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A Flower at Elmira: The Prisoner of War Diary of Wilbur Wightman Gramling

by Robert Saunders, Jr.

"I-want-to-go-home—so—bad." These forlorn words, expressing such homesickness, appear lengthwise within the right margin on the last page of Wilbur Wightman Gramling's pocket diary, a day-by-day journal of his experiences while imprisoned at Elmira Prisoner-of-War (POW) Camp in New York during the Civil War. Struck by a minié ball in the right arm and captured at the Battle of the Wilderness on May 6, 1864, Gramling, a private in Florida's 5th Infantry, spent eleven months at Elmira Prison. The journal he faithfully kept throughout his imprisonment is the only known existing document of this type written by a Florida soldier.[1]

The Gramling Collection housed at the State Library and Archives of Florida in Tallahassee includes but two folders: one containing "The Gramling Diary," and a second with a transcribed copy of the diary and a "Manuscript Inventory" which explains that Gramling's pocket journal is "one of the few surviving original diaries written by a Florida soldier in the Civil War." More significantly, "[i]t is even rarer in that it documents the experiences of a Florida serviceman who was incarcerated in a Union prisoner-of-war

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1 Wilbur Wightman Gramling Diary, Record Group 90000, Collection Number MSS 88-070, Folder 1, State Library and Archives of Florida, Tallahassee, FL, back cover page (hereafter Gramling Diary).

camp."[2] From a purely historical perspective, Wilbur Gramling's diary offers invaluable insight into prison life at a Union POW camp—one that gained a notorious reputation as a veritable dying ground for Confederate POWs and that was often scathingly referred to as "Helmira" by more than 12,000 southern captives held within its gates.[3] Nearly forty years after Elmira had closed as a POW camp, Dr. G. T. Taylor, who served with the 1st Alabama Heavy Regiment before his capture in August 1864, noted in his memoirs that, "Elmira was nearer Hades than I thought any place could be made by human cruelty."[4]

2 The Gramling Collection, "Manuscript Inventory," Record Group 90000, MSS 88-070, Folder 2, State Library and Archives of Florida, Tallahassee, FL.

3 The historiography of Elmira Prison begins with Clay Holmes' *The Elmira Prison Camp: A History of the Military Prison at Elmira, N.Y., July 6, 1864 to July 10 1865* (New York: Putnam's, 1912). Holmes gives no credence whatsoever to the post-war southern memoirists—several of whom will be discussed in this essay—and asserts that Elmira prisoners were treated humanely, were well fed, and received proper medical care. No new studies on Elmira Prison appeared for another eighteen years until William B. Hesseltine published *Civil War Prisons: A Study in War Psychology* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1930). In stark contrast to Holmes, Hesseltine argues that prisoners were mistreated and that their needless suffering was the result of a "war psychosis" which gripped both the Federal government and the northern people and infused a far more intense level of brutality into the war. James Robertson's "The Scourge of Elmira," in *Civil War Prisons*, ed. William B. Hesseltine (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1972), 86, follows the same line of argumentation: "[L]ife at Elmira was humorless; as a matter of fact, it devolved from the outset into a battle for survival."

Most of the recent works on Elmira recognize varying degrees of credibility with the post-war memoirs; those historians who employ a more critical eye to these accounts generally have produced more balanced studies. Notable among recent scholarly studies, listed by date of publication, include Lonnie R. Speer, *Portals to Hell: Military Prisons of the Civil War* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1997); Michael P. Gray, *The Business of Captivity, Elmira and its Civil War Prison* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2001); Michael Horigan, *Elmira: Death Camp of the North* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2002); Charles W. Sanders, *While in the Hands of the Enemy: Military Prisons of the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005); and, Roger Pickenpaugh, *Captives in Gray: The Civil War Prisons of the Union* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009). Gray's and Pickenpaugh's works generally are regarded as the most balanced and accurate. Both historians rely on the post-war memoirs, but they likewise draw heavily from less agenda-driven primary sources such as Gramling's Diary.

Mirroring Holmes's 1912 study, James Gillispie argues that the post-war memoirs have little value whatsoever. Based on his assessment of resources generated specifically during the war years, he concludes that Federal POW camps were run as reasonably as could have been expected. James Gillispie, *Andersonvilles of the North, The Myths and Realities of Northern Treatment of Civil War Confederate Prisoners* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2008).

4 G. T. Taylor, "Prison Experience in Elmira, NY," *Confederate Veteran* 20 (1912): 327.

Though officially cataloged as "The Gramling Diary," this primary source is more of a daybook or a journal than a diary. Distributed as a "Perpetual Diary" in 1862 by A. Liebenroth and Von Auw of New York City, it is small in size—just three inches wide by five inches tall—and includes roughly fifty sheets that allot about one inch of lined writing space for each day of the year. In keeping with the book's physical composition, Gramling's journal includes exactly three hundred and sixty-five entries. Though the treatment Gramling received seems far less brutal than what is normally chronicled as the typical Elmira prisoner's experiences, his daily entries nevertheless reveal the hardships and deprivations suffered behind camp gates. Most important, this journal provides a unique look into day-by-day life in the camp and Gramling's insights; his descriptions of the weather, food, shelter, Union officers, rumors, paroles, escapes, his homesickness, and heartfelt desire to once again be joined with his loved ones, his friends, and his church community. As a young man brought up on a farm, his daily entries were never without some reference to the weather, and his recordings of wild rumors reflected both his hope for Confederate victory and fears of the South's loss. Finally, his heartfelt longings to be home echoed the basic human quest for a peaceful existence among family and friends.

The Gramlings—today a large and extended clan with branches in Florida and South Carolina—trace their family's roots to Germany. In 1735, Adam Gramling and his wife Elizabeth Gassoway Gramling immigrated to South Carolina and settled in the Piedmont back-country, where they hacked out a life of subsistence farming. In early 1845, Adam's ninth son John Gramling and his wife Elizabeth settled in Madison County, Florida, where they raised ten children. In 1847, fourth-born Andrew Peter and his wife Elizabeth Gramling purchased farmland in Leon County and helped establish the little community of Centerville, located about eight miles northeast of Tallahassee.[5] Their land, roughly one hundred and twenty acres, was situated within the first 640-acre parcel immediately east of the intersection of Centerville and

5 Adam Gramling married Elizabeth Christina Gassoway; John Gramling married Elizabeth Imbroden; Andrew Peter Gramling married Elizabeth Gramling, daughter of Christian Gramling and, hence, Andrew's cousin. Collection Description Page, "The Gramling Diary," The Gramling Collection, Record Group 90000, Collection Number MSS 88-070, Folder 1, State Library and Archives of Florida, Tallahassee, FL.

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Pisgah Church roads.[6] Andrew and Elizabeth brought with them to their new farm five children: three daughters (Martha, Mattie, and Jane) and two sons (Irvin W. Gramling and Wilbur Wightman Gramling, born March 30, 1843).[7]

The family planted corn, barley, wheat, cotton, and a variety of other crops, and they raised hogs, sheep, and cattle. By 1860, as shown in the census and slave schedule for that year, the Gramling farm had been enlarged to 160 acres and included three slaves: one male aged 50 and two females ages 35 and 13.[8] Though the Gramlings were never among the planter elite in Leon County, the moderate climate and fertile soil there provided a reasonably prosperous life that allowed Andrew and Elizabeth to send Irvin and Wilbur to receive formal education at Fletcher Institute in Thomasville, Georgia, about thirty miles north of their homestead. It is possible that all five Gramling children attended Fletcher as the school maintained separate departments to educate both young males and females.

Founded in 1848 by the Florida Methodist Episcopal Conference, Fletcher Institute became a highly attended academy for the region. The basic course of study included orthography, reading, writing, and arithmetic, but students could also enroll in, among other subjects, mental and moral philosophy, rhetoric and logic, botany, Latin, Greek, and French. Given this broad curriculum, and also evidenced by the language skills within his diary, it is clear that Wilbur received the best education that was available to him within a reasonable distance from home.[9] However, the Civil War interrupted his studies. In early 1862, Wilbur and much of his class

6 State of Florida Deed Records, Leon County, Book I, 577; State of Florida, Leon County, Tax Records. 1850, 1853, 1856, 1859, 1861; The Gramling farm was located within Section 24, Township 2, North of Range 1 East. LeRoy D. Ball and Jonathan Bradford, "Map of Leon County Florida, 1883," State Library and Archives of Florida, Tallahassee, FL.

7 Genealogical Information from "The Gramling Diary" and The Gramling Collection, MSS 88-070, Folder 2, State Library and Archives of Florida; see also Clifton Paisley, "Biographical Note," Gramling Civil War Diary, MSS 0:129 Box 148, Special Collections, Robert Manning Strozier Library, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL.

8 National Archives and Records Service, *Population Schedules of the Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Florida (Slave Schedules)*, Microcopy Number 653, Volume 1 (Washington, DC: National Archives Microfilm Publications, 1967), Roll 110: 33.

9 W. Irwin MacIntyre, "The History of Thomas County," in the Hopkins Collection of Thomas County, Georgia, "Fletcher Institute," *USGenWeb Archives*, http://files.usgwarchives.net/ga/thomas/history/schools/fletcher682gms.txt, (accessed April 3, 2015).

at Fletcher resigned from the school and enlisted in the Confederate service.

Wilbur, along with his brother Irvin, his uncle Joel C., and his cousin John L. Gramling, enlisted on the same day, February 20, 1862, and were assigned to Company K of the 5th Florida Infantry.[10] The one-hundred men who made up Company K chose "The Dixie Yeoman" as the name of their company—one not only accurate in terms of the socio-economic background of these men but likewise reflective of the pride they took in coming from the "middling" sort of smaller farmers. The majority of these boys hailed from families who made their way in life through subsistence agriculture, and the name they chose for their company clearly shows that they were proud of the lives they were living. It was a simple but hard existence—a life of ceaseless toil raising food crops relatively unprofitable compared to cotton cultivation on a large scale. In a general sense, the young men who enlisted in Company K were neither poor nor rich; they survived through farming and they took great pride in that.[11]

Upon enlistment, the Dixie Yeoman spent the next four months training and drilling at Camp Call near Tallahassee. By mid-July, the 5th Regiment with its ten companies had marched out of the Tallahassee area, boarded a train at Monticello, Florida, and headed north toward Virginia. Wilbur Gramling's unit, combining with Lee's Army of Northern Virginia in early August 1862, was grouped from its arrival with the 2nd Florida Infantry, a battle-hardened regiment that already had been in Virginia for well over a year and had participated in a number of engagements, including Seven Pines and Seven Days. Though the 2nd Florida arrived in Virginia in 1861 with over five hundred men, their numbers by

10 All references in this essay to "Gramling" from this point refer specifically to Wilbur Gramling unless otherwise noted.

11 One notable exception to the yeomanry of Company K was 1st Lieutenant Joel Blake, who owned 188 slaves. The Blake family included several wealthy planters from the Miccosukee area north of Centerville. Lt. Blake was killed at Gettysburg. Zack C. Waters and James C. Edmonds, *A Small but Spartan Band, The Florida Brigade in Lee's Army of Northern Virginia* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 23. For additional information on the 5th Florida Infantry see David W. Hartman and David J. Coles, *Biographical Rosters of Florida's Confederate and Union Soldiers, 1861-1865*, Vol. II (Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1995), 572; State of Florida, Board of State Institutions and Fred L. Robertson, comp., *Soldiers of Florida in the Seminole Indian, Civil and Spanish-American Wars* (Live Oak, FL: Democrat Book and Job Print, 1903), 152, https://archive.org/details/soldiersofflorid00flor, (accessed April 21, 2015).

summer 1862 had been reduced to fewer than three hundred.[12] The 8th Florida Infantry, likewise organized and trained during the spring of 1862, had been sent to the Eastern Theater and combined with the 2nd and 5th. After November of that year, the 2nd, 5th, and 8th regiments were known collectively as the "Florida Brigade;" they would remain combined throughout the duration of the war.[13] Most of these men, Wilbur Gramling among them, subsequently were involved in all of the major battles of the Eastern Theater. They fought well, and many of them suffered battlefield injuries, contracted various diseases such as cholera or typhoid, or were killed in action. Approximately 15,000 "Flowers"—as Florida soldiers were dubbed—served in the war. Of that number, nearly 5,000 died of battlefield injuries or disease. These figures represent one of the highest per-state mortality rates among all Confederate forces.[14]

Considering that Wilbur Gramling and his fellow Dixie Yeoman fought in some of the war's fiercest battles—at Bloody Lane at Antietam, for instance, and into the same withering fire that all but obliterated George Pickett's command on the third day at the Battle of Gettysburg—it is rather remarkable that he escaped unscathed for as long as he did. His brother Irvin was not so fortunate. He was wounded at Gettysburg, captured by Union troops, and sent to Fort Delaware, where he remained for the duration of the war. Wilbur Gramling's service records show that he was present for duty for all but six months from the date of his enlistment until he was captured at the Battle of the Wilderness. During his absence, he recuperated on sick furlough in a Richmond hospital designated for Florida soldiers.[15]

In the first entry of his diary, dated May 6, 1864, Gramling began with, "Went in to battle at 2 o'clock." It would have been more accurate had he recorded that *"the battle went into him,"* as Union troops of Burnside's IX Corps broke through the thick underbrush of the Wilderness and smashed headlong into the Florida Brigade's

12 Waters and Edmonds, *A Small but Spartan Band*, 22-24.

13 Hartman and Coles, *Biographical Rosters*, II: 459.

14 Museum of Florida History, "Florida in the Civil War: Florida's Confederate Soldiers," http://www.museumoffloridahistory.com/exhibits/permanent/civilwar/05.cfm, (accessed April 22, 2015). Florida soldiers were called "Flowers" from the old Spanish "Land of Flowers."

15 National Archives and Records Administration, Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers Who Served in Organizations From the State of Florida. NARA Microfilm Publication M251, Reel 62, 2095-2118, Ancestry.com, (accessed on April 12, 2015).

left flank. Within a matter of minutes, Gramling and most of his company had been captured, wounded, killed, or driven away from the enfilading fire. "[W]ounded in right arm and taken prisoner," he recorded in his diary. "Sent to rear in great pain. Had ball out and wound dressed. About 600 prisoners with me."[16]

For the next three days, Gramling was under the care of medical staff assigned with the IX Corps. On May 9th, he was sent to the Presbyterian Church in Fredericksburg, a prominent institution that had been converted into a hospital by Union forces. Gramling remained at the church until he was well enough to walk the eleven miles to Belle Plain, Virginia, on the 20th.[17] He was then placed aboard a steamer and sent to Washington, DC, where he spent the next week at Columbian Hospital—a pre-war college and the same institution where Walt Whitman served as a nurse. Gramling noted that before reaching the hospital he "Saw Abe Lincoln's house." The president, he added, was "[v]ery comfortably situated." He did well at Columbian and especially enjoyed looking out at the sights from a second-story window. "Saw President Lincoln and Lady pass yesterday," he reported on the 23rd and noted that "[Lincoln] passes here nearly every day." He also wrote that "I see negroes riding out in fine carriages with their drivers. Sometimes a negro man and a white woman riding together in the carriage with a negro driver—frequently see them walking together."[18]

On May 27th, Gramling was transferred to Lincoln Hospital on East Capitol Street, "a nasty, out of the way place," he noted, that treated thousands of sick and wounded from both sides. Lincoln was far different from Columbian. It was a terribly overcrowded and understaffed institution that, according to Gramling, doled out "bad attention." The food was lousy too, he complained, "For dinner: bread, soup, and water. Supper: tea, syrup, and bread. Hardly ate it. Head aches now." "I think this is nearly the last place in creation," he lamented, "Expect to leave here before many days for some prison." However, three weeks passed before Gramling left Lincoln Hospital, and despite the conditions there, he noted that he made it through his stay "pretty well." Though he presumably had limited use of his injured arm, he was assigned either kitchen or mopping duty on most days. But those chores did not

16 Gramling Diary, May 6, 1864; May 9, 1864.
17 The Presbyterian Church, Fredericksburg Virginia, "Our History: Formation and Antebellum History" and "Our History: Civil War," http://fredericksburgpc.org/about-us/our-history, (accessed March 15, 2015).
18 Gramling Diary, May 21, 1864; May 22, 1864.

seem to impede healing. "Turned my wound loose yesterday," he noted, "It is doing very well."[19]

On July 12th, Gramling was sent to the Old Capitol Prison, a three-story brick building located on the corner of 1st and A Streets on the eastern slope of Capitol Hill that had served as the temporary US Capitol building after the War of 1812, a private school, and a boarding house.[20] The structure was purchased by the federal government in 1861 and soon after was converted into a prison. The *New York Times* reported in April 1862 that the Old Capitol as a prison was "a pleasant and desirable place [suitable] for a country residence, which affords our deluded friends [Confederate prisoners] a healthy Summer resort" and one in which inmates were kept as "comfortable as practicable."[21] Given that the old building was in actuality filthy, overcrowded, damp, and rat-infested, it is not likely that the inmates would have agreed with the *Times*. "They are very strict here," Wilbur Gramling wrote, "[The staff] [w]on't let you get close to the window. Eat twice a day. Quite a dirty place, just alive with chinches." Three days later, Gramling, who was being held in a central room on the third floor not much larger than five hundred square feet, noted that there were over four hundred POWs crammed into the room. The only benefit, evidently, was that the overcrowding forced the prisoners toward the walls and windows, and, despite the restriction against it, Gramling was one of the fortunate few prisoners situated close enough to a window to enjoy looking out at the passersby. "My principal amusement," he recorded on the 16th, "is looking at the women pass." "Some very pretty ones in the city of Washington." The following day, "[f]ive very pretty young ladies passed by in a carriage and one of them waved to me, which is frequently the case. (Great many Secesh here)," he added.[22] Aside from the enjoyment of peering at the sights, Gramling noted that he received but two pitiful meals daily and that the overcrowding, foul odors, sick and dying inmates, rats,

19 Ibid., May 27, 1864; May 31, 1864, June 3, 1864; June 27, 1864.

20 John C. Calhoun resided in the boarding house and passed away in one of its bedchambers in 1850. During the Civil War, the Old Capitol housed high-profile spies and conspirators such as Belle Boyd and Mary Surratt. Alicia Rodriquez, "Old Capitol Prison," in *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War*, Vol. III, ed. David S. and Jeanne T. Heidler (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 2000), 1432-1434.

21 "The Old Capitol Building and Its Inmates," *New York Times*, April 19, 1862.

22 Gramling Diary, July 12, 1864; July 16, 1864; July 17, 1864.

and other nuisances made his stay at the Old Capitol a "[v]ery disagreeable life."[23]

Though Gramling had no way of knowing such information, preparations were then underway to begin transferring him and thousands of other Confederate POWs to a former Federal training camp in Elmira, New York. General Ulysses S. Grant's Overland Campaign created an immediate need to prepare new facilities for thousands of recently captured Confederates. Ominously, as all former prisoner exchange cartels had broken down and few prisoners would be exchanged between the Union and Confederacy from the summer of 1864 until well into spring 1865, both belligerents scrambled to develop long-term accommodations for prisoners. Neither side had any experience whatsoever in managing such large-scale enterprises, and the results in far too many instances were filthy camps, inadequate food and nutrition, unsanitary privies, and thousands of deaths. The most glaring example of such tragic consequences was, of course, Andersonville Prison in Georgia, where nearly 13,000 of 45,000 Union soldiers died of disease and malnutrition.[24] Likewise tragic, though, were the nearly 3,000 Confederate deaths at Elmira Prison between its opening in July 1864 and its final closing thirteen months later.

On July 24th, Gramling and several hundred POWs were boarded onto a train in Washington and taken to Baltimore, where they were marched through several downtown streets and loaded onto a northbound train. Their train arrived at the Elmira depot at six o'clock the following morning, and the prisoners were herded through the streets under the curious eyes of the city's residents and marched through the camp gates. Ever on the lookout for pretty females, Gramling wrote in his diary that "Elmira is noted for pretty women and a good many of them."[25]

More than 75% of Gramling's entries speak of exchange rumors and of being released and going home. What he could not fully understand was that during the final year of the war, the time period of his incarceration, a much larger dispute involving human

23 Ibid., July 20, 1864.

24 There is no shortage of books on Andersonville. Two recent scholarly works include William Marvel, *Andersonville: The Last Depot* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994) and Pickenpaugh, *Captives in Blue*; see also Robert Scott Davis, "Andersonville Prison," *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/andersonville-prison, (accessed April 22, 2015).

25 Gramling Diary, July 23, 1864; July 24, 1864; July 25, 1864.

dignity directly impacted and ultimately curtailed his chances of being released. The Lincoln Administration was pressing the Confederacy to recognize black Union soldiers as POWs and to afford them the same treatment and consideration as their white counterparts. The Confederate government, however, continued to categorize African American prisoners as contraband and threatened to execute white commanders of black units. This stand-off effectively removed any chance of a "cartel" agreement between the two belligerents regarding parole, exchange, or release of prisoners. Military considerations also affected negotiations about exchange. By mid-1864, with the war turning in the North's favor, Lincoln and his generals reasoned they could drain the Confederacy of man-power by preventing POWs from returning to the field.[26] Though Gramling anticipated being quickly paroled or exchanged —as had been the case for virtually all prisoners taken to that time—his captors now had little motivation to provide releases. He spent the next eleven months as an Elmira inmate living in Barracks Number 3.

Assigned to kitchen duty, Wilbur worked as a waiter in the mess hall. He reported that he "had much work to do and get plenty to eat." "The way I spend my time," he reported on October 3: "1st [s]et the table and then clean up afterwards, then 2nd [r]ead and knock about until three o'clock, and 3rd, it is dinner, which I have to take an active part in, working after the rest [have long finished]."[27]

As might be expected, one of the leading topics Gramling discussed regularly was his health. His 365 entries include 86 references specific to his physical condition. Fifty-nine of these are positive, meaning that he was feeling good and was relatively healthy. He reported feeling poorly in twenty-seven entries. However, the worst he felt was when he had a toothache (which had been paining him for some time). Complaining of neuralgia deep

26 The so-called "cartel" was formally known as the Dix-Hill Agreement of 1862, which originated through negotiations between Confederate General Daniel H. Hill and Union General John A. Dix and established a system for exchanging and paroling prisoners. The reasons for the ultimate failure of this program by 1864 have been a matter of considerable historical dispute. For a more complete discussion of this agreement, see Benjamin G. Cloyd, *Haunted by Atrocity, Civil War Prisons in American Memory* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 6-12; Sanders, *While in the Hands of the Enemy*, 85-96; and Pickenpaugh, *Captives in Gray*, 48-49. All three historians show convincingly that the primary issue that brought an end to the cartel was the Confederacy's refusal to treat captured Union African American soldiers similarly to their white comrades.

27 Gramling Diary, July 26, 1864; October 3, 1864.

in his jaw, on August 19th, he wrote that "Suffering very much with jaw ache. Tried to have an old root extracted, and instead of getting [the root,] [I] broke a good one off at the gums." One month later, he contracted a severe upper respiratory ailment, a "cold and cough," he wrote, "bordering on pleurisy." Three days later though, he reported that aside from having a sore chest, he was feeling much better. Other ailments of which he complained included headaches, occasional diarrhea, slight fevers, and "feeling a little puny."[28] For the most part then, Wilbur Gramling fared well during his imprisonment and he knew it.[29] On December 31, 1864, a date that commonly prompts introspection, he wrote that;

> I feel thankful to the disposer of all things for being favored as I have been since I have been a prisoner—for I have gotten enough to eat ever since I was captured except for the little while I was at Fredericksburg, Virginia[,] and the Old Capitol [Prison in] Washington City, about ten days each. I have had enough clothing also all the while. Upon the whole, I have not fared much worse than in Dixie.[30]

Given that smallpox was then raging within the camp and was by far the most dangerous and lethal illness within all prisons, Gramling no doubt was thankful that he had been vaccinated, even though the process was both crude and especially painful. Considering the terribly overcrowded conditions within a camp that was intended to house five thousand inmates but by that time held over twelve thousand, it is not at all surprising that once introduced into camp, smallpox spread rapidly through Elmira's prisoner population. The medical staff was inexplicably—and, as some contemporary historians argue, inexcusably—late in trying to stem the spread of this pathogen. Some historians have asserted that they were at best lax in their efforts.[31] "Good many cases of small pox," Gramling wrote on December 19th, "Prisoners are very sickly as a general thing." He was most fortunate to have been vaccinated

28 Ibid., August 19, 1864; September 19, 1864.

29 Gramling's potentially most serious illness occurred between September 19 and 22, during which time he evidently suffered a dangerous upper respiratory infection. He noted on the 20th that he was "feeling very faint and weak," and was taking medication. He was fortunate not to have developed pneumonia.

30 Gramling Diary, December 31, 1864.

31 Pickenpaugh, *Captives in Gray*, 212; Horigan, *Elmira: Death Camp of the North*, 212-213. Horigan is especially critical, stating that camp officials did not construct a proper smallpox hospital until well after the disease was rampant among the prisoner population.

that same week. On the day after Christmas, he reported that his "vaccination was finally taking." About one week later, he noted, "Confirmed that my vaccination has taken," but, "[his] Arm is pretty sore [though] and is still inflamed." Finally, on January 16th, he wrote that "Got the scab knock off my arm again today. Oh, it looks quite bad." He had diarrhea on the 17th, but was feeling well again just one day later.[32]

In terms of his health, it appears that Gramling's longest-lasting and most acute affliction was homesickness. There are several dozen entries revealing just how desperately he wanted to go home. "I am getting very tired of prison and am growing more so every day," he wrote on August 2nd. "The thought of staying here all winter and perhaps till the war ends makes the time a great deal longer." "I wished myself at Ma's cupboard," he wrote longingly a few weeks later. Demonstrating his generally depressed condition, his entry for September 17th reads: "Lost all hopes of getting back to Dixie. Still I hope to get there sometime if I live long enough." Within another entry: "I am homesick. Get the blues or something else . . . Makes me want a stalk of cane to chew and some potatoes. Oh me!" "Almost crazy I want to go to Dixie," he confided on March 3rd. "Still live in hopes even as I die in despair." Perhaps most touching of all is his notation for March 12, 1865: "Oh me! So lonesome can hardly keep back the tears. So long since I have seen any of my old associates. Hope my imprisonment won't last always."[33]

Sundays were especially difficult for him. Not only did he miss his mother, father, and siblings, he missed his church. The Gramlings were prominent members of Pisgah Methodist Church, located less than one mile from their home. Today listed on the National Historic Register, "Old Pisgah" was first organized in May 1830 and became one of the leading churches in antebellum Florida. It is reasonable to assume that the current structure, completed in 1859, was constructed with the volunteer labor of Andrew, Irvin, Joel, and Wilbur Gramling. To the Gramlings, that church was central to virtually all aspects of their lives. "I think more about home Sundays than any other day," Wilbur wrote, "[N]ot only home, but the Old Pisgah Church house [as well]."[34]

32 Gramling Diary, January 16, 1865; January 17, 1865.
33 Ibid., August 2, 1864; August 28, 1864; September 17, 1864; September 11, 1864; March 3, 1865; March 12, 1865.
34 Methodist Episcopal Church, South, *Register of Members and Probationers, Pisgah, Leon County, Florida* (Nashville, TN: E. Stevenson and F.A. Owen, 1857), in Pisgah United Methodist Church, "Register of Members," Volume 1, 1830-1903,

Much of the two or three hours Gramling spent each day "knock[ing] about" no doubt involved chatting with his fellow inmates. With little else to do, engaging in idle chatter filled much of the prisoners' time, and the leading topic of interest was always the events of the war. Yet, being prisoners put them at an obvious disadvantage, and much of their discussions were based on rumors. Some carried at least a modicum of truth, but most of the rumors were flat-out wild and reflected so much wishful thinking. Gramling dutifully recorded many of these—some he believed, some he did not. Early on in his captivity, reports in the diary correspond to Grant's Overland Campaign for May and June 1864 and dwell on rumors of southern losses. "Yanks still hold Richmond," he recorded on May 12th, and "Lee is surrounded and entirely cut off from his base." "General Longstreet mortally wounded in shoulder." "Lee is retreating and nearly cut off from Richmond. Jeff Davis is captured by Grant and paroled," he reported on the 26th. "Don't know whether he will be summarily hanged or not." On June 23rd, he wrote, "No news from the front; only that Grant has shot down all the clocks and steeples in Petersburg."[35]

The rumors among the prisoners continued, of course, while Gramling was at Columbian and Lincoln hospitals and at the Old Capitol Prison. "It is reported," he entered on July 10th, "that our boys drove the Yankees 18 miles, killed General [Lew] Wallace and captured one other general—forget his name—and are now within nine miles of Baltimore." This entry reflects Jubal Early's raid across the Potomac and the general panic that ensued within Washington.[36]

After his arrival at Elmira, Gramling continued recording reports of the war. He noted the progress of Early's raid on August 4, and in this instance, the Confederate raiders had dashed headlong into Pennsylvania. "Chambersburg has been burnt down by our forces," he wrote. "Demanded $100,000 in gold for saving it but the authorities couldn't advance the money. Therefore it was burned."[37] On August 7th, Gramling noted gleefully that "Papers

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Collection Number M86-041, State Library and Archives of Florida, Tallahassee, FL; "Old Pisgah," Historical Marker, CR-151, Leon County, http://apps.flheritage.com/markers/markers.cfm?ID=leon, (accessed March 3, 2015); Gramling Diary, September 4, 1864.

35 Gramling Diary, May 12, 1864; May 26, 1864; June 23, 1864; July 10, 1864.

36 Allan Nevins, *The War for the Union: The Organized War to Victory, 1864-1865* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 88-89.

37 Gramling Diary, August 4, 1864; The town was burned on the orders of Brigadier General "Tiger John" McCausland, Jr., supposedly in retaliation for Union

yesterday state that Lee whipped Grant again last Saturday, also that Gen[eral] Hood is getting the best of Sherman. . . . Hill and Longstreet seem to be doing as they please in P[ennsylvania], while Ewell is in the [Shenandoah] Valley threshing wheat." He recorded ten days later that "Rumor says that the Federal Government wants an armistice for six months in order to come to some terms of peace." "Which I think is hardly credible," he added. "Report says that Lee made a flank movement on Grant and fully demoralized his army." "It is reported," he noted on September 4th,, "that Lee has whipped Grant again and driven him 6 miles," and he wrote the next day, "Hood has given Sherman a bad thrashing, driven him 9 miles and has taken a good many prisoners." Gramling recorded that on October 6 the *New York Herald* informed its readers that "Lee has whipped and badly crippled Grant's army. . . . Sherman in an unsafe condition." "Papers say that Sherman's army is completely annihilated. Jeff Davis speaks very cheeringly to the soldiers." Gramling entered on the 21st that "Papers state that England and France have recognized the independence of the Confederacy." Clearly indicating he did not appreciate the magnitude of such a report if it was true, Gramling noted immediately following that "Nothing else [is] new."[38]

"The news from every quarter [is] of the most flattering terms," Gramling wrote on November 3rd. His entry for November 5th relates jubilantly that, "Big gains, another victory. Beauregard captured Atlanta with 10,000 prisoners."[39] These reports well represent the wishful thinking one would expect among Confederate POWs. Interestingly though, a sizable number of the rumors Gramling reported originated in northern newspapers. It seems that in many cases at least, most of the North's population remained just as ill-informed as the POWs held in northern prisons.

Elmira prisoners also followed political developments with keen interest, believing—erroneously of course—that Lincoln losing the presidential contest of 1864 would mean a negotiated end to the war. On Election Day, November 8th, Gramling noted that

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destruction in the Shenandoah Valley. See Gary Gallagher, ed., *The Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1864* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); see also Jim Baugess, "John A. McCausland, Confederate General" in *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War*, Volume III, ed. David S. and Jeanne T. Heidler (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 2000), 1272-1273.

38 Gramling Diary, August 7, 1864; August 17, 1864; September 4, 1864; September 5, 1864; October 6, 1864; October 21, 1864.

39 Ibid., November 3, 1864; November 5, 1864.

"Generally thought [among the prisoners] that it will be a close run between Abe and Mc [Lincoln and George B. McClellan]." "[R] ather in the latter's favor," he projected. Over the next few days, he referenced the election within multiple entries: "It is reported that Lincoln is ahead as far as is known." "Great speculation about the election. Some say that Lincoln is elected and some say Mac." "Have not heard who is elected yet for president," he entered on the 14th, "[but] it is a very close run." "I believe it inclines to be in Lincoln's favor," he added disappointedly. Finally, on the 19th, he recorded that "Seems to be no doubt but Abe is reelected."[40] All hopes of a McClellan victory were thus dashed.

The "New York papers say General Lee has been killed," Gramling wrote on November 23rd. "Beauregard has taken the oath and Jeff [Davis] is not to be found." No doubt relieved to learn just three days later that Lee was in fact still alive, he read in the *Herald* that "Lee has whipped Grant again, capturing 20,000 prisoners." "It is reported," he wrote on November 28th, "that Beauregard has thrashed out Sherman again [and] completely annihilated his army." He then predicted that "all of us will doubtless eat our Christmas dinner at home."[41] Despite such rosy entries and optimistic predictions, however, most of the rumors in circulation after the election echoed the Confederacy's rapid deterioration throughout the remainder of that winter.

More reflective of the actual course of events, on December 8th, Gramling referenced a newspaper account indicating that "Sherman [has] advanced to within 6 miles of Savannah, some say 40. Not much talk of an exchange." "Think we will stay here all winter, perhaps during war," he mused sorrowfully. Despite the occasionally accurate report, false reports far outnumbered true ones. "Jeff Davis has poisoned himself," was the rumor Gramling recorded on Christmas Eve 1864.[42]

"Bob Lee whipped," he wrote on March 29, 1865. Five days later, he reported with alarm that "Richmond [has] gone up. 12,000 prisoners, 50 pieces of artillery [taken]." "Papers say General Lee and army surrendered or will soon," he noted on the 7th. "Considerable excitement," he added, then four days later, he entered, "Still rumors that seem to be confirmation of the surrender of

40 Ibid., November 8, 1864; November 11, 1864; November 14, 1864; November 19, 1864.
41 Ibid., November 23, 1864; November 26, 1864.
42 Ibid., November 28, 1864; December 8, 1864; December 24, 1864.

Lee and army. Some [prisoners] seem to be glad, some sorry." Gramling's entry for April 14th reflects his sullen demeanor; "Great rejoining throughout the U.S. Great exultation and crowing in the papers. Picturing Richmond as entirely destitute of provisions and [of former slaves] receiving the Federals with great joy." "There has been a great deal of excitement this month," he wrote, "the whole Confederacy has gone up." "Sad to think of," he added, "but there might be hope [of release]."[43]

Then the news of the tragic events at Ford's Theater on the night of April 14th spread throughout the country like a torrent. "Excitement has only begun," Gramling wrote, "Abe and Seward were murdered last night. First rumored by a Virginian, and lastly, a . . . clerk rumored that all Rebel officers at Washington were killed." Two days later, Gramling noted that "Lincoln's murderer is supposed to be one Booth." "The assassin not apprehended yet," he added. There are no further notations in the diary concerning Lincoln's assassination or of John Wilkes Booth.[44]

Though Gramling recorded many of the war reports he heard, he was cautious enough not to believe most of them. "As the saying is, those tales have got no hair in them," he noted. However, POWs giving credence to favorable news, no matter how absurd, was one way of coping with their incarceration, their homesickness, and their difficult circumstances.[45] In terms of chronicling how prisoners were treated at Elmira, one needs to evaluate basic necessities such as shelter, food, medical care, and punishment, According to Gramling's diary, in each of these categories he fared reasonably well, but that is not to say though that all POWs at Elmira were as fortunate. Arriving during the third week of July before the largest influx of prisoners, he was assigned to a bunk in one of the barracks. Within a few weeks of his arrival, all space within the existing barracks was full. After the first week of August, with the prison population having risen to slightly over 5,000, nearly all of the approximately 7,000 prisoners who arrived between September and December were quartered in leaky, musty tents. The men consigned to tents remained within these pitifully inadequate shelters

43 Ibid., March 29, 1865; April 4, 1865; April 7, 1865; April 14, 1865; April 30, 1865.

44 Ibid., April 14, 1865; April 15, 1865; April 16, 1865.

45 Ibid., March 13, 1865; Debates over the treatment prisoners received within northern POW camps and the conditions under which POWs were forced to live have been, to say the least, historically contentious; finding consensus on conditions within Elmira is especially difficult.

well into the winter months; there was no other place to house them until late December.[46]

Each of the existing barracks by contrast was equipped with two stoves, and Gramling reported that hauling in wood for the stoves occupied much of the inmates' time during October. He later wrote that though there were a few days during the winter months when there was neither wood nor coal to heat the barracks, these instances proved the exception rather than the norm.[47]

As mentioned previously, Gramling was assigned a position as a waiter in the mess hall, and though it was exceptionally tedious work, he evidently received sufficient food. In fact, other than him mentioning his job and his "get[ting] plenty to eat" on July 26th, he rarely discussed food at all. Considering that the quality and quantity of food at any prison of any type always has been a point of contention, it seems rather odd that Gramling made no issue of it. Post-war accounts by dozens of former inmates tell of prisoners being forced to subsist on a diet of bean and onion soup that was mostly water, stale bread, and a small piece of salt pork. According to these reminiscences, eating rats, cats, and dogs as supplements to their meager rations was common among the inmates. It seems reasonable to argue, however, that had the inmates within Elmira been served only the quality and quantity of prison food described in these accounts, hundreds more no doubt would have died, and those fortunate enough to have survived their imprisonment, including Gramling, would have been little more than human skeletons. There are but few accounts of Confederate prisoners being released in such condition due exclusively to malnutrition.[48]

The most controversial issue involving prisoner treatment at Elmira centers on medical care—or the lack thereof. With a death

46 Lieutenant Colonel Eastman originally reported to the Union's Commissary-General of Prisoners, Colonel William Hoffman, that Elmira Prison could accommodate up to five thousand POWs within the existing barracks. However, that number was exceeded as early as August 2, 1864, and from that date until additional barracks were completed in December, the majority of Elmira's prisoners were housed in tents. Statistical data concerning housing in Elmira is provided in Holmes, *The Elmira Prison Camp*, 257-259.

47 Gramling Diary, January 16, 1865.

48 Gillispie argues that though the quality of rations was by today's standards rather poor, POWs nonetheless received adequate quantities. Gillispie, *Andersonvilles of the North*, 231-232; According to Nathan R. Meyer, on the other hand, the diet at Elmira was so poor that by December 1864, Confederate POWs were "dying of starvation at a rate of twenty five a day." Nathan R. Meyer, "Elmira Prison," in *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War*, Volume II, ed. David S. and Jeanne T. Heidler (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 2000), 648-649.

rate of 24.3%, which represented 2,963 deaths out of a total prisoner population of 12,123, it is abundantly evident that even by Civil War standards, far too many prisoners died at Elmira.[49] It is also clear that most of the deaths occurred due to one of three maladies: bacterial infection, scurvy, or, smallpox. The chief surgeon assigned to Elmira Prison, Dr. Eugene Sanger, was subsequently vilified by many of the former prisoners—as well as by a good number of historians—for what they charged as his decidedly malfeasant approach to addressing the dangerous health conditions inside the camp.[50]

Five hundred Elmira prisoners died in August and September 1864, and roughly one-half of the prisoner deaths during those months can be attributed to a bacteria-filled overflow known as Foster's Pond, which caught spillover waters from the adjacent Chemung River. By late August, with the camp's prisoner population having reached nearly 10,000, the pond served as a catch-all for the camp's latrines and was horribly polluted. Essentially, this stagnant body of water became a microbial cesspool constantly befouled by human waste.[51] Today, Foster's Pond under similar conditions would be declared a biohazard.

Though Sanger reported the dangers posed by the pond, Elmira's commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Seth Eastman, delayed taking action because, first, he did not want to spend the resources necessary for digging a drainage trench to the river, and, second, he was hopeful that fall rains would swell the river and

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49 Mortality statistics for Elmira are listed in Holmes, *The Elmira Prison Camp*, 258-260; see also Robertson, "The Scourge of Elmira," 95. Historian Michael Gray shows slightly different figures: 12,147 prisoners and 2,973 Confederate deaths. Michael Gray, "Elmira, A City on a Prison-Camp Contract," *Civil War History* 45:4 (December 1999): 330, 337.

50 Jesse Waggoner, "The Role of the Physician: Eugene Sanger and a Standard of Care at the Elmira Prison Camp," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 63:1, (January 2008), 3-5; 13-15; 18-21. Waggoner provides an interesting assessment and rather damning indictment of Elmira's medical staff—and especially of Dr. Sanger; Michael Horigan includes a letter written by Sanger in which the chief surgeon boasts that he had "relieved 386 of them [Confederate POWs] of all earthly sorrows in one month." Horigan describes Sanger as "a cold, calculating, self-serving medical officer whose lack of compassion led him to deny his patients at Elmira his salutary medical skills." Horigan, *Elmira: Death Camp of the North*, 129-131.

51 The problems created by Foster's Pond are discussed in all secondary accounts. There seems little doubt that addressing such a health hazard should have been more of a priority. Gray, *The Business of Captivity*, 57-58; Pickenpaugh, *Captives in Gray*, 78.

Saunders, Jr.: A Flower at Elmira: The Prisoner of War Diary of Wilbur Wightman

thus flush out the pond naturally.[52] The rains never came and the pond continued to be a health threat well into the winter when falling temperatures alleviated the problem somewhat. By that time though, bacterial infections contracted through tainted water caused deadly dysentery and exacted an enormous toll on the prisoners.

Most of the other deaths that occurred in August and September can be attributed to scurvy; a dietary deficiency of vitamin C that causes hair and teeth loss, a "sponginess" to the gums and roof of the mouth, yellowish and pallid skin, dangerously chronic diarrhea, and internal bleeding. Left untreated, scurvy is invariably fatal. Chief Surgeon Sanger reported 793 cases by the end of August. Much to his consternation, that number had more than doubled by the middle of September.[53] Correctly following the most widely held course of treatment, Sanger recommended that increased rations of fruits and vegetables be added to the prisoners' diet. Earlier, however, in May 1864, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton—apparently in retaliation for the horrible conditions Union soldiers faced in Southern POW camps—had ordered a universal twenty percent reduction in rations for all Confederate POWs, and thus the prisoners were deprived of much-needed nutrients, especially vitamin C.[54] Given that the rations reduction went into effect before Elmira accepted its first POW, it is highly likely that many Confederates arrived in camp already suffering from advanced scurvy—especially those who had spent May and June in other POW camps such as Point Lookout in southern Maryland. On July 30, Gramling recorded that several of the men with whom he had been captured at the Battle of the Wilderness arrived at Elmira. "Cay, Carter, Felkel, Berry, [and] Snipes came here today from Point Lookout and several others from the regiment. They are well but look quite thin. Give Point Lookout a bad name."[55]

The most deadly disease to strike the prisoner population at Elmira was smallpox. It is generally noted that this dreaded

52 Pickenpaugh, *Captives in Gray*, 78.
53 Gray, *The Business of Captivity*, 28.
54 The issue of Union retaliation has been especially contentious. See the discussions in Gray, *The Business of Captivity*, 29; Sanders, *While in the Hands of the Enemy*, 167-168; historian James Gillispie argues that though Secretary Stanton approved a retaliation policy in response to the horrors at Andersonville, the results of that policy were not as severe as some historians have suggested. He argues further that the retaliation program was relaxed significantly by November 1864. Gillispie, *Andersonvilles of the North*, 97-100.
55 Gramling Diary, July 30, 1864.

contagion first entered Elmira in October 1864 via prisoners captured at Fort Morgan near Mobile, Alabama. However, it appears that the disease was limited in October to a relatively few patients and that a full-fledged outbreak did not occur until December. According to Dr. G. T. Taylor, he and several other prisoners were held as POWs at Governor's Island in New York Harbor from August until December, and they all contracted smallpox while there. Despite the contagiousness of their illness, Taylor asserted, they were transferred to Elmira in early December 1864.[56] By the third week of that month, and, as discussed by Gramling, smallpox had spread rapidly throughout much of the prison population. The mortality figures for January, February, and March, respectively, were astonishingly high: 285, 426, and 491.[57]

As indicated in his diary, although Gramling hardly enjoyed perfect health during his captivity, he was exceedingly fortunate to have endured his time at Elmira without suffering from or contracting any of the three most deadly maladies. Likewise, given the medical office's pitiful record of caring for desperately ill prisoners, Gramling was blessed that the few bouts of illness he experienced never required hospitalization. The smallpox vaccination he received in December, though tremendously painful, likely saved his life.

As a day-by-day account by a young man who spent thirteen months as a Confederate POW, Wilbur Gramling's diary adds considerably to our understanding of how the Union treated its prisoners. Moreover, given that he provides a first-hand description of prison life at Elmira, it would seem that the diary would serve

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56 G. T. Taylor, "Prison Experiences in Elmira, NY," 327.

57 Holmes, *The Elmira Prison Camp*, 257-258. Numerous accounts, both primary and secondary, lay most of the blame for the substandard medical care at Elmira before December 1864 squarely into the lap of Chief Surgeon Sanger. These accounts argue that Sanger wantonly neglected his duties by ignoring the health hazards posed by Foster's Pond and did little to obviate the scurvy epidemic until much too late. The critics likewise charge that Sanger delayed taking any action regarding smallpox until well after the pestilence was widespread throughout the prison camp. This information is significant because later accounts charge that Sanger and the medical staff were derelict in addressing the smallpox epidemic throughout October and November. However, it appears that though there may have been a few isolated cases of smallpox during those months, there was no serious outbreak before the second week of December. And by then, Dr. Sanger had been relieved of his duties at Elmira. The medical staff in Elmira vaccinated most of the prisoners throughout that month. Regardless of these efforts though, 1,202 prisoners died during January, February, and March, with a significant percentage of the deaths being caused by smallpox.

as one of the more reliable primary sources on prison life at that camp. In so many respects though, Gramling's diary starkly contradicts to a remarkable degree virtually all other primary and secondary accounts, especially regarding the contentious issue of prisoner treatment. Arriving at Elmira in July 1864 and surviving in relatively good health for the next eleven month seems extraordinary in light of the many testimonials of other prisoners who recounted the horrors of life at "Helmira." Yet Gramling never mentioned being starved or eating pets and vermin. He was never beaten by the guards, he spent his time housed in a barracks heated by cast-iron stoves, and, by his own account, he normally received plenty of food.[58] The incongruences between sources such as Gramling's daybook and a myriad of first-person accounts written after the war are especially difficult to reconcile.

The experience of being a Civil War POW—or, for that matter, a prisoner during any war fought before international agreements established rules for acceptable treatment—often hinged entirely on how well the captors chose to treat their captives, and like so much else about the Civil War, managing large-scale POW camps was entirely unprecedented for both sides. It is important to remember that even during the nineteenth century, prisoners of war were not viewed as criminals and, generally speaking, were not to be treated as such. Yet, virtually everyone has heard of the horrors that occurred within the walls of Andersonville Prison in Georgia. It is clear beyond any reasonable argument that the Confederacy failed tragically in properly caring for large numbers of prisoners of war, and arguments have raged ever since as to whether the South could have prevented such horrible deaths.

Debates have raged likewise concerning northern POW camps and the experiences of Confederate prisoners. No one would argue that death on a scale of Andersonville occurred within any Federal camp. Yet, the death rate at Elmira Prison—24.3%—came appallingly close to matching the infamous Confederate camp. The question then, as is the question now is: was the high death rate

58 This statement by no means suggests that Gramling enjoyed an idyllic life at Elmira. He mentions on January 22, 1865 that his feet "were frostbitten again," clearly indicating that he lacked adequate shoes on more than one occasion. Though he seemingly was not a person to be involved in trouble, for some unknown offense he spent twenty-four hours on December 13-14 locked in a small shack known as the "guardhouse." This sweatbox was "a pretty lousy hole," Gramling wrote on the 14th. He was allowed only bread and water during his time in the box.

at Elmira preventable? Moreover, did the Federal government, or officials within it or the US military, institute policies deliberately intended to sicken or even to kill Confederate POWs so as to prevent them from returning to the battlefield—or perhaps in retaliation for the inhumane treatment Union soldiers received at Andersonville? Was Elmira Prison, which was being prepared to accept prisoners during spring 1864, when reports of the horrors at Andersonville filtered north, designed specifically as a "death camp," a place where the North would exact its revenge by mistreating southern POWs? And finally, did the Federal government intentionally deprive the men adequate shelter from the elements, healthy food, and medical care? The answers to these questions have proved difficult to ascertain because most of the first-hand accounts by former southern prisoners were written well after the war and were influenced by considerations well beyond mere historical fact. Primary sources such as Gramling's diary, on the other hand—written as the events occurred—are indeed rare, and they often tell far different tales of prison life at Elmira than the memoirs written well after the guns had silenced and the prisoners released through the prison's gates.

The issue of how prisoners were treated at Elmira became hopelessly ensnared in post-Civil War debates over which side, Union or Confederate, mistreated POWs more. During much of the three decades following Lee's surrender at Appomattox, a number of highly exaggerated accounts by Union soldiers imprisoned at Andersonville and other POW camps were published and received wide circulation, often with the allegations that the intentional mistreatment Union soldiers experienced in Confederate-run camps reflected the savage nature of southern society in general, especially as it had been befouled by the evils of slavery. Incensed former Confederate POWs published their reminiscences in response and, with equally imaginative accounts, charged that they had been mistreated just as severally. Even more unconscionable, they argued, was that their mistreatment occurred within a land of plenty and that all of the deprivations in food, clothing, blankets, medical care, and heating fuel were intentionally and specifically concocted to punish or eliminate Confederate POWs.[59]

59 One of the more informative works covering the debates over treatment within northern and southern POW camps and the ever-changing nature of how Americans chose to remember the war and all of its horrors is Cloyd, *Haunted by Atrocity*.

These post-war memoirs by former Confederate POWs constitute one genre of publications echoing the Lost Cause interpretation of the Civil War that emerged in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. This interpretation was part of a regional and cultural movement dedicated to honoring the Confederacy, deifying its military leadership, and elevating the southern war effort to a noble and glorious cause. Moreover, organizations such as the Southern Historical Society and numerous local and state-level Ladies Memorial Associations that evolved into various chapters of the Daughters of the Confederacy sought to glorify the war by memorializing its southern participants while ensuring that school-age children were taught the "proper" (i.e., southern) interpretation of the war. Lost Cause enthusiasts thus whitewashed the war, conveniently disposed of the thorny slavery issue, and sought to reclaim some semblance of the moral high ground.[60]

Though Lost Cause apostles generally acknowledged that the South may have been wrong on the slavery issue, they insisted that Confederate soldiers nevertheless fought honorably for the higher ideals of constitutionalism, liberty, and southern independence. Among so many other attributes, the Lost Cause was an effort to reclaim southern honor. Yet northern accounts of the horrors within Andersonville, Libby Prison, and other POW camps presented the Confederacy in darkness and evil, cut southern honor to its core, maligned southern character, and severally tweaked southern sensibilities. In response, between 1865 and 1920, scores of first-hand memoirs were published by former Confederate POWs all generally parroting the same message: the Lincoln Administration—and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton most particularly—mandated a retaliatory policy for Confederate POWs that led to abuse, cruel treatment, inadequate facilities, poor diets, and thousands of deaths.

Few of these Lost Cause memorialists disputed the 29% mortality rate within Andersonville Prison. However, the post-war defenders of southern honor argued that such tragic losses were

60 Recent works that have added significantly to our understanding of the Lost Cause include Gary Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan, eds., *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause and the Emergence of the New South, 1865-1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). For a study of the Ladies Memorial Associations see Caroline E. Janney, *Burying the Dead But Not the Past: Ladies Memorial Associations and the Lost Cause* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); see especially Cloyd, *Haunted by Atrocity*, 67-72.

unavoidable, as the South had by the final year of the war become incapable of caring for so many prisoners. The South could not feed itself, they argued, much less prisoners of war. Conversely, the North suffered no such privations, and the high mortality rate in Elmira, critics of northern prison camps asserted, thereby reflected intentional brutality.[61]

The post-war memoirs written by former Elmira prisoners seemingly would offer a treasure trove of primary research material highly useful for documenting life inside the camp. However, as the majority of these sources are decidedly less-than reliable because they are agenda-driven, unabashedly biased, and weighted with ulterior motives, they must be viewed through a most skeptical lens. Virtually all of the first-hand but Lost-Cause memoirs that allege abuse and brutality at Elmira were written in the spirit of reclaiming southern honor by exposing what the memoirists perceived as northern dishonor.

Anthony M. Keiley, a former sergeant in the 12th Virginia captured during Grant's siege of Petersburg, was held as an Elmira POW from September through November 1864. After being paroled, Keiley returned to Richmond and published his memoirs based on what he claimed was a diary he had kept throughout his imprisonment. Ultimately published in 1866 as *In Vinculus; or, The Prisoner of War*, Keiley's narrative is a wild-eyed rant overflowing with colorful invective for his captors.[62] Keiley hoped to sell books, and he knew that a manuscript highlighting the evils of the northern people would be quite popular. His book likewise was one of the first published responses from a southerner to the charge that the Confederate government intentionally starved prisoners at Andersonville.

Though he described a number of the Union officers at Elmira, Keiley directed his most scathing diatribe at William Peck, one of six captains assigned to Barracks Number 3. "There was" among these officers, he wrote, "a long-nosed, long-faced, long-jawed, long-bearded, long-bodied, long-legged, endless-footed, and long-skirted curiosity, yclept [named] Captain Peck" who, Keiley charged, was notorious for stealing the prisoners' personal belongings and then "huckstering" them for substantial personal gain.

61 Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 23-24, 57; Gillispie, *Andersonvilles of the North*, 29-45.

62 Anthony M. Keiley, *In Vinculis; or, The Prisoner of War, Being the Experience of a Rebel in Two Federal Pens, Interspersed With Reminiscences of the Late War* (New York: Blelock and Company, 1866).

"Of the same block [Barracks Number 3]," Keiley wrote, "Captain Borden was a chip: a fair-haired, light-moustached, Saxon-faced 'Yank'—far the worst type of man, let me tell you . . . whose whole intercourse with the prisoners was the essence of brutality."[63] At the same time though, Keiley reported that Major Henry V. Colt, the immediate supervisor for all Union personnel for Barracks Number 3, was "uniformly urbane and courteous in his demeanor, [and that he] performed the varied, and often annoying, offices of his post with a degree of justice to his position and to men under his charge [with] a [level of] patience, fidelity, and humanity that could not be surpassed." In stark contrast to Major Colt, "[Dr.] Sanger was simply a brute," Keiley remarked bluntly, who intentionally abused ill Confederates. This "club footed little gentleman, with an abnormal head and a snaky look in his eyes," he continued, engaged in "systematic inhumanity to the sick." Lastly, Keiley stated that men driven by hunger regularly hunted, killed, and ate rats—which also served as a medium of exchange on the camp's illicit prisoner-run market.[64]

Walter Addison, a private in the 44th Tennessee Infantry, spent nearly twelve months at Elmira and wrote his account of prison life in 1889. Not only did Addison charge that the soldiers in Elmira were treated in the most brutally inhumane manner imaginable, he asserted that killing Confederate prisoners was a matter of policy within the camp. "There is no doubt in my mind," he wrote,

> "as to the intention of our enemies to rid themselves of as many of our prisoners as was possible, no matter what the means to which they resorted. Witness in various instances when contagious diseases were introduced into crowded prisons. I recollect, in one instance at Elmira hundreds

63 Keiley, *In Vinculis*, 133-134. Likewise typical were the reminiscences of T.C. Davis, a private in the North Carolina 40th Infantry, who referred to the officers as the "meanest men I ever saw—demons in human flesh." Taylor, "Prison Experiences in Elmira, NY," 65. Referring to one of the guards at Elmira, a former sergeant in the 44th Tennessee Regiment recalled that "one, whose name I have forgotten, was a fiend. He was a humped-back Scotchman [*sic*], nicknamed by the boys 'Old Hogback,' but he was hog all over." G.W.D. Porter, "Nine Months in a Northern Prison," *The Annals of the Army of Tennessee*, Vol. 1, ed. Edwin Drake (Nashville, TN: A.D. Haynes, 1878), 160-161, http://www.tennessee-scv.org/4455/9months.htm, (accessed April 15, 2015).

64 Keiley, *In Vinculis*, 134, 138, 145, 146. Keiley alleged that "The most scandalous neglect prevailed even in so simple a matter as providing food for the sick, and I do not doubt that many of those who died perished from actual starvation," 140.

> of deaths were the result of smallpox introduced from patients from Blackwell Island, New York."[65]

Adding to his astonishing claim that smallpox was intentionally and maliciously introduced into the prisoner population, Addison also described the "outrageous manner" of administering vaccinations, noting that as each prisoner approached the head of the line "the butchering began by illiterate and irresponsible men [of the medical staff]." "They would take hold of a thick piece of flesh," he wrote, "dip a lancet into the diluted virus, and thrust it entirely through the pinched up flesh." The wounds often became inflamed and gangrenous, Addison remembered, and there were men whose arms had to be amputated because of this procedure.[66]

Addison also described starving men subsisting on a diet of whatever small animal that could be caught and killed. "[O]n one occasion an officer came into the stockade accompanied by his favorite dog. No sooner was the dog discovered by several hungry prisoners than he was seized and converted into food." "[Neither] rats, dogs, cats nor any other animal would long exist amongst that hungry throng of prisoners." "Would men eat dogs and rats," he asked, "unless suffering from extreme hunger?"[67]

Marcus Toney published his memoirs, *Privations of a Private*, in 1907, and, similar to Keiley, assured his readers that his memoirs were based on a diary he kept while at Elmira. Toney recounted having to sleep in tents even when the outdoor temperature plummeted well below zero and subsisting on an inadequate prison diet that compelled hungry men to eat vermin of all sorts. Though thankful that he managed to survive on prison rations and gifts of food from friends, "I have tasted a piece of rat," he admitted, "and it is much like squirrel."[68]

John R. King was a Virginia soldier captured at Spotsylvania Courthouse. In 1916, over a half-century after Lee's surrender, he was asked by the Stonewall Jackson Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy to chronicle his memories of prisoner

65 Walter Addison, "Recollections of a Confederate Soldier of the Prison-Pens of Point Lookout, Md., and Elmira, New York," Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, via Elmira Prison Camp Online Library, http://www.angelfire.com/ny5/elmiraprison/addison.html, (accessed 04/15/2015).

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 Marcus Toney, *The Privations of a Private*, 2nd edition (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the Methodists Episcopal Church, South, 1907), 101.

treatment. Describing a line of prisoners entering the mess hall, King recalled that "We went in a trot, canteens, buckets, tin cans, coffee pots, rattled, old rags and strings, and long unkept [*sic*] hair, dirt and grey backs, cheek bones projecting, for there was very little of us except skin and bones." "It has often been said," he added, "that the northern people treated and fed their prisoners well. I wish it were true, but during my imprisonment which was more than a year, I never saw any of the good treatment."[69]

Given that historians chronicling the Civil War have produced several lifetimes of reading on nearly every aspect imaginable, it is curious that secondary works on northern POW camps have until just recently been altogether scarce. During the last two decades, however, a significant number of monographs has been published detailing either one particular prison or the Union's POW policies in general. The primary controversies within the historiography of Elmira Prison center on whether the epithet "Helmira" has any validity whatsoever. Moreover, historians have had to judge to what extent, if any, prisoners at Elmira were abused, mistreated, starved, or improperly cared for. Those historians willing to believe post-war accounts generally argue that, indeed, Confederate prisoners at Elmira suffered both terribly and needlessly and that if Elmira was not specifically Hell, it was at best one of its portals.[70] On the other hand, the most reliable first-hand accounts, such as Wilbur Gramling's diary, apparently have been used more selectively because these do not portray as much of a horror story at Elmira as do the memoirs. One historian argues that Gramling's relatively tolerable experiences differed so dramatically from those of other prisoners because he was one of the fortunate few who secured jobs in the camp.[71]

Despite some historians' inclination to dismiss Gramling's experiences as exceptional rather than typical, other first-person accounts—diaries written while their writers were incarcerated at Elmira—more often support rather than refute Gramling's facts

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69 John R. King, *My Experiences in the Confederate Army and in Northern Prisons, Written from Memory* (Clarksburg, WV: Stonewall Jackson Chapter No. 1333, United Daughters of the Confederacy, 1917), via Elmira Prison Camp Online Library, http://www.angelfire.com/ny5/elmiraprison/king.html, (accessed April 21, 2015).

70 Two recent studies that focus specifically on prisoner suffering at Elmira and other POW camps and are particularly critical of the camp's administration as well as Colonel William Hoffman and Secretary Edwin Stanton include Speer, *Portals to Hell* and Horigan, *Elmira: Death Camp of the North*.

71 Horigan, *Elmira, Death Camp of the North*, 64.

as he recorded them. Like Gramling, Thomas Benton Alexander, a sergeant in the 1st Tennessee Heavy Artillery who spent four months at Elmira from December 5, 1864 until March 10, 1865, also kept a day book chronicling his experiences as a POW.[72] With his arrival at the camp, Alexander noted that "our quarters is [*sic*] very good with 2 stoves in Each Barracks very good Bunks 3 men to each Bunk." He likewise added his assessment of the food. "[W]e have two meals a Day," he wrote, "for Breakfast Bread and meat for Dinner soop [*sic*] and Bread [.] [N]o supper[.] [T]he two meals very good Enough to live on if we had one more meal a Day we would do well."[73] Alexander also noted the high death rate during that month's smallpox outbreak, "Dying by the dozzen per day," he wrote, "some frees [*sic*]"[74] As not all of the new barracks were fully constructed until late December, it is likely that some of the unfortunate POWs still quartered in tents froze to death in the bitterly cold December weather. Overall though, Alexander's account mirrors Gramling's, especially in regard to the prisoners' relatively adequate diet.

Louis Leon was another Elmira Prison diarist. Having served as a sharpshooter in Company C of the 1st North Carolina Regiment from the war's outset, Leon was captured at the Wilderness on May 5, 1864. He was held at Point Lookout, Maryland, from May 15th through July 27th when he and roughly seven hundred other prisoners were sent to Elmira.[75] Noting that there were about 3,000 prisoners at Elmira when he arrived, Leon was among the Confederate POWs who arrived at the camp while there remained sufficient room within the barracks. "I like this place better than Point Lookout," he wrote.

Leon's diary entries were written sporadically; he did not write daily but rather added comments pertaining to an entire month or longer. His entry for September was solely to complain about

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72 Alexander had been held as a POW twice previous to his incarceration at Elmira. He was captured at Fort Donelson in February 1862, paroled, then recaptured at Port Hudson in 1863, and once again paroled. George Rugg, "Introduction," *Thomas Benton Alexander Diary, Manuscripts of the American Civil War*. University of Notre Dame, Hesburgh Libraries, Rare Books and Special Collections, http://www.rarebooks.nd.edu/digital/civil_war/diaries_journals/alexander/, (accessed September 3, 2015).

73 Ibid., 38.

74 Ibid., 39.

75 Louis Leon, *Diary of a Tarheel Confederate Soldier*, via *Documenting the American South, or, The Southern Experience in 19th-century America*, Digital Edition (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Academic Affairs Library), 1998,. http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/leon/leon.html, (accessed September 22, 2015).

the changing weather. "It is very cold," he wrote, "worse than I have seen it in the South in the dead of winter." He mentioned the smallpox outbreak in his October 1864 entry, and he also corroborates post-war memoirs that speak of prisoners eating rats to supplement their rather meager meat rations. "We can buy from prisoners rats, 25 cents each, killed and dressed. Quite a number of our boys have gone into the rat business." For November and December, Leon recorded that not much had changed, other than that the weather had turned bitterly cold and the men spent most of their time indoors. "We dance every night at some of our quarters," he wrote. "Some of the men put a white handkerchief around one of their arms, and these [men] act as the ladies. We have a jolly good time."[76] Such a report hardly corresponds to post-war memoirs that provide such graphic detail on the never-ending evils within the walls of "Helmira."

In January 1865, Leon admitted that the South could not win the war. "Nothing [new]," he wrote gloomily, "only that I fear that our cause is lost, as we are losing heavily and have no more men at home to come to the army." He noted in February that, "The smallpox is frightful. There is not a day that at least twenty men are taken out dead." "It is the same gloomy and discouraging news from the South," he wrote as his March entry, "and gloomy and discouraging in prison." When word reached Elmira that Lee had surrendered his army on April 9th, Leon and about four hundred of his fellow prisoners "took the cursed oath and were given transportation to wherever we wanted to go."[77]

Considering that Alexander's and Leon's diaries corroborate closely most of the details provided within Gramling's diary, it would be unwise to dismiss Gramling's relatively tolerable experiences as unique or to attribute them to him having had the good fortune of being chosen to work as a waiter. After all, neither Alexander nor Leon worked in the mess hall. Leon evidently supplemented his diet with rodents, but consuming such morsels would not by itself indicate that he barely survived on the rations provided. What is common to all three diarists was that they were fortunate to have arrived at Elmira when there was space available within barracks. There should be no doubt that the roofs over their heads and the stoves that warmed them through the bitterly cold New York winter made their time at Elmira, if not pleasant, far more survivable.

76 Ibid., 67-68.
77 Ibid., 69-70.

Gramling's good luck, if one wishes to look at it that way, extended far beyond being a waiter in the mess hall. Moreover, the circumstances and timing of his capture and incarceration most likely directly influenced his experiences. It may, for instance, seem altogether counterintuitive to suggest that Gramling was fortunate to have been shot at the Battle of the Wilderness. After all, can being struck by a .54 caliber projectile in any way be viewed as fortuitous? It is reasonable to assume, however, that without this battle injury, he would have been sent to Point Lookout along with the rest of the Company K prisoners, and there he would have suffered in the open air throughout June and July instead of being sent to the hospitals in Washington, DC. Also fortuitous was Gramling's transfer to the Old Capitol Prison. The poor and overcrowded conditions in that facility made relocating the prisoners a priority. Therefore, instead of arriving at Elmira after all of the space in the barracks had been assigned, Gramling arrived in time to be given adequate housing. Had he arrived just a few days later, more importantly, he likely would not have been chosen to serve as a waiter in the mess hall, and hence, he would not have had as much food. Though it is evident that the rations served at Elmira were often less-than nutritious, the extra portions of soup seasoned heavily with onions meant that Gramling was better able to fend off scurvy. Lastly, fortune smiled on Wilbur Gramling once again when his smallpox vaccine "took" and he did not contract that deadly scourge.

Though he had held out for several months, in his desperation to get home—he never once talked of being released so that he could rejoin the fight—Gramling signed the oath of allegiance on April 26, 1865, two weeks after Lee's surrender at Appomattox. "I am still an R. E. Reb," he wrote proudly on the 24th, but two days later, he entered, "Most all have applied to take the oath and I was weak enough to do so also. Sorry for it since. [Will] [t]ry and live in the hopes that it will prove the best." The next day's entry said, "Am feeling troubled today, afraid I have done wrong."[78] The remaining nine entries of the diary—it ends on May 5, 1865, one year from the date of his capture—speak of release rumors, the marked decline in the number of smallpox cases, and his general boredom. "Fair and pleasant," he recorded on May 4th. Revealingly, he then noted that "Making a total of 50 cents per day for helping an Ethiopian saw every night." He then commented, "New U.S." Gramling ended his diary the next day. "Fixing up quite a

78 Gramling Diary, April 24, 1865; April 26, 1865.

garden," he wrote as his last line—one that pleasantly brings to mind Voltaire's Candide.[79]

On June 22, 1865 Gramling and several hundred of his fellow prisoners were loaded onto trains and sent south. What happened to him beyond that date is unknown. He most likely traveled directly to Florida, returned home, and resumed working on the family farm. However, Wilbur died on December 3, 1870, just five years after the war and at the young age of twenty seven. Though multiple sources note that he died of a lung ailment contracted during his time at Elmira, there is no evidence to support such a claim.[80] Regardless, he was laid to rest in a small cemetery less than fifty yards from the front door of his beloved Old Pisgah Church.[81]

Historians determined to place blame—hell-bent on finding the demons in the story of Elmira Prison—likely would be frustrated in their efforts after consulting the Gramling Diary. And as shown, other diaries, such as those by Thomas B. Alexander and Louis Leon, offer additional and reliable evidence that life within Elmira was more tolerable than described by post-war memoirists whose biased reports and ulterior motives render their accounts questionable at best. Neither Gramling, nor Alexander, nor Leon speak of abusive guards killing men in cold blood, and they never described starving skeletons of men too weak to walk. It would seem that such incidences and images would not have been left out of their accounts. It is imperative, therefore, that each of the post-war, agenda-driven memoirs be used in a highly measured manner and most assuredly not taken at face value.[82]

Gramling's daybook is one of those sources that should give us pause as it serves as an especially reliable counterbalance. By itself,

79 Ibid., May 4, 1865; May 5, 1865.

80 Though the actual cause of Wilbur Gramling's premature death likely will never be determined, it seems improbable that it can be attributed to any ailment contracted at Elmira. Even as late as March 31, 1865, the day following Gramling's twenty-second birthday, he noted in his diary that "The winter is about over now and it has not been so very hard. I have toughed it out very well. Can't say that I have suffered any either from cold or hunger for which I am very thankful. [I] [h]ave been blessed so far." It might be concluded from these lines, though, that Gramling had seen considerable suffering during his time at Elmira and that he well understood just how fortunate he had been. Gramling Diary, March 31, 1865.

81 "Genealogical Information, The Gramling Diary," The Gramling Collection, MSS 88-070, Folder 2, State Library and Archives of Florida, Tallahassee, FL.

82 Historian James Gillispie clearly agrees with this conclusion. "The overwhelming majority [of post-war memoirs] from both regions" he notes, "are virulent polemics that often conflict with wartime records and diaries." Gillispie, *Andersonvilles of the North*, 3.

it most certainly would not support the assertion that Elmira was a death camp *by design*. But there is no getting away from the appallingly high 24.3% mortality rate. Indeed, it was a death camp—or, perhaps more accurately stated, it was a place where through neglect, indifference, inexperience, and ignorance, nearly three thousand men died while being held captive within its fences. If Confederate prisoners were ill or malnourished upon entering, their chances of surviving Elmira were that much less. As cruel as it may sound, Elmira was not a spa—and the prisoners were not there on a health cure. The myriad and unprecedented problems associated with housing, feeding, clothing, and providing proper medical attention for POWs throughout 1864 and 1865 tragically reflected the unprecedented nature of the entire war.