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# THE PALIMPSEST

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## With Gager in Georgia

John T. Gager died on November 24, 1939, at his farm home in Bethel Township, Fayette County, Iowa, near the village of Alpha, where he had been prominent in the community for almost seventy years. He was at the date of his death thirteen days past his ninety-ninth birthday. He had been for some years the oldest person residing in Fayette County, and so far as known attained a greater age than any other man who ever lived in the county.

But the fact which gave his passing the greatest significance was that he was Fayette County's last surviving veteran of the Civil War. For twenty months before his death he was the county's only surviving man of the army which marched under the banner of the Union in the war between the States. His death occurred almost seventy-five years after Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox.

Mr. Gager never failed to vote at a general

election or primary, and not even when he was at his ninety-eighth milestone did he consent to use an absent voter's ballot, but insisted on riding to the country polling place. At age ninety-five he went swimming with his grandchildren in a pool in an abandoned quarry. Throughout his diary the pleasure he derived from reaching a river in which he could swim is frequently recorded.

He was twice married. By his first wife he had ten children, of whom only one survived him, his son, Ernest Gager, at whose home he died. For many years he lived with his son Charles and family on the Gager homestead where he first located in 1872. Charles died only ten months before his father did.

Born in Broome County, New York, November 11, 1840, John T. Gager came with his parents in 1851 to Brush Hill, DuPage County, Illinois. There he enlisted in the Union Army, and there he returned after the war, married, and farmed for seven years. Then he and his family moved to northwestern Fayette County, where he remained for the rest of his life. He farmed, operated a grist mill at Alpha, and developed a mile-long lake and camping resort on Crane Creek above the mill dam.

He was the first superintendent of the Alpha Sunday School. He was a member of the Con-

gregational Church and the Good Templars Lodge when those organizations existed in the village.

But all these matters are by the way. This is not an obituary sketch. It was as a veteran of the Civil War that he was best known to the public, and his own heart interest was largely centered in that conflict. He was the last commander of the Fayette County Veteran Association, and in his ninety-fifth year was serving in that capacity when the association held its fifty-fifth and final reunion in West Union on August 15, 1935, with all of the county's six Civil War survivors present.

John T. Gager enlisted July 29, 1862, in Company B, 105th Illinois Infantry, and served until June 7, 1865, thus participating in all but the first year of the war. For each of the four calendar years during part or all of which he was in the Army, he kept a diary, in a little book about a quarter of an inch thick, with pages two by four inches in size. Each page had room for the entries for three days, about thirty words to the day.

Home from the war, John T. Gager deposited his four volumes of diary in a desk, the drawers of which were locked while the house was occupied by renters for a few years. When the family returned, they found the desk drawers had been broken open and some articles taken. Among the

things that disappeared were three volumes of the diary, those for 1862, 1863, and 1865. Fortunately, the single volume that was left was the one for 1864, when Private Gager participated in the Atlanta campaign and Sherman's March to the Sea. This little diary is now the property of, and in the possession of, Mrs. Helen Gager, widow of the son, Charles Gager.

The seventy-eight years that have passed since 1864 have not served to dim the writing, and almost all of the book's nicely written entries are still perfectly legible. Nor is its good state of preservation due to lack of use, because several interested persons have had the privilege of going through it, and Mr. Gager himself referred to it often, reliving his soldiering days again and again. He was so familiar with its contents that even after he was past ninety years of age a casual inquiry as to where he was and what he was doing on a certain date would bring an almost word for word recital of the entry.

The reader of the diary is struck with the ability of an intelligent man to put into thirty words a day a story of the activities of General Sherman's army which enables any one familiar with the history of those campaigns to follow pretty closely the progress of the fighting. The soldier of those days of course had a much better view of the mili-

tary ensemble than any soldier can have of the large scale operations in present-day warfare. Armies were incomparably smaller then than now. The contacts between the common soldier and the higher officers were more intimate. The military movements were much slower. The effective range of weapons was a small fraction of the present distances. For all these reasons, the private soldier had a close-up view of what was going on and understood the general strategy and tactics of a campaign.

Private Gager began his diary with the entry: "Friday, January 1, 1864, Finds the 105th Ill. Vol. comfortably quartered at Fort Steele (4 Co's inside) where we have been since Aug. 19th, 1863. John Kenyon arrived from the North last eve. Brot me a Box & letter."

The diary of a soldier's life if repeated in complete form would tire the general reader by its monotonous repetition, especially in the early part of the year 1864, before the big military movements were started. Still, to one especially interested in Civil War history, there is cumulative effect in the brief statement each day of the hours kept, the number of miles traveled, the kind of roads, the mud or the dust, the rain or the sunshine, the drills and the guard duty, the detail to picketing, and the side activities such as attending

religious meetings or going to a city on leave. All taken together they drive into the mind a vivid consciousness of what in those years a soldier's day-by-day life must have been, except when the fighting was hardest. A few sample entries are as follows:

January 11, 1864. "Had Dress Parade last evening at 4 o'clock, the first one this year, 64. Owing to so much flooding ice in the Ohio, we recd. no mail today. Dress Parade at 4. Weather warmer. On Guard."

January 14. "Nothing unusual transpired today to awaken the dull monotony of camp life, especially when we stay so long in one place. Weather Pleasant."

February 6. "Signed our Pay Rolls this morning, think we will get our pay soon. Received a letter from Charley. Some rain last night, cool today. On duty."

February 24. "Our marching orders were genuine this time. Left the Fort at 7 A. M., marched  $3\frac{1}{2}$  miles, and camped for dinner. Marched  $4\frac{1}{2}$  miles farther and camped about 3 P. M."

February 26. "Broke camp this morning at daylight. Passed the Stone River battlefield at 10. Reached Murfreesboro at 11 A. M. Camped near the town for the day. Pleasant."

February 29. "Rained all night and is raining

still. Started as usual, marched through a hilly country, and reached Tullahoma at 3 P. M. hard time to camp. Rained hard all day."

March 4. "Had a pretty hard march today in the Mts. Started at  $\frac{1}{2}$  past 7, the 105th in advance. Camped on the eastern slope of the Mts. at 3 P. M. after 10 miles of hard marching."

March 9. "Started this morn. at 6. Crossed the Tenn. R. on pontoon bridges. Passed the Ala. line into Tenn. Hundreds of dead mules along the road. Marched 11 miles and camped near Tenn. R."

March 11. "We are done marching for the present. Over 200 fell out of the Brigade on the hard march yesterday, having marched 20 miles over a mountain road in Georgia. Changed clothes & washed today. Rec'd. a letter from home. Have a pleasant camp. All well."

On February 23rd he reported that he had "had a good time down to the Capitol last night," when there was a Washington's day celebration in Nashville. On March 12th, 13th, and 14th he reported "the whole regiment at work" splitting stakes and raising tents, and declared "our camp is a very pleasant one for Lookout valley."

On March 17th he went up the side of the mountain and got pine trees to set out on the company street. On March 19th the brigade marched



in review before Generals Hooker and Howard. After reporting six inches of snow and a hard freeze, he stated on March 28th that he was "the sickest I ever was in my life." On April 2nd, though he had a skirmish drill at 9, company school at 2, and dress parade at 5 he "read a good story in the Novelette."

On April 13th "a party of us went up on Look-out and had our pictures taken." On April 25th he reported that "There has over 30,000 Troops passed here in the last 3 weeks."

With a campaign in prospect on May 5th he reported the position of his regiment as "2 miles south of Ringgold, 7 miles from Tunnel Hill, and 14 from Dalton." The entry for May 7th is: "Started at daybreak on the Nickajack trail. Crossed Taylor's Ridge at 10 and drove in the Rebel Pickets that were stationed there. No engagement today." On the next day he says: "Did not move all day, but were held in readiness. Geary's Div. were engaged all day 4 miles from here at Dug Gap. Our loss 500." And one day later, "Were in line of battle all day, but did not move." On May 11th "Our Division came along at  $\frac{1}{2}$  past 6, we fell in our proper place, marched 10 miles and camped in Snake Gap. Cut out the road thru the Gap." On May 12th he ends an entry, "80,000 troops here."

May 15. "This morning we were marched around to the extreme left. 3d Div. of 20th Corps ordered to charge a Fort. The charge began at noon and took the Fort, but could not take the breastworks beyond. Loss heavy." Next day: "The whole Rebel army evacuated their strong works last night. Our brigade moved on the Battle Field and buried the dead of both Armies."

May 17. "Started at 4, crossed the Chattahoochee River on a ferry boat, marched 15 miles and camped for the night. The Rebs are not far ahead of us."

May 18. "Started early, marched 17 miles, overtook and skirmished some with the Rebs, about Sundown, & laid on our Arms all night."

May 19. "Started this morning at 6, the 105th in advance of the whole Army. Skirmished most of the day, drove the Enemy about 3 miles. At night they all left. Our loss light."

May 23. "Reveille at 3, started at 6, marched 10 miles through a scorching Sun, then rested 2 hours, marched 2 miles further, camped near Etowah R."

May 25. "Started at 9 o'clock, marched 12 miles & found the Enemy in force. A severe battle was fought from 3 o'clock until dark."

May 30. "The Enemy made a desperate

charge the whole length of the lines about midnight, which caused heavy cannonading and musketry on our side & a terrible repulse to them."

June 2. "Moved over to the left of the 23d Corps, the rain fell in torrents. Advanced in line of battle, Cos. A, F, G, and B as skirmishers. Stayed out all night. Dr. Potter killed by a shell."

June 8. "Remained in same place as yesterday. Rained as usual. Capt. Rogers is quite sick today. No mail arrived. Done some washing. Attended prayer meeting in evening."

June 12. "Rained without ceasing. We are living on  $\frac{3}{4}$  rations now-a-days. Received 3 letters, wrote & mailed two. The Rebs charged our Right several times but were repulsed. *Rain.*"

June 17. "The Enemy evacuated their works in front of us last night. We moved out early, soon overtook them & had a running fight with them for about 2 miles. Drove them in their earthworks and gave them a good shelling."

The entry of June 21st is much like many others about that date: "Remained at the Breastworks all day. Heavy skirmishing in front, and stray balls flying over. Severe cannonading of the left. Rained as usual. Mailed a letter. All well." To the entry for June 27th is added: "Had to keep our heads low, for the bullets flew pretty thick."

July 3. "The Enemy evacuated their strong

works in front of us last night. We followed in pursuit at daylight, overtook their rear guard at 8 o'clock, gave them a good shelling, got shelled in return."

July 17. "By consent of both parties we do not shoot. Called in from picket at 4 P. M. The whole Corps had moved to the left. We crossed the River at 10 P. M. and camped at midnight."

After noting on July 19th that "We are now within 5 miles of Atlanta," the entry for July 20th reads: "Started this morning at 9, felt our way thro' the woods 3 or 4 miles, met the Rebs in a fair fight & drove them with terrible slaughter. Fight lasted from 3 o'clock till sundown. Rebel dead lay very thick all over the ground."

July 21. "Our wounded were soon taken care of, but we were at work all night carrying off wounded Rebels, and were busy most of today burying the Rebel dead."

July 22. "We advanced again this morning, skirmishing lively with Rebs, and drove them into their forts 1½ miles from Atlanta. Built Breast-works under fire."

August 2. "The 23d Corps moved from the left and took up position to the right of us. We started at 6 P. M., moved around to the rear of the 14th Corps (5 miles) & camped for night. Our troops massing on the right."

August 19. "Lieut. Fisher, Co. I, instantly killed on the skirmish line this morning. Co. K nigger killed. Skirmishing very brisk today. Nothing unusual occurred. Weather hot. We have good news from Mobile."

August 22. "The Pickets have effected a compromise, so there is no firing. Our siege guns send Shells over into Atlanta every five minutes day & night. A great many rumors from the right."

September 3. "A portion of our Division moved into Atlanta yesterday and captured nearly 1,000 prisoners."

September 4. "Our communications are severed again, so we get no Mail. Regtl. Inspection at 10 A. M., Religious Services at  $\frac{1}{2}$  past 10. Wagon trains and supplies all moving to Atlanta."

September 14. "Nothing of importance occurred today. The general Topic discussed everywhere is the Traitorous proceedings of the Chicago convention. Received letter, wrote one."

September 17. "Labored faithfully all day bringing lumber and working on our houses. We have now got up good and comfortable quarters."

"Received the news of Sheridan's victory in the Shenandoah valley" was an entry on September 22nd, and on September 24th Private Gager "Got a pass this morning and went down to Atlanta."

September 29. "We get no mail or papers now-a-days, so it is pretty lonesome in camp. All hands at work fixing up the ground. Troops continue to go back."

October 3. "The wagon & R. R. Bridges went away by the flood yesterday. Nearly the whole Construction Corps is at work on them today. Troops going to the rear all the time."

October 4. "More troops and wagons going to the rear than ever. General Sherman here most all day."

Beginning with October 5th "it is rumored that the Enemy hold the railroad up at Big Shanty."

October 6. "Rumors that the Rebs are driven from the R. R. and are coming this way."

October 7. "No communication with the North yet." That day and the next, "Worked most of the day making an abattis."

October 9. "The R. R. Bridges were finished and the trains passed up with R. R. Iron."

October 10. "Went down the river about 2 miles to get persimmons and pumpkins." This must have been fun for on the 13th and 14th he recorded two more persimmon forays. On October 15th he "received a large mail last evening and again this morning", and so on the following day "Spent most of the day reading."

October 19. "The 105th was paid today up to

Sept. 1, 1864. We rec'd 8 months pay. The guerrillas captured and burned a train between here and Marietta."

October 21. "We have not had any mail for a week, so it is getting to be lonesome times again. Bought a pair of boots for \$5."

October 29. "Trains came thro' from Chattanooga today for the first time in 3 or 4 weeks. Now we expect to have something to eat again, & also some mail."

October 30. "Orders recd. for the 20th Corps to get ready for a 50 days campaign. Which way we are going is more than any of us know." The famous March to the Sea had been decided upon.

An entry on November 2nd says: "Orders received to turn over all surplus baggage and prepare to march." On November 5th Private Gager drew clothing and blankets, and "Received orders to be ready to march at 7 o'clock in the morning," but on November 6th he wrote, "our marching orders were countermanded at midnight."

November 9. "The Rebs made a reconnaissance in force this morning to see if the 20th Corps had evacuated Atlanta, but by the way the shells flew they thot the Yanks had not all gone."

November 11. "This is my birthday. Received a can of butter by mail."

During the next three days he was busy "tearing up the railroad between here and Marietta". Then the great march began. On November 15th Private Gager observed that "All the public property in Atlanta is in flames. The grand movement commences today. Started at noon on the Augusta road, passed Decatur at Midnight. Marched all night" and "camped at sunrise" about "15 miles from Atlanta. Remained in camp 1 hour. Started and marched 12 miles and camped on Yellow River after dark. All very tired. My feet were pretty sore." The next day's march began at five o'clock and the army camped at eight. But, wrote the soldier, "we have all the fresh pork and sweet potatoes we want." The army marched sixteen miles the next day and "camped at 7 P. M. Hard days march."

November 20. "Started at daylight. Passed over beautiful country. All well, but the march is hard."

November 21. "The mud is ankle deep so it is very hard marching today."

Laying pontoon bridges across streams and swamps is frequently mentioned on the following days. On November 22nd Sherman's army entered Milledgeville, on the Oconee River, and remained for the day. Private Gager "Did some washing, cooking and *resting*. In the eve went



down town and destroyed Arms, Ammunition, Salt". On November 29th he "Had to build 9 bridges. The rebs charged on the advance several times today. 2 of our men killed, 3 Rebs killed."

December 1. "I went a foraging today; we went about 7 miles south of our main route. Got plenty of Pork, Sweet Potatoes, Syrup."

December 3. "Our Brigade left the road and went to destroying railroad. Marched 23 miles and camped at 11 P. M. Crossed many swamps. All tired out."

December 7. "Our road is blocked with trees every few rods."

December 8. "Swamps all around. Marched all night, going only 4 miles, and stopped this morning [December 9] at 10 o'clock for breakfast." The Union Army "Camped at 8 P. M. 15 miles from Savannah. The roads all blockaded."

December 10. "Marched 10 miles & deployed in line of battle before the Rebel works 3 miles from Savannah. Skirmishing and cannonading."

December 12. "Advanced our lines again today. Nothing to eat but rice and beef. The Rebs threw 2 shells into our Regt., but hurt no one. No communications yet."

December 14. "Fort McAllister, on the right, was captured yesterday & our Communications

are now open, but we get no Mail or Hard Tack yet. The Rebs Shelled us again today. Lonesome times."

December 17. "We received our first mail today since we left Atlanta. It came via New York. I recd a letter from home, also a vest."

December 18. "Plenty of papers to read, but not of very late date."

December 19. "The mosquitoes were so bad last night we could not sleep."

The purpose of the campaign was about to be realized. On December 20th Private Gager reported: "All are talking about the Grand Assault we are to make Thursday." But on the following day, "To our great surprise and satisfaction the Rebs evacuated the City of Savannah last night & we marched in this morning. They left Artillery, Ammunition & everything."

December 22. "Went down town this morning & all through the City. Got me a good Blanket and some other Notions." He added the next day that "Savannah is quite a large & very handsome city." On the day before Christmas he mailed some letters and sent "a package to Mother. Some steamers came up today. Worked on our house and fireplace."

There is no climax to this story. Private Gager could not know that the final surviving entries of

his painstaking wartime record of those dangerous, weary, lonesome days would be at the close of 1864. There is no hint of conclusion as he recorded the events in Savannah at the end of December.

December 27. "The 14th Corps was reviewed today. Drills the same as yesterday. Quite a number of steamers came in from Hilton Head."

December 30. "The 20th Corps was reviewed at 11 o'clock by Gen. Sherman on Liberty and Bay streets. We left Camp at 8 A. M. & returned at 3 P. M."

December 31. "Received orders to march at 6 o'clock this morn across the River into South Carolina. Could not lay the pontoons so we did not cross."

Private Gager had another volume of his pocket diary ready for another thirty-word entry on January 1, 1865.

WALTER H. BEALL