"I have had hard times but not as hard as Some......."

By Pam Newhouse

(Over the past few months I have received e-mail and letters regarding Sultana soldiers. Some are poignant; others matter-of-fact; all are important as we seek to remember these men. In this newsletter issue I will share these offerings with you. -Editor)

John Halliday of Pleasant Hill, California writes: "Throughout his term of service Samuel Poyseil faithfully wrote home to his wife and three children (under the age of six), living in West Liberty, Ohio. He enlisted in Company E. 95th OVI on August 14 1862. A week after enlisting, and with very little training, the 95th was sent south. They didn't have long to wait before meeting the enemy, and on August 29-30, 1862, most of the regiment was captured at the Battle of Richmond, Kentucky. They were soon exchanged and after a period of reorganization, the regiment was again sent south. For the next two years, they participated in operations against Vicksburg, and went on numerous raids throughout Mississippi and Tennessee."

In early June, 1864, the regiment joined General Sturgis' expedition to Guntown, Mississippi. At the Battle of Brices Cross Roads, Mississippi, Poyseil, along with many other members of his regiment, were captured. This group included Poyseil's brother Will, and brother-in-law Elliott.

Sent to Andersonville, Georgia, a nine month gap appears in Poyseil's letters home. His family didn't know whether he was alive or dead. In April 1865, he was released at Vicksburg. Soon after, he penned his last letter home before he was killed on the Sultana: (Note: Poyseil used no punctuation. It has been added for easier reading; however the spelling has been printed as he wrote it. Clarifying information in parentheses is John Halliday's).

"Parole Camp Vicksburg April 7, 1865

Dear Wife

I take my pen to write you a few lines to let you know that I am still well and I hope when this Comes to hand you and Children will be enjoying the same blessing. the letter I wrote the other day was wrote in hast but since then I have got things in better shape. I have drawn new close (clothes), a thing I was in great need of as I was almost naked and dirty as nigger and as lousy as a dog. But have got to Gods Country where every thing is plenty. the Sanitary & Christian Commission ar doing lots for us. they give us paper, ink & pens to write our friends and Potatoes & onions & Crout (kruit) to eat and we are doing very well. I have now to tell you here I have bin in prison. I was captured on the 11th of June 1864 and taken to Andersonvill, Georgia, a most God forsaken place I ever Saw and turned into a large Stockade without a bit of Shelter from the Sun or rain. I remained there until the 21st of Sept When there was a Speshel Exchange at Sherman's lines, and I went out for exchange. and you may (imagine) my disappointment wen I hear that they would not Exchange the men Captured. from there I was sent to Savanna Georgia and Staid 4 weeks, then to Lauton (Camp Lawton was a stockade prison similar to Andersonville, located in Millen, Georgia) and so on all over the State. I saw your Brother Elliot in Sumpter (another name for Andersonville), but we got separated last fault (fall). but I hope he has bin Exchanged before this and home. He was in tolerable health. I have had hard times but not as hard as Some, for the last Summer I made some money by Selling Cooked rice and other things. And last fault I kept a Butler stand and made a good deal of money. and I bought me and Will good close. but I have had (hard Luck). some one Stole my pocket Book and all my money amount to 38 dolls in all. and after that I Suffered a great deal of hunger for we only got half a pint of meal and half a pint of Nigger peas for one day and that only made one meal a day. I Expect I will make you tired reading Such long letters, but it has bin so long since I have wrote to you that I dont know when to stop. Oh if I only know weather you was all alive and well how thankful I would be. but I hope for the best and am waiting patiently for a letter from you So I will know weather I have a darling wife and little ones yet. I dont know when I shall be exchanged but they are looking for the reb prisoners to exchange for us every day. then we are to be sent to Camp Chace (Chase) and get furlows home. then I can tell you all of my ups & downs while a prisner witch I would not write in a week. Oh my dear Wife how often I have thought "Give my love to all and tell my little ones that Pappa will soon come home to see them."


Died on the Sultana.
of you and my little ones and only wished
you knew that I was alive and that I could
get a letter from you. but you must not
think I lost any love for you. Oh no my
Dear, I still love you and hope Soon to be
with you. I am glad my time is So near
out. only a little over 4 months more to
Serve and I don't think I shall ever have to
go to the front again. Oh wont that be a
happy time wen I can come home to Stay
with my loving family. Noe my Dear,
you must write often to me and I hope the
times wont be long wen we can
get together. Noe my Dear,
Pictures, and portfolia full of letters witch
happy time wen I can come home to Stay
in general were tame in comparison to what
soldiers had to endure in these fearful
prison houses. Starvation and disease were
the enemies to be encountered here and
were two fold more deadly than musket
balls.
I shall not endeavor to give a detailed
description of the routine and monotony of
our prison life. Suffice it to say that we
suffered untold horrors there. In addition to
the want of food, the proximity of the prison
to the river allowed the water, when the
river became swollen from the frequent
rains, to rise up into the building and cover
the floor to a depth of from one to three
and four feet deep. Our building was not far
from some cordwood which our captors
furnished us, and on these pens we were
enabled to keep out of water when the place
was flooded. For six long, weary months
we lived in this dreadful existence, and
ached every day for a breath of pure air and

SAMUEL POYSSELL, C. 1861

boarding these trains we now started on one
of the saddest and most gloomy rides many
of us had ever undertaken. To make matters
worse, the front train was wrecked by being
derailed. We were on this train about two
days. (After then being loaded on a boat)
we arrived at our destination.

This prison had been an old cotton
warehouse in former days, and within its
dark and gloomy walls we took up our
abode, not having the least idea when we
could get out of there.
The horrors of the battlefield and of war
in general were tame in comparison to what
others had to endure in these fearful
prison houses. Starvation and disease were
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was flooded. For six long, weary months
we lived in this dreadful existence, and
ached every day for a breath of pure air and

a sight of the glorious blue sky once
more." He then speaks of the Sultana
disaster:
"The first I knew of the terrible catastro­
phe that had befalled us was when I
awakened from sleep by the timbers of
the upper deck together with clouds of
cinders and ashes, falling on me and
pinning me to the deck, I being asleep on
the lower deck. Hundreds of other
soldiers were sleeping on the deck,
crowded together as thick as they could
find room to lie. The other two decks
the upper and hurricane were likewise
crowded with sleeping men.

As soon as I awakened from sleep, I
found myself fastened tightly by the
mass of timber that had fallen from
above, so that I could hardly move. The
immense cloud of hot coals and cinders
rained down upon us and I could feel my
flesh being burned and scorched as I lay
there, exerting all the energy I possessed
to clear myself from the wreckage. I was
successful in extricating myself, after
being badly burned by the hot cinders
and scalding stream from the exploded
boilers of the boat.

Never will I forget the scene that I
then witnessed. Quickly following the
explosion, the Sultana caught on fire and
soon she was a blazing furnace of angry,
devouring flames.

When the tremendous shock came
most of the men sleeping on the upper
and hurricane decks were blown into the
river and nearly all of them were
drowned on the spot. Hundreds of poor
fellow soldiers sleeping on the lower deck
where I was were securely pinned down
by the great heap of wrecked timbers that
fell upon them and all efforts to rescue
them were futile, on account of the fire,
and many of them who had not been
killed at first were burned alive before
the eyes of the helpless but more
fortunate comrades, who could do
nothing to save them from their horrible
fate.

As soon as I could clear myself from
the wreck, I began to look for father,
who was on the boat with me. I soon
found him and saw that he was badly
hurt, though he had also succeeded in
getting clear of the wrecked timbers. I
knew that we could remain a very few
minutes as the flames were mounting
higher and higher, so I spoke to my
father and told him we would have to try
to save ourselves the best way we could.

From your Husband S. W. Poysell"

Florence Kind of the Woodlands,
Texas, sent a Civil War reminiscence
written by Cpl. James R. Collins (3rd TN
Cav). Collins survived the war and the
Sultana disaster and lived in Cleveland,
TN after the war with his first wife, Kiziah
Seaborn. (His second wife was Nannie
Sarth). He was a shoemaker and harness
maker. The following is an excerpt of this
story printed, curiously enough, in a
Kansas newspaper (he lived in Tennessee
all his life). He begins by telling about
the Second letter. give my love to all and
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From your Husband S. W. Poysell"
We bade each other good-bye, and at once prepared to jump into the river. My father sprang into the water and seized a plank. That was the last time I ever saw him. I made my way to the bow of the boat, and catching hold of a rope that was hanging from bow down to the water, I let myself down into the river. Just as my feet struck the water, a drowning man seized me in a deathless grip, and all that saved me from sharing his fate was my hold on the rope. I saw the poor fellow at last loosen his hold and go down to rise no more.

Then, losing my hold on the rope, I sprang into the raging, chilly water. The spring freshet was then on, and the great Mississippi was out of banks and spread for miles over the country on each side of its course.

Swimming part of the way, and then turning on my back and floating, I went several miles down the river, and finally came to some saplings into which I climbed. I did not know that I was burned so badly until I got out of the water. But when I pulled myself up into the branches of one of those trees, I found that I was badly burned and scalded on several different portions of my body, and as soon as I had left the cooling influence of the chilly water, the pains from the burns became intense.

I had hardly got secure in the tree, before someone called to me from a small bunch of trees near by, and asked me to come over there, that there was a floating log there wedged in among the trees, upon which we could stand. I accepted this comrade's invitation and was soon beside him on the floating log. I then ascertained that there were three or four more men in the trees that were scattered about. One poor fellow who was in a tree a little distance from us, seemed to be terribly wounded, from the groans that escaped his lips, and in a few minutes we heard him strike the water, and then all was still. He had undoubtedly been so seriously hurt that his strength had failed him after he had reached the tree, and he fell into the water to be instantly drowned. We had not been in our precarious refuge very long before we heard a boat coming up near the opposite shore. We screamed and yelled with all the strength of our lungs to attract their attention, but it went straight on, and we almost despaired of being rescued at all.

I shivered from cold, my clothes, of course, being dripping wet, and suffering intense agony from the burns on my body, and never shall I forget the horror of those long hours I spent out there in those trees in the great river, hoping against hope that some kind fate might rescue us from our terrible plight.

It seems that providence must have heard our cries, for some time after daylight we saw, to our great joy and relief, the same boat that had gone up the river and passed by, coming down again on our side and making straight for us. The boat was soon alongside of our refuge, and numb with cold and sick with pain we were picked up and put aboard. (We then went) on down the river to Memphis, picking up men all the way down. Arriving at Memphis, all those disabled were sent to the hospital. I remained in the hospital until my wounds were partially healed, sufficient to enable me to travel. From Memphis we were transferred to Camp Chase, Ohio, the place to which we had started on the unfortunate Sultana. There we were paid off, and by a special order of the war department we were sent to our respective states to be mustered out for his own dear sweet home, happy, Oh! so happy to get there again.

So thus ended one of the most tragic and lamentable events that ever occurred in the history of our county. When the news of that awful tragedy was sent abroad, many a home was darkened with grief and sorrow that had been happy in anticipation of the home-coming of a father, a son, or perhaps a brother or sweetheart.

And those poor fellows who died in that awful catastrophe! ... Seventeen hundred of them were either burned to death or went down into a watery grave at the bottom of the great river.

Dana R. Spencer sent papers regarding Josias W. Jones, a Sultana survivor. He was 18 when he enlisted in the 18th Michigan Infantry (in 1862). He was a wagoner and a teamster. When applying for a pension in 1891 he stated: "That ever since I left the army in 1865 I have been suffering from rheumatism, loss of eyesight, and nervous exhaustion. That in the year 1885, I had a severe stroke of paralysis and ever since have been subject to frequent dizzy spells. That during the war (I was) in prison at Cahaba, Ala., (for) eight months and when I was released my eyesight was almost entirely gone. That in 1885 I have by advice of my physician taken long and frequent vacations from business in order to recuperate from nervous disabilities and that in consequence of the above named disabilities at the present time I am incapable to perform any manuel labor whatever." - Josias W. Jones

Jones told his son about "Picking wheat and oat kernels out the mule manure to stay alive in prison."

His obituary related: "Mr. Jones had many thrilling and interesting experiences while in the service. One of these was that of being sent out to chop wood when he was prisoner in Morgan Castle (Cahaba Prison). He and two other Union soldiers worked all day and were then shut up in a barn with a guard stationed at the door. Removing a board from the floor the three escaped and were soon a good distance from the barn. They were tracked by bloodhounds and climbed trees to save their lives. Caught by their pursuers, Mr. Jones was placed on short rations and the other two soldiers were kept in shackles for some months. At the National
Encampment of the GAR held in Toledo last year (date not given), was the only surviving old soldier who was aboard the Sultana when she was blown up by the bursting of her boiler.

Not all survivors were matter-of-fact in their reminiscences nor did their memories grow sweeter after the war. One such soldier was Winfield Scott Pottle. A descendant wrote of him: "Winfield Scott Pottle (sometimes misspelled as 'Pattie')," was a passenger on the Sultana when it blew up near Memphis. He was sleeping at the stern of the ship when the boiler exploded. He was a member of the Ohio 54th Infantry (Platt’s Zouaves). He was captured while trying to defend General Sherman whom he calls 'Bitter' Sherman in his notes. He was hit on the head with a Confederate sabre and taken as prisoner. He first went to Libby Prison, then to Bell Island, and from there to Andersonville. He describes his agony in his military records.

On board the Sultana, he was thrown from the stern of the ship where he was sleeping next to someone with the last name of White. He and the other soldier clung to debris and were rescued by a fisherman in a boat. His name was apparently put on the dead list and his father who also fought in the war, came to retrieve his body only to find him alive.

He never was the same after Andersonville and the Sultana. One thing he wrote was "I can still see myself as with my own eyes, crawling, weak from hunger and dying of thirst. God forgive them, I can't."

This descendant continues: "He suffered and some of that suffering echoed down to present generations. There are those of us who suffer from the after effects of a war we never knew. His daughter had to take care of him until he was placed in the Soldier's Home in Ohio. She was very bitter because of having to take care of him to the exclusion of all else. So bitter in fact, that she burned all of his things upon his death. She raised her granddaughter because the child's mother died at age 28. The anger and resentment was passed on to this granddaughter (my mother) who grew up an angry woman and who carried on the legacy of abuse to her children. My brother died at the age of 46 because of drugs and alcohol. My four sisters have all been married several times."

The remaining son, who wrote this account for us, blessedly, has a strong religious background and says, "The legacy of abuse" stopped with me. I used God as my ultimate example of how to be a man. Thank God I have a wife of almost 30 years and two great sons. My mother died two years ago of cancer, bitter to the end."

Families whose father/husband didn’t return home endured agonies as well. This editor’s gr gr grandfather’s family, (Adam Schneider, 183rd OH Inf.) had lost its means of support when he died on the Sultana. Adam and Catherine had three small daughters and, blessedly, all found good husbands within their German community in Cincinnati and had long and happy marriages. But the horror of losing their husband/father never went away. In 1904 the middle daughter, Hannah, wrote to the Survivors of the Sultana Association in Knoxville, TN:

"Cincinnati, April 24th 1904

Dear Sirs,

With sorrow in my heart, I will write a few lines to you, and gratefully do I thank you all to remember this terrible catastrophe where, at the time our poor father and husband lost his life and so many faithfull soldiers. He, promising to be at home to his dear ones, never returned. But a friend, died some time ago, lived to tell about it (Michael Conrad). This man, being a very careless disposition, could not for any reason be wakened on any other night, but April 27th always brought him to our house and cry, cry, like a baby. It certainly was terrible. I am with your reunion in spirit and I hope to be with them as long as they live. My father was Adam Schneider, 183rd Ohio Regiment.

Our mother is still living at the age of 80 almost 81 and is making her home with my oldest sister where she would gladly hear from you.

Mrs. Braunwart and all the others"

And so, the tales go on. Every family who lost someone on the Sultana has a story to tell; these are just a few of them. Let's keep on telling them so these men will never really die. ■

THE HONOR ROLL OF THE DEAD

Continuing the original Sultana Survivors Associations' custom of calling out the names of the Sultana soldiers who had passed away since the previous reunion, we carry on by calling out names of Union soldiers from the great state of Ohio:


to be continued.....
We shall meet, but we shall miss him, 
There will be one vacant chair 
We shall linger to caress him 
As we breathe our evening prayer.

When a year ago we gathered 
Joy was in his mild blue eye 
But a golden cord is severed 
And our hopes in ruin lie.

We shall meet, but we shall miss him, 
There will be one vacant chair 
We shall linger to caress him 
As we breathe our evening prayer.

- Popular Civil War ballad

lived, I wonder: Was he able to put this terrible experience behind him, or, like Winfield Scott Pottle, did it destroy his spirit and his health and deeply affect future generations of this family? These are sobering thoughts.

On a lighter note I'm happy to report that Gene Saleckers's book, Disaster on the Mississippi, is selling well and Gene is getting more and more calls to speak. He will come to Michigan in April and address my Civil War Round Table as well. If you don't yet have his book, run out and get it now! And, of course, I'm sure you have long ago purchased Jerry Potter's excellent book, The Sultana Tragedy.

I continue to receive lots of interesting e-mail regarding the Sultana. One such letter comes from a student in Florida who is writing a research paper for history class in which he will describe "the feelings and reactions of people at the time of the disaster, then talk about the feelings and reactions of people today." He says the instructor already knows about the disaster. Needless to say, I will send all he needs and more!

As fall turns into winter and we (up north at least) struggle with the weather during the holidays, I wish warmth and happiness ~ and yours. God Bless!

Pam Newhouse, Editor

FROM THE EDITOR

We are all, in many ways, products of those who went before us and it is important to remember and talk about those ancestors.

The Roll of Honor is one such way in which I try to do just that. It takes a long time to type all the names, but as I do so I try to focus on each name as a person. I wonder what kind of husband or father this man was; I notice the same last names listed and wonder: father and son? brothers? And, noting that one lived and one died (or both died) I can only imagine the impact that this has had on the surviving families. For each one that lived, I wonder: Was he able to put this terrible experience behind him, or, like Winfield Scott Pottle, did it destroy his spirit and his health and deeply affect future generations of this family? These are sobering thoughts.

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I continue to receive lots of interesting

NEW SUBSCRIBERS

• Clifford S. Ely, (desc. of Sgt. John Ely, 115th OH),
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