

A First-Hand Account of Life inside Confederate Prisons

Introduction: I found the following narrative several years ago while researching genealogical records in Vinton County, OH. The narrator, descended from a Revolutionary War soldier, is not my ancestor but instead was the grandfather of an uncle, John Bobo, by marriage. Francis Marion Bobo was born in 1839 in Meigs County, OH; he enlisted in the 2nd WV Cav which was comprised largely of Ohio residents from counties along the Ohio River. This regiment became a WV unit after the Ohio governor claimed he was under orders to commission no more cavalry. With only a couple exceptions I have re-typed this narrative exactly as I found it.

Narrative of Francis Marion Bobo

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Mr. Editor: -

After many years of persuasion I shall make an attempt to write a sketch of my experiences in southern prisons which lasted 15 months.

I started from Camp Pratt above Charleston [WV] about the 1st of September, 1863 with a detail of thirty men from Co. I 2nd W. Va. Cavalry. About one third of them was from East Tennessee with one of their member as guide. The object of our expedition was to slip through to a point on the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad and burn an important bridge and make our escape into East Tennessee, where these men were acquainted.

With the expectation of recruiting a good army and taking them out with us, all of the company started together on horseback and went as far as there was any road; then we stopped and killed a beef and cooked it, had good supper, filled our haversacks, and thirty of us started into the woods before daylight each armed with two Navy revolvers.

The rest of the Company started back to camp with the horses. We could not travel very fast for the reason we had to stop many times and wait for night to come to travel through improved country, shunning all of the houses, never traveling the road and never speaking above a whisper at night.

In a few days, most of our food was gone, so we had to subsist principally on corn. We ventured into an old orchard one day to get some apples and found a man on horseback. He saw us and ran. At another time we met two men and a boy in the woods. One of them said he was a deserter from Lee's army. We let the old man and boy go after taking a solemn oath, and kept the soldiers with us until we were captured.

The night before we were captured we traveled a good part of the night, we went up the mountains and lay down. We had not lain very long until we heard a rooster crow right close, so

we started on our tramp. After going up the mountain which was on the night of the 12th of September, we found near the top a good many ripe blackberries. On reaching the top of the mountain we came to a fine patch of whortleberries which looked like and tasted like huckleberries, but larger. We went down the south side of the mountain until we came water, where we stopped footsore and tired, to stay until night. We did not lie there but a little while until we were fired on. Part grabbed their shoes and ran one way and part the other. Five of us and the prisoners stayed and dressed and kept concealed until they came up close, then we surrendered. There were over one hundred of the enemy consisting of home guards and militia and a few cavalry soldiers. They had been following us three days, but we traveled a part of every night; that bothered them. They took us five down the road where there was quite a little army of mounted men. They found out by someone that there more Yankees in the woods, so they went after them and got all but seven or eight and they made their escape with the guide. The cavalry and our boys soon made acquaintance. Some of them had been prisoners in our camp and had some of our horses; so we were chums.

After getting all the Yankees they could find gathering up fourteen or fifteen in number, they started and marched up, our arms tied behind our bodies, across the country four or five miles to a little town called Marion [in southwestern Virginia] on the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad where they put in Jail. The soldiers were very much disgusted at this part.

About 7 or 8 o'clock that night they brought us some bread fried meat and water. It tasted mighty good to us for had had nothing to eat that day but a little roasted corn.

We had a floor to sleep on that night which was better that we were used to. Next morning we got a little more to eat but not half enough. The soldiers got themselves detailed to take us to Richmond. We were glad of that for they were bully fellows. When we got to the station, the place was crowded with people who came to see the Yankees. Some of them would talk saucy, but the guards took our part, because we were prisoners. So when we had some one to stand between us and danger, we were about as saucy as anybody.

We got on the train and went as far as Dublin depot where they put us off and put us in a guardhouse with a lot of their men. It was one of the most filthy places I ever saw men kept in. They did not keep us there but a few hours until they took us out about half mile, gave us a right good vacant house with a good deal of out door privilege.



Libby Prison

We found many friends among both soldiers and citizens. They brought us plenty of good things to eat during our stay there of about twenty-four hours. Then our old guard went with us as far as Lynchburg, where we stayed again overnight. The guards told us that we could take our money when we got to Richmond. We doubted a little but found it to be true. They took all they could find handy, purses and all, with penknife and combs. They put us in Libby prison and building, on the ground which was frozen. I had not been in but a little while until some man tapped me on the shoulder from behind, and who should it be but old Elmer Armstrong. He was taken at Winchester and was a sutler in the 116th Ohio, if I have

not forgotten. He had been there for some time and looked pretty bad. He had the back and shoulder lining padded with greenbacks and wanted to get rid of them. The officer of the regiment wanted the money, so I would go in the privy with him and cut the money out for him. The men above had a hold cut through the floor, through which let a string down. He tied his money to the string and they would pull it up; so he got rid of his money that way.

And that reminds me of a circumstance that happened on the lower floor a few days before. They had sweet potatoes in the cellar. The prisoners cut a big hole through the floor, took a block and drove a few nails into it, then pull on the block, tied a string to the block, let it drop on the pile, then pull up the block. They stole potatoes a good while before they found it out. the night we landed in Libby we got our first mess of peas. They were all shapes and colors. They all had one or more bugs in them. We skimmed the bugs off the first mess but soon quit that. We did not stop at this place only a few days until we were taken over on the island.

I left Libby prison about the 18th or 20th of September 1863 and was taken over to the Isle, being taken over on a flatboat pushed, pulled and paddled by hand. There was quite a land on this Isle, eight or ten acres in all. But the prison contained only about three acres on the lower part nearest the city, with room in front for headquarters, with commissary and cook house on the river bank.

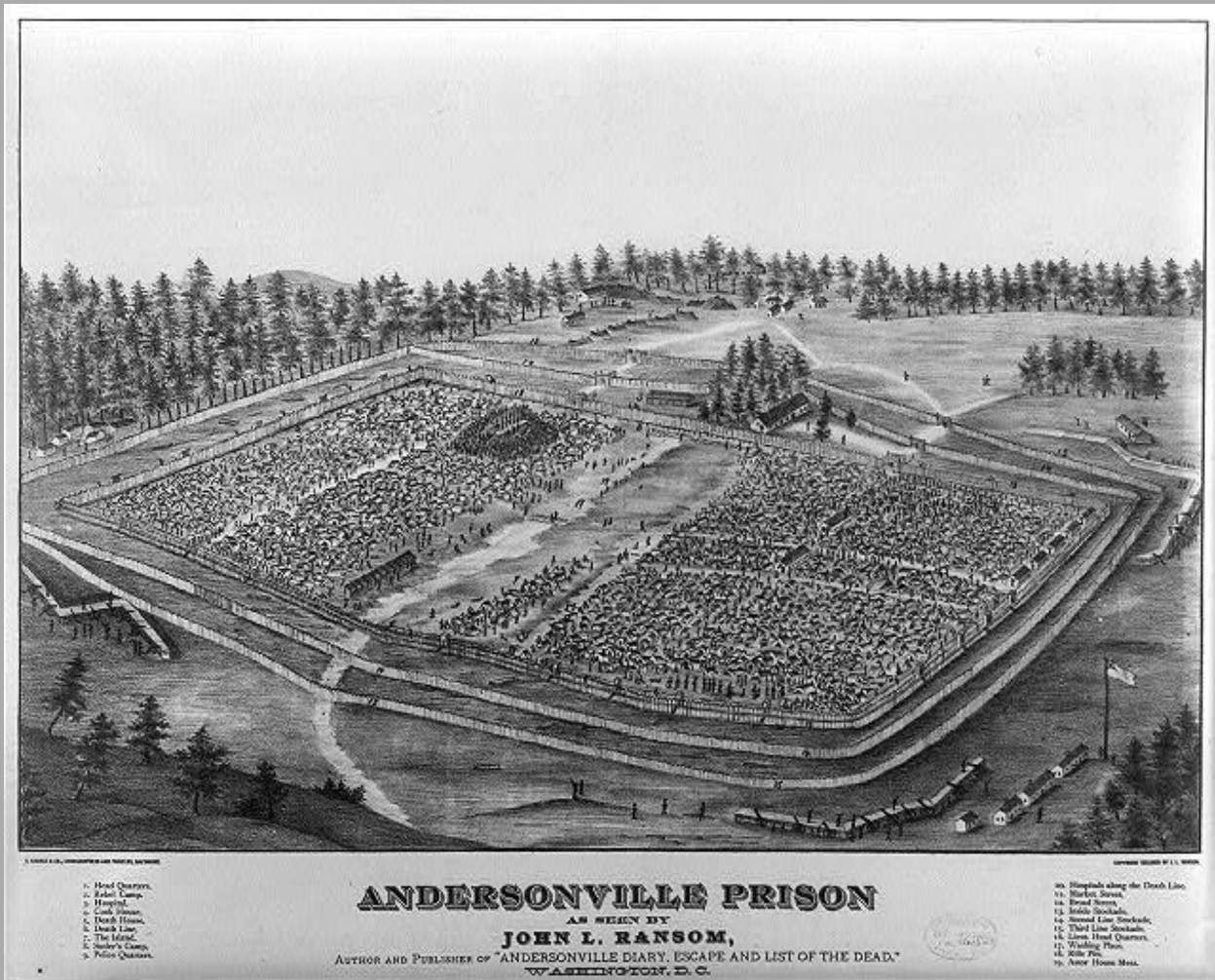
The prison was enclosed by an embankment, the dirt being taken from the inside which made a ditch varying in width and depth from two to four feet deep and six to twelve feet wide. When we marched inside the prison the first thing we saw was that nearly all the prisoners were sitting down with their shirts off killing lice and cracking nits, a job which had to be attended to once or twice every day, if possible for the lice were so thick that you could see the sand move where it was dry and warm and see them crawling on top.

The prisoners flocked around us to beg and buy tobacco. They soon got about all the tobacco we had. We had plenty, for guards that brought us to Richmond had given us all they had. That was about all they had to give us in return for pen-knives, combs and gum blankets which they thought we did not need; but we found out better afterwards.

Fortunately for us there were but few prisoners on the island. At that time, there were a good many vacant tents; so our guard of fourteen got possession of one. We had access to the river at one place to get water. There were a good many shallow wells inside. We got a pint of pea soup, one half peas and one fourth of a loaf of bread for supper. For our breakfast, we received one small piece of meat and one fourth loaf of bread. The meat was all from the fore-quarters of beef and mutton and very small ones too.

About the time we went, the exchange [of prisoners] stopped and the pen soon filled up. Not half of them had any kind of shelter and but little clothing. It was getting cold and there was no wood. Clothing and blankets were sent us, but not enough to go around, so they tried to give to those who were nearest naked, but that did not succeed very well. Some that were most needy got the least. Those that had tents with ten to twenty fared pretty well we thought. Fourteen of us slept in one tent under three widths of blankets sewed together. All had to lie one way. As it got colder, we bunched together like hogs down in a ditch, covered up with anything we could get hold of and lay there nearly all the time. They got a little wood, enough to make a few smokes. they kept turning in more prisoners. We began to get corn bread part of the time, no meat but a

little sorgum instead, very poor in quality. Salt was a very scarce article. The guards would sell it to the prisoners and they would peddle it at two or three spoonfuls for five cents in our script or fifty cents in Confederate script. We got smallpox in the pen and they vaccinated all of us and that killed a great many. We had to wash in cold water without soap and never got any soap or salt unless we bought it. There was not one fourth of us who had any money. That was the cold winter of '63 and '64. The river froze over so they could not cross. They took the strongest prisoners out and compelled them to carry wood enough to keep three or four fires burning most of the time. Only a few could keep warm at a time. The strongest ones massed themselves together and would trot up and down the main street until they got tired, then would crowd together and rest, and then go again. Others would crawl into the tents and beg for room to sit or stand out in the cold air. A great many were too weak to make any struggle for their lives, so they piled down on the ground in the ditches and there nearly all the time. They were freezing to death all the time. They quit giving anything except corn bread and peas and a little black sorgum. Meat was a thing of the past; but I have seen (old-mold?) bread handed out to the guards while on duty around the prison without any meat and they ate it as if it tasted good.



I have read a great deal about Andersonville. Of course, the death rate was greater there, and is it any wonder, when it was filled up at first with men taken from such places as Belle Isle, Danville, Libby and Pemberton buildings and others? It is now February in 1864 and I start to

Andersonville. We are taken over the river to the city, put in Pemberton building three or stories high, kept there two or three days to await transportation, I suppose. It is very cold weather and nothing provided to keep us warm. The prisoners would [build] little (nat-nut?) fires in the center of the floor space by laying sheet iron on the floor and tearing off shingles, or anything to get smoke. There was no place for the smoke to get out, and it would get so thick we could not see over a foot from the floor. WE had to keep our eyes shut about all the time we were there. They put us a box car, crowding us in so close we could not lie down. When we got near Raleigh, they let us out to rest a day and night and to feed us. They marched us to a big clearing where the timber was chopped and ready to pile and burn. It was level ground with a little snow and water in places. I saw a man there who was down in a puddle of water. He was an old country man, crazy and nearly eaten up with lice. They took him to the fire, sheared his hair and beard of which were stiff with lice and nits, stripped off his clothes to dry him and there was a bunch of lice between his shoulders that had to be scraped off with a knife.

The next place we stopped was Andersonville. We were among the first that went there. The inside was covered with brush and tree tops, having been a thick pine forest and the timber was taken for the stockade. It was a paradise to us -- plenty of small timber to make small houses and plenty of wood to make fires to bake corn bread. We got a pint and half of meal and fresh beef for our ration; sometimes a little rice; sometimes sweet potatoes; no salt to put into our meal; no sugar for the rice, no butter for the sweet potatoes. Our meal was not ground cob and all, but there was a good deal of cob, and not sifted. The beef was composed of shank bones and little fore quarters of sheep, shipped in boxes; and it was spoiled more or less. When the weather for warmer, it smell loud and the green flies were plentiful.



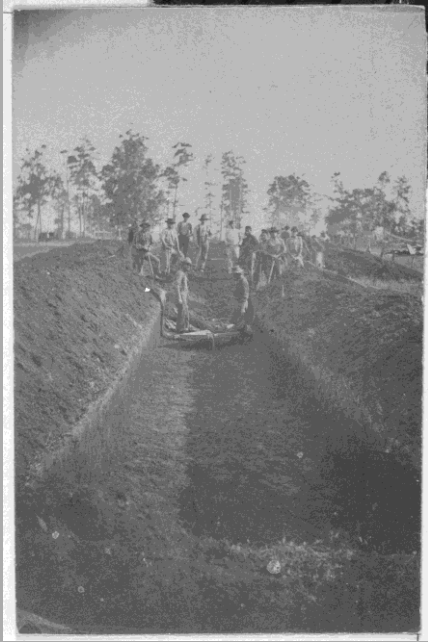
The pen was about forty by eighty rods, longways north and south. A ravine running from west to east with the privy at the lower end and the swap from two to four rods wide on the north side. The prisoners built shanties right up against the stockade. Everything went along smoothly for a little while, when the boys began to dig out from under the stockade. Then the guards kept them away from the wall and drove stakes and tacked railing on about a rod from the wall, and called that the 'Deadline'. No one was allowed to go closer than that to the wall. Still they would dig down in their tents and tunnel

under the wall. Prisoners kept coming in every day by hundreds and thousands. The wood melted away, the water got Warm.

They began to dig shallow wells along the ravine, kept going farther and digging deeper until they dug wells from thirty to forty feet deep.

After about a month they had a cook house and kettles set to make mush and ovens to bake bread, and commenced to give us bread, mush and meal, but no salt in it. They gave us a little bacon instead of spoiled beef. They got prisoners to go out and do most of the work by giving them all they could eat. The prisoners began to die, fifteen or twenty a day. We carried them off of the camp and laid them inside the Deadline at the big gate where they hauled in the provisions. Then there were stretcher bearers to take them to the cemetery under guard. The

prisoners did all this work. There were always a lot of dead at the gates. When the bodies lay over night their clothes would be covered with lice on the outside. Prisoners kept coming in until they had to enlarge the pen about one third. The number of deaths increased so they could not carry the bodies to the cemetery; so they carried them outside the pen; so they could haul them out by the wagon load. Sometimes the teamsters would leave then a number of them out over night.



How They Buried the Dead

One afternoon, there was quite a stir over at the south gate; later we found they had been carrying LIVE men out and laying them down with the dead. so that night they got up and walked off. I think they caught about all of them with the hounds, but they always kept a guard with the dead after that. I stayed on the north end of the pen and I could look over the prison wall at the south gate and see the prisoners coming from the depot to the prison gate. We could tell as soon as we saw them whether they were old prisoners. The old prisoners always would have large bundles carrying. They would bring the prisoners from the station to a level piece of ground outside the gate, where they would search them. Then we would line up inside the gate entrance to see then come in and hear the news from the outside and look for friends.

I heard them tell friends how they hid their money. One had a nice bunch of money in his hand. There was lots of money brought in. Old prisoners picked up everything that they could carry -- axes, saws and hammers, so they had most every kind of tools.

(To be continued)

The narrator lived for another twenty years and after the Civil War fathered seven children. Unfortunately I have never located any subsequent installments he might have written.

Andersonville, properly named Fort Sumter, was situated northeast of Americus, GA, and consisted of 16 1/2 acres before being enlarged to 26 acres. During the summer of 1864 there were 32,899 prisoners but the adjacent National Cemetery has 12,912 graves, probably not all of those who died at the prison.

In April 1865 the S.S. *Sultana* carrying some 2031 (six times its capacity), mostly Federal soldiers recently freed from Southern prisons, including Andersonville, burned and exploded. At least 1,238 died, the worst mishap ever on the Mississippi River.

The prison's commandant, John Wirz, was executed in November 1865, the only execution because of the war.