

REMINISCENCES of THE BATTLE OF BENTONVILLE

"About the 14th of March, 1865, Col. Joe Wheeler's men passed down the road from Averasboro to Goldsboro. My father's country home was located about half-way between those places, where that road was crossed by the Clinton and Smithfield Road, giving access to the home from four different directions. Our home was one of those very large, perfectly square two story buildings, of ye olden time, when the servants prepared the meals away down in the kitchen and took them up to the 'Big House,' as they expressed it.

When Wheeler's men reached our home, tired and hungry, they went immediately to the kitchen, took the breakfast, and ran off the cook. Their explanation was, that Sherman's army was just behind them, and would have us and all our belongings in their possession. Hence we told them to take what they would for both horse and rider. They remained in our neighborhood several days, and took their meals from our table, treating our family with utmost respect.

About the same time, General Hampton and his staff spent a day and night at our home. Sherman's army was expected hourly. They had heard of our Confederate guests, as we termed them, and it grew within their hearts a hatred that knew no bounds.

In the afternoon of March 19, 1865, Wheeler's men, unknown to us, were resting in a plum nursery, about two hundred yards away, when seven drunken Federal soldiers came to our home seemingly to torment us. Two of them took my father before then, tramping him down with their horses, making him rise, to repeat the insult, and swearing they would kill him. We plead with one, who was not so intoxicated, to follow and save him. The other four were threatening, at the point of guns, the lives of mother and children. Wheeler's men heard our screams, and swore they would rescue us at the risk of their own lives. They saw we were on a lower veranda, and they poured a volley into our home, too high to reach us. They ran up, shooting one yankee from his horse, and took the other three prisoners. Then they came back to comfort us, whistling *Dixie*. They took the prisoners into the woods and gave them a 'Furlough,' they said. My dear old mother begged for the lives of her persecutors, saying, 'They are not fit to die.' One Dixie boy said, 'Woman, how can you?'

Our family, then at home, comprised, father and mother, two daughters and three small brothers. One older brother, Dr. M.W. Harper of Dunn, N.C., had enlisted in 1861, as a 16 year old volunteer. He went all through the war, was wounded at the battle of South Mountain, Md., and, being unable for service, was at home at the time referred to. Knowing Sherman of old, however, he decided not to be his prisoner, hence selected the best place for hiding---in a distant wood, under the bark of a massive pine tree. There he lay for days, without food, expecting every hour to be sabred, for the boys in blue were probing the ground in twenty feet of him.

Another brother, Dr. H.D. Harper, Sr., of Kinston, N.C., was then in service in Eastern Carolina as a courier for Col. Stephen D. Poole.

The general in command of the Federal troops allowed us no guard, and after looting every nook and corner of the whole plantation, the blue-coated scavengers made fire beneath our home, thinking to drive us out, but we did not go. One good heart among them saved our home, not knowing that so soon it would shelter their own sufferers.

By this time -- noon of the 19th -- the great Battle of Bentonville was on the way. The line of battle that had been formed across our grounds had been advanced as the Confederate boys marched for death, those fearful yells, the awful roar of the cannon, the hurtling grape and canister scattering destruction everywhere, made an impression that can never be described, and today rests in the memory as a funeral dirge. Only a few hours, and our home was being filled with the bleeding and dying from the Federal lines. After the battle was over, the army remained several days, removing their wounded to Goldsboro. Our Confederate wounded were prisoners, and still on the bloody field of battle.

My father offered his home as a hospital for them, and fifty-four heroes, some dying and some soon to die, were brought by their enemies to our hearts and hands. My mother and two daughters nursed them each day and night, dressed their wounds, cooked for and fed them for eight to ten days before any nurses came. We sat by and saw them die, loving and comforting them, as we would our own.

The Federal army furnished provisions, of course, for them and from their supply, we were saved from starvation. Twenty-three of the fifty-four died, and we wrapped their blankets about them, and laid them in the cold, cold ground. I must make special mention of one---Lieutenant Willie D. Reid, of Washington, N.C. On the day of his arrival, he asked me to be his nurse, and though I was only a child of fourteen years, he was my special charge for nearly two months. In his delirium, he talked of battles, of death, of home and mother. He professed faith in Christ, and expressed himself 'at peace with God.' On the day of his death, he asked me not to leave him, saying, 'It will all soon be over.' During the hour of dissolution, he exclaimed: 'Oh, if I could only see mother once more, I'd be willing to go.' (His mother soon followed him [in death].) I sat by his side until his soul passed into eternity. Not more than one hour after the burial was over, Willie's father came, almost heartbroken. He had been near Smithfield for several days, trying to get through the Federal lines. He brought many delicacies for his wounded boy, but all the efforts of physicians, nurses and friends could not keep him. Willie, the last of the twenty-three, was laid beneath the sod, one lovely morning in sunny May. We praised the Lord for his triumphant death; but our hearts are wrung even unto this day, when we remember the horrors of death to some of those brave soldier boys.

But in those days, we did not have time to weep and be sad, there were others to be nursed into health. We continued our work day and night, and one after another would say, 'I am strong enough to start for home.' By June 30th, 1865, we had said goodbye to the last dear boy in gray. And though the journey on foot was long for some of them, pale and emaciated as they were, yet it was real glory to watch those happy faces, as they shouted 'Hurrah! Hurrah! We're going home.'

Some years after, the bodies of our twenty-three heroes, and many others, were moved from their first resting place, and given each his own six feet of earth in our family burying grounds. A beautiful monument has been erected there to their honor and memory. The names of our noble twenty-three were engraved upon it. Also, space was given for the names my father and mother-----John and Amy Harper---which were beautifully engraved therein, as a memorial to their many sacrifices and unwavering devotion.

Kinston-----Mrs. B.W. Hatcher, nee Mary F. Harper

President of the A.M. Waddell Chapter UDC

No date on record found in the NC Dept of Archives & History

