in his left hand,
and a rusty ol' bull horn in his right;
I've heard his sad mournful cry many a time
and once, I caught his in New Mattie's search-light.

I knew this distinguished Captain well; his character,
his kindly devotion to passengers, and to his crew,
how much he loved that beautiful packet Sultana,
and his sacrifice I understand, is shared by few.

Yup, I've seen him walk the Memphis wharf
across the river yonder where Hopefield used to be;
wandering along, waving at steamboats passing by
in a rising fog so thick, that a cat couldn't even see.

His hair has turned to silver, he's all bent over with age,
but his endless search for survivors, still lingers on today.
And when this ghostly form appears upon the water
every captain knows, there's trouble on the way.

Though his antique uniform is all tattered 'n torn
those golden buttons on it still sparkle and shine;
wearing that faded captain's cap tilted to th' right,
one can see, he's definitely from another time.

His walk, manner of style, I'd recognize him anywhere,
even with that long snow white fluffy beard.
Sure, he's known to frighten others, this I must admit;
for he is a bit unusual, you might even call him, weird.

Old Man River spitefully changed his course
after he buried the Sultana, beneath th' silt 'n' sand;
Leaving Capt'n Mason's ghost to roam forever,
waving a flicker o'light from a rusty relic,
clutched in his bony hand.

- from the Egregious Steamboat Journal, Nov./Dec. 1992

* the Captain of the Sultana; he died in the disaster.
SULTANA STORIES FROM OUR MEMBERS

New Sultana Remembered subscriber Kathy Slack of Roanoke, Virginia and 7th grade son Joseph have been busy researching their Sultana ancestor, Peter Rosselot (50th Ohio Infantry) and it all culminated in Joseph doing a school project out of the results: The Memphis Herald - Special Post War Edition, May 14, 1865, a great little newspaper that headlines such articles as "President Shot-Lincoln Dead", "Davis Captured - Confederacy Falls", "Lee Surrenders" and, "Steamer Explodes, Sultana Blast Kills Almost 2,000", "Horrors at Cahaba- Prisoners Live to Tell of Hardships", "A Survivor's Story". The Survivor was Peter Rosselot, a French-born Union soldier who enlisted in the army at Mowreystown, Ohio in 1862. In 1864 he was captured at the Battle of Franklin, Tennessee. (Editor's note: The 50th Ohio was posted in the center of the first battle line at Franklin, just west of Columbia Pike Road, near the Carter House. Hood's unexpected frontal charge came right here, at the center of the line, and the Rebels broke through, killing and capturing many (see map, right). (My great great grandfather, Adam Schneider of the 183rd Ohio, was standing behind the 50th a little farther west in the second line of battle and, like Peter Rosselot, was also captured here and taken to Cahaba Prison.) Peter Rosselot did survive his Franklin-Cahaba-Sultana ordeals and was an active member of the veteran's group, the GAR (Grand Army of the Republic) after the war. In the post-war photo of him below you can see that he is proudly wearing his GAR badge. An extremely literate man, Peter contributed his account of the Sultana disaster to Chester Berry's 1892 book, Loss of the Sultana and Reminiscences of Survivors in an articulate and highly informative 4 1/2 page account.

Kathy recently contacted her 93 year old cousin, Lenore Rayot Hare of Cincinnati and asked if she had any memories to recall about her grandfather, Peter Rosselot. Mrs. Hare said, "Whenever I entered the room during a discussion of the event the discussion ended or she was ushered out of the room. Quite often, after talking about the Sultana and the war, Grandfather would go to his room and pace the floor. The topic was discussed amongst the adults but (we) children were not allowed to share in the sorrow of it as it brought back such painful memories." (There were 35 men from the 50th Ohio on board the Sultana. Of these, 17 died. -Ed.)

Kathy, Joseph and her family will be joining us for the first time in Knoxville, and Joseph will bring along a copy of his newspaper to display. We welcome them.

MEMBER'S REQUEST

I recently received a letter from our one international subscriber, Dave Harvey of England. I had asked him to tell me what his Sultana interest was and how he happened to hear of us. In his interesting reply he made a request to our general membership which I now pass along to you: "...I broke my back in a car accident last April (1992) and am now in a wheelchair. (Consequently) I lost my job as a London police officer and will have a bit more time on my hands for research...I got interested in the Sultana when I lived for 10 years in Colorado and worked on a big ranch. My interests have always been military history and I expanded into the US Civil War during my time there. My main US interest was photographing graves of CW generals and I managed about 700 of them whilst there, although I didn't get many done in Michigan (so if you know anyone who can do a few for me I'd be obliged)...Having visited Andersonville and few times I naturally was interested and "devastated" when I first heard of the Sultana tragedy...I guess my interest in the tragedy would be finding out where any of victims & survivors are buried and collection photos of same - so if any of your members can oblige I'd be delighted".

Members, send those photos and letters to: Dave Harvey
14, Cobham Gate
Freelands Road
Cobham
Surrey KT11 2TG
England

(Remember to also send photos of CW Generals to Dave!)
"THE HONOR ROLL OF THE DEAD"


To be continued....

FROM THE EDITOR......

THE ANNUAL REUNION

The Annual Reunion of Sultana Descendants and Friends is fast approaching and as stated in the last newsletter, will be held on April 24th in Knoxville, Tennessee, this being the Saturday closest to the date of the Sultana disaster (April 27). This year we will meet at Mt. Olive Baptist Church, near the original site (if not the building) of previous meetings of the original Sultana Survivors Association. To this end, here is a message for all of us from association founder Norman Shaw:

"Knowing what plans have been made for our upcoming annual reunion causes me to look forward to the event with great anticipation. I think this will be our best meeting to date since we first gathered around the Sultana monument back in 1987. As you read in the last issue of the newsletter, we will unite again at the Mt. Olive Baptist Church on Maryville Pike (see following map). This will allow for more adequate space and facilities and even baby sitting service.

Planning of our reunion for this year has progressed to the point that I can give you a detailed summary of what to expect:

4 PM - Ceremony at the Sultana Monument (in cemetery behind Mt. Olive Church)
5 PM - Commemoration Service in Church Sanctuary
6 PM - Dinner in Fellowship Hall
7 PM - Program (with time for fellowship afterwards)

The program will include a presentation by Gene Salecker which will include his latest research on the Sultana disaster and slides of some of the places where Sultana survivors held their meetings over the years, including the northern group. Gene always has lots of interesting things to share with us. Remember to bring any Sultana ancestor photos and information to share with Gene. Also, we will be treated to a performance of 19th century songs by the Appalachian Harmonizers, a fine quartet of which Peggy Shaw, Norman’s wife, is a part. (Editor)

To date I have received only 18 paid reservations, but I expect over 100 to attend. I think it's exciting to see that some of our folks will be traveling from such states as Wisconsin, Virginia, Michigan, Illinois and Maryland.

Naturally, anyone can attend either or all of the scheduled events, although I feel the most satisfaction will be gained from those present for the complete program.

Again, for those planning to come to the dinner it is essential that the $6. per person reservation be sent in to me as early as possible. Send to:
Norman Shaw
1120 Winding Way Dr.
Knoxville, TN 37923

Don't expect to pay at the door! The meals will be prepared by a member of the church who will cook a fresh meal on site. I think the menu is varied enough to satisfy almost everyone: Ham, roast beef, salad, two vegetables, coffee and iced tea and choice between two desserts. When you reserve, don't forget to include your names!

Expect some of the extras that we had last year which added greatly to the evening. Once again, you'll find Union reenactors representing the 1st U.S. and 15th U.S. Infantry regiments, Jerry Potter will be selling and autographing his successful book, The Sultana Tragedy, and display tables will be set up for the showing of your Sultana-related relics.
old photographs, and memorabilia. at the Monument Ceremony. (Don't forget that Jerry Potter would like to ask all who come to please bring him copies of photos of men who were on the Sultana - in uniform, preferably, but also in later life. He is working toward getting a made-for-TV documentary made on the disaster. -Editor)

The passage of each year finds more and more people with varying degrees of interest in the Sultana story discovering the existence of our organization. I hope we garner potential members from our additional advertisement in the Knoxville Civil War Round Table's newsletter (which is shared by other Round Tables throughout the country), the Civil War News, and even an indirect reference in the latest Blue and Gray magazine in an article dealing with George McNamara's "Dr. Samuel Mudd Newsletter".

Make your plans now to attend the reunion! Each year that we reunite not only maintains the memory of the Sultana story, but also keeps within the spirit of acknowledging our Civil War heritage.

Norman Shaw

Thanks, Norman, for again putting this all together. If you have any questions about the reunion you can reach Norman at:

(615) 693-9544 (home)
(615) 691-6777 (office)

Larry and I are going to be able to come to the reunion this year (last year we were in Europe at that time) and I am looking forward to meeting those of you that have written me over the year...and also those of you who I haven't had contact with. I always love to go to Tennessee in the Spring, but most importantly, I love to meet with all of you Sultana descendants and friends.

I will be working for the National Park Service this summer as a Seasonal Historian at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park in Fredericksburg, Virginia. My duty stations will be the Chancellorsville Battlefield where Confederate General "Stonewall Jackson" was mortally wounded, and the Jackson Shrine (in the same Park) where he died. I hope you'll all drop in and see me there!

Remember: SEND YOUR REUNION DINNER RESERVATION TO NORMAN TODAY!

Pam Newhouse, Editor

---

Take I-40 (near downtown Knoxville) to the Alcoa Highway (US 129, the "Airport" exit, 386B); go south on this (crossing over the Tennessee River and passing the University of Tennessee Hospital complex on the left) - about 2 to 3 miles. Turn left on Maloney Rd. (1 1/2 miles after passing the Southgate Shopping Center) and go to Maryville Pike. Staright in front of you, across the Pike is Mt. Olive Baptist Church. Turn left here onto Maryville Pike and Mt. Olive Cemetery will be about 50 yds. down the Pike on your right.