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## THE CONFEDERATE SHOEMAKERS OF TOWN BLUFF, TEXAS

*By Thomas R. Reid*

Throughout the brief life of the Provisional Army of the Confederate States, soldiers suffered from an ongoing shortage of shoes. In August 1862, Captain John Stark of Company H, Thirteenth Texas Cavalry (dismounted), wrote to his wife from southern Arkansas that, "some of the boys are nearly naked now, and some barefooted."<sup>1</sup> In the same letter, Stark mentioned that a shop in Monroe, Louisiana, sold shoes for \$5.00 a pair, but had so many orders it could not help him. Lieutenant Theophilus Perry of the Twenty-eighth Texas Cavalry wrote that a shop in Shreveport had shoes for \$10.00 but they were too "fine and unsuitable."<sup>2</sup> At the time common soldiers were paid only \$11.00 a month.

In campaigns fought west of the Mississippi River, commanders often reported leaving "shoeless" soldiers behind in camp as they prepared for battle. After battles, Union casualties or prisoners often were stripped of their footgear. One Confederate soldier commented in the Charleston *Daily Courier* on September 3, 1862, that "All a Yankee is worth is his shoes."<sup>3</sup> The shortages were attributed to the location of the center of commercial shoe manufacturing which was in the Union-controlled northeast.

Following the successful conclusion of the Red River Campaign in the summer of 1864, which had included moving large infantry formations many hundreds of miles, shoe shortages became critical. Major General John G. Walker, commander of the Confederate District of Western Louisiana, issued orders on July 1, 1864, establishing a military shoe factory at Town Bluff, in eastern Tyler County, Texas, and assigning soldiers as workers.<sup>4</sup> Town Bluff was a cotton port on the Neches River located on high bluffs overlooking the cypress-lined eastern bank in Jasper County. It was a village of white-painted, wood-frame homes, warehouses, and businesses. It had been surveyed, subdivided, and promoted in the 1830s by Wyatt Hanks, a former member of the first government of the Republic of Texas as well as the operator of the first ferry on the Neches at that location. General Walker may have selected Town Bluff as the location of the shoe factory because of an existing leather tanning facility as well as the availability of a trained shoemaker, Private William R. Ratcliff, Jr.<sup>5</sup>

The four soldiers detailed to the Town Bluff shoe factory were conscripted by the Confederacy. All conscripts were required to be assigned to combat units prior to being detailed to other duties. In this case, the soldiers were assigned to Captain Charles H. Jones' Company K, Thirteenth Texas Cavalry Regiment (dismounted), then serving in Louisiana and Arkansas in the Trans-Mississippi Department.<sup>6</sup> The probable foreman of the enterprise, Ratcliff, was a volunteer detailed from Company D of Spaight's 11th Battalion, then stationed between Beaumont and Sabine Pass.<sup>7</sup> The soldiers detailed for duty at

Town Bluff were considerably older than those already serving in the Thirteenth Texas Cavalry, whose mean age in May 1862 was twenty-five years.<sup>8</sup> The mean age of the shoemakers in 1864 was thirty-five.

One of the shoemakers, Samuel W. Allen, a native of Pennsylvania, probably came to Texas by way of Tennessee, where his wife had been born, about 1857. He was described in the Tyler County, Texas, census of 1860 as a mechanic (millwright) aged twenty-seven with a two-year-old daughter who had been born in Texas. Allen's only mention in the records of Company K occurs in the regiment's final muster in April 1865. This was typical of those from Tyler County detailed as shoemakers, and can be explained by the fact that there are no extant muster records for March 1, 1864, to March 31, 1865.<sup>9</sup>

D.M.H. Carroway, a native of Alabama, came to Tyler County, Texas, about 1858. His sons, one aged two and the other eight months, were listed in the census in 1860 as having been born in Texas. At that time, Carroway, at the age of twenty-eight, was working as a farm laborer. His wife, born in Georgia, was listed in the census as illiterate. Carroway worked near the large farm of W. H. Perryman located on the road from Woodville to Mott's Ferry on the Neches River.<sup>10</sup>

Rufus King Ratcliff was born in Mississippi in 1819. He married Sarah M. Thompson in September 1843. In May 1846, Ratcliff was the first postmaster in the town of Ratcliff, a village that was located a few miles northwest of Town Bluff near Wolf Creek.<sup>11</sup> He also had served as county tax assessor in Tyler County's first administration following statehood. Forty-five years old in 1864, Ratcliff was at the upper extreme of those subject to the Confederate draft.

George Washington Richardson had been born in Louisiana in 1827; his wife was a native of Mississippi. In 1860 they were living in Tyler County, where their first son had been born about 1858. Richardson farmed near Spurger, Texas, and was thirty-seven at the time of his conscription.<sup>12</sup>

William R. Ratcliff, Jr. was born in Mississippi. His family relocated to Tyler County when he was approximately seven years old. His father, described in the census of 1860 as a mechanic, was a native of Tennessee and his mother was Canadian. William Jr. was a successful farmer who enlisted in the Confederate service in a company raised in Tyler County by his father-in-law, Captain James Gortney Collier, for Lieutenant Colonel Ashley Spaight's Eleventh Battalion of Texas Volunteers.<sup>13</sup>

In 1935, eighty-one-year-old Elizabeth Abigail Ratcliff Hicks, the daughter of William R. Ratcliff, Jr., recalled that her family lived on a small farm on Beech Creek, near Town Bluff, at the time of the Civil War. The farm had been given to her father by her grandfather, James G. Collier, one of the county's early settlers.<sup>14</sup> About seven years old at the time the war broke out, Elizabeth had vivid memories of the war and of the part her family played in making shoes for the Southern soldiers.<sup>15</sup>

Mrs. Hicks related, "My father went into the war. He was sent to

Jefferson County and trained for a while with the troops between Beaumont and Sabine Pass.” Her father served in Lieutenant Colonel Ashley W. Spaight’s Eleventh Battalion of Texas Volunteers, whose mission was to defend the coast from Sabine Pass westward against the threat of Union invasion. Her grandfather, Captain James G. Collier commanded Spaight’s Company D, in which her father also served.<sup>16</sup> Her father had learned, at a young age, to make shoes. Once his battalion commander discovered this, Spaight detailed Ratcliff back home in November 1862 to fill that urgent need. The Confederate District of Texas made this temporary arrangement official April 26, 1863, with a formal detail to produce shoes for the army.<sup>17</sup>

While it was certainly an unromantic job, Ratcliff and the family dedicated themselves to it as a necessary task. His superiors had established a quota of fifteen pairs of shoes a week, but he bettered that. For anything beyond his weekly allotment he received some payment in Confederate currency, but for the stipulated fifteen pairs he got nothing other than his regular military pay. Elizabeth recalled that aside from the rawhides themselves, which her father and brothers tanned, the family furnished all the material for the Confederate shoes. She clearly remembered the big tanning vats, the red oak bark and the mill where it was ground.

“My mother and the other children made wooden pegs - we had no metal nails, of course,” Mrs. Hicks remembered. “We also made all the thread for the shoes - every bit of it. My mother had me spin two hanks of thread every day. Then if it wasn’t too dark, when I finished I could go out and play a little. But after that I had to come in, spin some more, and then knit a while.” The wooden shoe nails were whittled from red oak, and after being hardened carefully in the fire, they were often more durable than soft iron. Once driven into the soles and heels of shoes, they absorbed moisture and expanded slightly, producing a strong bond in the leather.<sup>18</sup>

The leather works mentioned by Eliza Hicks was located on Tanners Creek, a short distance upstream from Town Bluff near the Neches River and just downstream from Wolf Creek.<sup>19</sup> The former site of the tannery is now submerged beneath the waters of B. A. Steinhagen Lake. An example of the early nineteenth-century mill used to grind the red oak bark for its tannin<sup>20</sup> used in the process can be seen on the grounds of Heritage Village Museum located a short distance west of Woodville, Texas. No reference remains to suggest a location of the workshop in Town Bluff. The removal of the county seat to Woodville in 1846, however, began a decline in commercial activity there that probably ensured that many buildings were vacant and available for the enterprise.

The tanning process involved the use of salt, alum, gall, and tannin made from red oak bark, as well as frequent changes of water, boiling, scraping, and drying. Tanning hides for shoes, known as bark tanning, was labor intensive and took about forty-five days to complete.<sup>21</sup> Eliza Hicks mentioned that her uncle, Tom Hicks, “helped with the tanning,” but it is unclear if that was a part of the shoemakers’ duties or a separate business selling leather to the Confederate authorities.

The finished shoes were square-toed, ankle-high brogans, reddish-brown in color. Three or four pairs of eyes for the rawhide laces secured them. The soles and heels were attached to the uppers by small wooden pegs or nails. Although produced in the normal range of sizes, there was no difference between "left" and "right" shoes; they conformed to the shape of the wearer's foot with time. Similar shoes were produced in a factory in Georgia during the war, and were sold to the Quartermaster Department for \$2.25 per pair.<sup>22</sup> The official Confederate regulation for clothing issue to the army was contained in Adjutant General Samuel Cooper's General Order 100, December 8, 1862, and stipulated that four pairs were to be issued each year without charge and that additional shoes would be charged against the soldier's pay at a cost of \$6.00 a pair.<sup>23</sup> The system of distribution was often less than ideal. While stationed in Pineville, Louisiana, in the summer of 1863, Private John C. Porter of the Eighteenth Texas Infantry recalled, "Here we drew a lot of shoes, but as I was out on guard, I got none, although I had been barefoot for months. However, they afterward got me a pair of elevens ... my size being eights, which I wore until the spring of 1864."<sup>24</sup> The intended level of resupply was a goal the Quartermaster Department could never attain.

Based on the output required of Private William R. Ratcliff, Jr., during his original detail - fifteen pairs per week - the five or so soldiers in the workshop at Town Bluff probably produced in excess of 3,000 pairs of shoes for the Confederate Army between July 1864 and June 1865. The soldiers of the Trans-Mississippi saw little action during that last period of the war, but did do a great deal of marching between Louisiana and southern Arkansas. They were, no doubt, grateful for new shoes to wear on those treks as well as on the long march home.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>John T. Stark to Martha Stark, Aug. 9, 1862. 13<sup>th</sup> Texas Cavalry file, H.B. Simpson Research Center, Hill College, Hillsboro, Texas.

<sup>2</sup>Theophilus Perry to Harriet Perry, July 17, 1862, in M. Jane Johansson ed., *Widows by the Thousand* (Fayetteville, Arkansas, 2000), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup>Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Johnny Reb* (Baton Rouge, 1978), p. 115.

<sup>4</sup>National Archives and Records Administration, Compiled Service Records of Soldiers Who Served from the State of Texas, Records Group 109, Microfilm 323, reels 75-80, Washington, D.C. The General Order is cited in the record of each soldier detailed.

<sup>5</sup>James E. and Josiah Wheat, *Sketches of Tyler County History* (Bevil Oaks, Texas, 1986), pp. 41-51.

<sup>6</sup>Thomas R. Reid, *Captain Jack and the Tyler County Boys: A History of Company K, 13th Texas Cavalry Regiment, C.S.A., 1862-1865* (Woodville, Texas, 2000), Appendix C.

<sup>7</sup>Janet B. Hewett ed. *Texas Confederate Soldiers 1861-1865, Vol. 1*. (Wilmington, North Carolina, 1997), p. 434; The Texas State Historical marker for the camp of Spaight's Battalion is located immediately south of the Lamar University - Beaumont campus.

<sup>8</sup>Thomas Reid, "The Spartan Band: A History of Burnett's 13th Texas Cavalry Regiment, 1862-1865," MA thesis, Lamar University, Beaumont, TX, 2001, p. 31.

<sup>9</sup>National Archives and Records Administration, "Confederate Soldiers Who Served from the State of Texas," Microfilm Record Group 109, M323, reels 75-80; Wheat, *Sketches of Tyler County History*, p. 151; Following the war, Sam Allen owned and operated a large sawmill near Mobile in northern Tyler County.

<sup>10</sup>"Eighth Census of the United States. Population Schedule." Tyler County, Texas. Microfilm M653-1306, Washington, D.C. All census data cited in this article will be found in this source.

<sup>11</sup>Wheat. *Sketches of Tyler County History*, p. 245.

<sup>12</sup>Compiled Service Records, Texas, M323-79: "Eighth Census, Population Schedule, Tyler County."

<sup>13</sup>Compiled Service Records. M323-79: "Eighth Census, Population Schedule, Tyler County."

<sup>14</sup>Wheat, *Sketches of Tyler County History*, p. 44. Captain Collier, along with William Ratcliff and Marion Phillips, surveyed the road from Town Bluff to the new county seat of Woodville in 1846.

<sup>15</sup>Dean Tevis, "Pioneer Texas Family Makes Thousands of Pairs of Shoes for Confederates," *The Sunday [Beaumont] Enterprise*. July 7, 1935.

<sup>16</sup>Hewett. *Texas Confederate Soldiers*, Vol. I, p. 103.

<sup>17</sup>Compiled Service Records, Ratcliff, William R., Pvt., December 1862 muster record notes "absent," "detailed November 1862 as shoemaker by Order Number 3." Subsequent musters note "detached service to make shoes for Gov. Texas Apr 26/63." Brig. Gen. William R. Scurry gave the order.

<sup>18</sup>Dean Tevis, "Pioneer Texas Family," *The Sunday Enterprise*, July 7, 1935.

<sup>19</sup>Lou Ella Moseley, *Pioneer Days of Tyler County* (Ft. Worth, 1975), p. 145.

<sup>20</sup>Tannin is a reddish-brown compound from oak bark containing tannic acid.

<sup>21</sup>*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1st ed., s.v. "Tanning."

<sup>22</sup>Thomas H. Flaherty, ed., *Echoes of Glory: Arms and Equipment of the Confederacy* (Alexandria, Virginia, 1991). Photos of similar shoes manufactured for and worn by Confederate soldiers are illustrated on pages 174-175.

<sup>23</sup>*War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols., Series 4, Volume II, pp. 229-231.

<sup>24</sup>James H. Davis, *Texans in Gray: A Regimental History of the 18th Texas Infantry* (Tulsa, 1999), p. 51.