

AN OLD SOLDIER OF FORTUNE

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THE LITTLE BUGLER AS HE LOOKED IN '61



THE LITTLE BUGLER IN A SOLDIER'S HOME TODAY

William F. Johnston went to war at the age of eleven years and became a plains fighter afterward. His reflections, here set down, point a moral and adorn a tale

[This "human document" is published as one of the most remarkable letters we ever read. It was not intended for publication originally, but was written by Mr. Johnston, who lives in the Michigan Soldiers' Home, to his brother, an editor in Nebraska.]

MY DEAR Brother George:
Your letter of November 27 is at hand, and it warms my old heart to think my little brother is so interested in anything pertaining to my rather uneventful past. Of all things I despise 'tis an egotist. However, as you wish to know something about your brother Billy's early experience, I don't see how I can help telling.

I was born June 18, 1850, in Detroit, Mich., and when the Civil war broke out in 1861, I was going to school, with no thought of anything but a good time and mischief. In July, 1861, when one month past eleven years of age, I offered my services in the Ninth Michigan infantry, Company "H," Captain Adams in command, which was quartered at Fort Wayne. Of course, I ran away from school to enlist, and mother was almost crazy before they found out where I was. They kept me some two weeks at the fort as a drummer boy. I was so short my drum would not clear the ground when marching, and I had got into so much mischief in that time that a sergeant took me to the port gate, took me over his knee and spanked me with a leather belt, and told me to beat it for home and mother, which I did. I have always thought my father told them what to do with me.

Well father whipped me and mother cried over me, and as I had got peppered with lice while at the fort, I was made to sleep in the barn for a week, until cleaned up. But the lice and drum were too much for me, and in July, when twelve years and a month old, 1862, I again ran away from home and enlisted in the Twenty-fourth Michigan infantry which was quartered on the old fair grounds in Detroit. I beat the drum and played the devil for ten days, when I was again taken to the guard line and invited to skip. With the invitation went some kicks and cuffs I have not forgotten yet.

But the boys were not to blame for the rough treatment they gave me as my father had quietly put them up to it, trying to make me tired of soldiering.

My brothers and sisters thought I was a hero, father thought I was a devil, but mother thought I was just her own little Billy just the same. But go to school I would not! There was too much attraction on the street, so in October, 1862, my mother packed a little trunk of clothing, and they started me for the Lansing Agricultural college. Well things began to happen then. I arrived at the school in the afternoon of Saturday, October 9, and was to have been examined and put into my classes Monday morning. I might say this was the extent of my college education, and the last of my schooling.

Sunday morning Mr. Tibbets, who kept the boarding house for the school, and his wife, left for the day to make a visit. Milton Ward of Detroit, who was at the school at the time, and myself were boon companions, having been acquainted in Detroit. Sunday morning, Milton and I hooked away, and went up to Lansing, as I remember it, a couple of miles away. Milton always had money, and was four or five years older than I. He got a big bag of candy and a bottle of wine. We went out to the school for a lark. After dinner Milton and I and another boy and three or four little girls who were visiting boys at the school, got together in a

big room upstairs, and what a time we did have! Mr. Tibbets and his wife came home and found the lot of us all asleep; some on the floor, some on the bed, but all of us tipsy and sick from the wine. Was there anything doing then? I should say yes! This whole lark was laid at my door. I was locked in a room to be kept until Monday, when I was to be sent back home to my parents. I did not dare go home, as father would certainly have tried, at least, to whip some of the meanness out of me, for I had about used up his patience. So after the house had got quiet at night, I dropped out the window and hiked for Lansing. They were then recruiting for the Sixth Michigan cavalry.

I told the recruiting officer I had no mother or father, that I sold papers and did odd jobs for a living, and swore I was eighteen years old. Sure, he knew better, but they enlisted me regularly as a bugler, and assigned me to Company G, Sixth Michigan cavalry. I was twelve years, three months and twenty-three days old, and was in my third enlistment, but this was the first time I was mustered in. Alf Madden enlisted with me. I was sent to Grand Rapids where the regiment was camped while being recruited to its full strength. We were mustered into the service there. The life that we led the officers of Company G was anything but pleasant.

In Washington, we camped for a time on Meriden hill from which place we made our first hike. And we tasted war, when we went to Falmouth and skirmished with Moseby's guerrillas. We had the opportunity of trading coffee for tobacco with the Confederate pickets. A white handkerchief on the end of a saber was the signal to stop shooting while the trade was being made between the "Rebs" on the Fredericksburg side of the Rappahannock river and us "Yanks" on the Falmouth side. I must say I never knew of any advantage being taken to shoot a fellow while the trade was being made. In the early spring of 1863, no regiment was kept more busy than the Sixth Michigan looking out for Moseby and his men. We always had them, but never got them to any great extent. Moseby was a wonder.

From then to the time I was taken prisoner we were in eighteen battles and minor engagements between June 30 to October 11, 1863. The Little Bugler never lost a day, but did lose lots of meals in that time.

On October 11, 1863, at Brandy station, my horse was shot from under me, and I was taken prisoner. Our regiment was charging through a regiment of enemy cavalry that had got in between the main column and the rear guard, when my horse was struck by a piece of shell between the knee and hoof, throwing me heels over appetite some feet over his head. I was cut and bruised by the feet of the charging troopers, who were behind. When I finally got up it was to look into the barrel of what appeared to me to be a cannon, but in fact was only a .45 Colt, and a fellow in a gray suit was telling me to strip! He took my shoes and pants, and darn him, he could not wear either of them; he was so much larger than I.

I was taken with a trainload of other prisoners to Richmond, Va., but on the way had traded off my blouse for something to eat. We were divided up in bunches after arriving at Richmond. Destiny sent me to old Libby prison, and later to Belle Isle.

I had no pants, shoes or hat. One of the older men had given me an old coat. The guard would issue us a few sticks of wood in the evening. We burned our fires as long as possible, and when the fires had burned out to coals we scattered the coals over the ground to warm it, and then would

lie down to sleep, stretched in long lines of any number of men, all curled up spoon fashion, as close together as possible.

I lay down on the end of the line one cold night when soon a poor fellow came and snuggled up to me. Along in the early morning when he should have turned to warm my back, he did not move. I got up on my elbow and pulled his nose. He was dead. It was the most frightful experience I ever had.

Our dead were usually relieved of any good clothing they may have had on to be used by those who were almost naked. I had still on what was left of a shirt and pair of drawers that I had worn for almost a year. Can you realize or imagine how little of either were left? I went down to the dead line one morning and saw a body on which was a fine shirt of blue cashmere cloth. I went to the gate and asked the officer of the Confederate guard, an old man, if I might remove the shirt from that body to wear myself.

"My poor boy," he said, and gave permission, with tears running down his wrinkled cheeks, to take the shirt.

A red-whiskered, spindle-shanked, low-down fellow from Wisconsin that I was chumming with, and whom I had kept alive by stealing grub for him to eat, stole that shirt from me. I lost a silver mine in Colorado years ago that sold afterwards for three hundred thousand dollars, but it did not hurt so badly as the loss of that shirt.

Shortly after this, there was a parole of sick and disabled men agreed on by the governments. I got out and walked aboard our transport at Savannah, the raggedest-looking kid that ever left that city. What few troops there were in that transport just stood and cried when they saw our boys. This was the nineteenth of November, 1864.

At Annapolis I got my back pay, ration money and clothing money for the time I had been prisoner, amounting to some \$390, with a furlough for thirty days. I started for Detroit. I can't tell you all that happened on the trip, but I got home broke after a week or ten days on the road.

Father killed the fatted calf, mother had it cooked, and I was made much of by everybody. For I had been reported dead long ago, and they had preached a memorial sermon for me, telling what a good little boy I had been. I came home and spoiled it all. After a few days at home I went to dismounted camp at Harper's Ferry and from the camp was returned to my regiment, then in Washington waiting to take part in the grand review, after which we were sent to Fort Leavenworth. Here I was discharged, and the regiment sent out on the plains after Indians.

I went to Denver in the fall of 1865 with a mule train, before there was a railroad in the mountains. I returned to Topeka, Kan., with bull trains, enlisting in the regular army, went to California by way of the isthmus, guarded surveyors in Arizona from the Indians, and fought Indians in Arizona with the First United States cavalry. I made a trip into Mexico with a load of phoney jewelry. Later I was arrested as a filibuster spy in Guaymas and was shipwrecked on my trip from Guaymas to Mazatlan. Two out of seven were saved after floating around for thirty-six hours. I was shanghaied in San Francisco and taken around Cape Horn to Dublin, which was the most adventurous five months of my life. I came back to my home in 1873, married in 1874 and settled down to be decent.

I am now a member of the Michigan Soldiers' home. Uncle Sam is trying his best to make me comfortable in my declining years. But neither he nor all the powers that be can make up the ten years' worse than lost from my twelfth to twenty-second year, for what I did not learn that was rough in that time I have not learned since and it is not in the books.

ALL OVER NEBRASKA

SHORT NEWS ITEMS.

A two days' farmers' institute will be held at Wakefield Feb. 11 and 12. The city of York is preparing to pave thirty-one blocks in the spring. Four and one-half miles of paving were completed last year.

I. J. Thomsen of Minden, republican, is the first to file as a candidate for office in Kearney county. He filed for clerk of the district court.

Twelve orphan children were brought to Seward the other day from New York and placed in homes in the city and surrounding country.

The Lancaster County Board of Commissioners has purchased a suitable building in Lincoln and begun the manufacture of culverts for county use.

A. V. Wortman, editor of the Hebron Champion, and E. H. Kendall have purchased the Hebron Register and will combine it with the Champion.

The annual convention of the county treasurers of Nebraska will be held in Omaha February 23 and 24. Peter McIntosh of Adams county, is president of the association.

Five thousand acres of Platte valley land will be put into sugar beets between North Platte and Kearney, according to John Bryan, agent for the American Beet Sugar company.

The town of Hadar, located a few miles north of Norfolk, has been incorporated. Hadar boasts of a population of 108 souls and those enthusiastic over the incorporation expect to see a continuous growth in the town.

Madison county's corn crop for 1915 is figured to have been 4,025,587 bushels, or an average of 342 bushels to the acre and is valued at \$2,012,944. The county had 11,489 acres in winter wheat, averaging 19.4 bushels to the acre.

The village board of Eddyville has granted Andrew Sutherland a twenty-five year franchise granting him the right to conduct an electric lighting system within the town, and has also ordered that twelve street lights be installed at twelve principal crossings.

Rayard H. Payne, of Grand Island, has prepared his petition for one of the nominations for district judge and will file the same in the near future. There are at present three candidates for the non-partisan nomination, though it is expected there will be others.

An agricultural short course will be held at Allen March 6 to 10. This is the first venture in a short course in the community thus far. In addition to the work by the state workers several local features will be added.

A concrete bridge of the latest style of construction will be erected over the Platte river at Kearney. It will take the place of the mile long wooden structure now spanning the river. Application for state aid was made many months ago and not until lately has the matter been acted upon by the board.

Joe W. Leedham, editor of the Gordon Journal, has announced his candidacy for the republican nomination to the office of commissioner of public lands and buildings. Mr. Leedham is a student of the University of Nebraska and of Morningside college at Sioux City, and a native of Nebraska.

Bert Howard announces the sale of the Johnson County Journal-Tribunal of Tecumseh, to Charles D. Blauvelt of Arapahoe. Mr. Howard has been interested in the paper for several years. Mr. Blauvelt has previously been in the newspaper business at Arapahoe, selling his paper, the Mirror, last fall.

The smallest known human mother, Mrs. Dolletta Boyken, and her two children are in Fremont for a visit with relatives. Mrs. Boyken, who was a former Fremont girl, weighs only thirty-six pounds and is twenty-seven inches high. Her parents and brothers are normal sized. The little 4-year-old son of Mrs. Boyken is larger than his mother.

City Health Commissioner Council of Omaha announced that he intends to employ several additional physicians as assistants in the health department during the prevalence of scarlet fever. These are to check up "suspicious" cases, follow up quarantines and aid in inspection of places of public gathering. There are nearly three hundred cases in the city at this time.

Petitions were circulated placing the name of Senator A. D. Spencer of Barnston in nomination for the republican nomination for senator from the Fourteenth senatorial district, comprising the counties of Gage and Pawnee.

Both elevators at Plymouth have been turning away grain the past few days, owing to the shortage of cars. The recent rise in prices has had a tendency to bring in the grain and there is much complaining over this car shortage.

Mrs. Caroline L. Johnson, 90 years old, widow of the late William Johnson, and a real daughter of the Revolution, perhaps the only remaining one in the state, died at Hastings.

Contracts on three new state-aid bridges are to be opened soon. At Sutherland, over Platte river, cost limit, \$22,000; length, 540 feet. At Gretna, over Elkhorn; cost limit, \$25,000; length, 300 feet. At Schuyler, over Platte river; cost limit, \$45,000; repairs to steel bridge now standing, 1,050 feet long, and 700 feet additional of new steel spans.

A Young Womans' Christian association has been organized at Hebron. The organization has started off with a membership of nearly two hundred.

Plainview will soon have a Carnegie library. The Carnegie board has allowed the funds for the building and the city council has passed an ordinance to support it.

Omaha was selected as the place of the first annual exhibition of record swine, by representatives of the National Swine Growers' association, who met in Chicago recently.

D. J. Wilberon of Pilger sent his first herd of fat stock, consisting of forty head, averaging over 1,250 pounds, to the South Omaha market the other day and got the top price of \$8.15.

A. L. Mohler, president of the Union Pacific railroad, who was seriously injured when he fell on the ice while skating at Omaha, is much improved and is expected to be about soon.

Henry Brackhan was burned to death at his home twenty miles southeast of York as a result of the explosion of the contents of a can of kerosene with which he was starting the kitchen fire.

The McPherson county board has ordered a special election for April 18, to vote on the proposition to issue bonds to the amount of \$4,000 for the construction of a new court house at Tryon.

William Fisher of Beatrice was killed at the home of his sister, Mrs. Henry Synovec, residing on a farm near Belleville, Kas., being caught in the fly wheel of a threshing machine engine.

Directors of the Mid-West Retail Implement Dealers' association, after the annual convention at Omaha, decided to hold the next convention also in Omaha, the dates to be December 6, 7 and 8, 1916.

Several hundred delegates are expected to attend the annual state convention of the Y. M. C. A. at York February 18, 19 and 20, according to officials of the state association who are busy with plans for the meeting.

Two banks in Harlan county paid their taxes under protest pending the supreme court decision on the validity of the new law that superseded the Smith mortgage tax law which permitted banks to escape taxation on their capital stock.

Machinery of all kinds for mixing concrete will be in operation, turning out the various kinds of useful and ornamental articles made of this material, at the tenth annual Midwest Cement show to be held in Omaha February 29 to March 4.

Clerk of the Platte county district court, C. M. Gruenther, as referee, sold at public sale at the court house in Columbus, in the neighborhood of five hundred acres of Platte county land, at an average price of \$135 per acre.

All records for a single month's hog receipts at the South Omaha stock market were broken in January. The previous record month for hog receipts was February, 1912, when the receipts for that month totaled 359,022 head. The total for last month is nearly 400,000 head.

Nebraska health officers at their annual conference in Omaha, endorsed a proposed Nebraska law for combining the pure food, health inspection and various other health movements under one head. The bill, to be introduced in the next legislature, will also call for a sanitary survey of the state. More than 100 Nebraska towns were represented by their health officers.

The city manager plan is being advocated by many residents of Beatrice at the present time. Beatrice was the first Nebraska city to adopt the commission form of government, and the same interests behind this move, are behind the city manager plan. It is suggested as the city election is approaching, three men enter the race for the commission who will consent to serve without pay.

Fourteen thousand acres of irrigated land are ready for entry in the North Platte project and applications may be made at the Alliance land office up to March 24. Drawings will be held later, according to an announcement by the United States Interior department. The department says that the farms will contain from forty to eighty acre farms, and that homesteaders will find nearly 60,000 acres already in cultivation in the vicinity and the land is in the center of a rapidly growing country.

O. G. Smith of Kearney, director of the State Fair association and prominent stock raiser, filed his petition to be placed on the republican primary ballot as a candidate for senator from the district comprising Sherman, Kearney and Buffalo counties.

Edward Varnier, editor of the Adams Globe, is the champion trapshot of Nebraska, according to the official averages of the Inter-State Trap Shooting association recently issued. His average for the 2,690 targets shot at during the year was 92 per cent.

A dividend of 10 per cent was declared at the annual meeting of the Wymore Farmers Lumber, Coal and Grain company held at Beatrice. The organization has 150 stockholders.

It has been decided by the Burlington Railroad company to renew construction as soon as weather conditions make it possible upon the Chalco cut-off. Work was temporarily suspended in 1915 on account of the unusual financial conditions throughout the country. It is the intention now to complete the line at as early a date as practicable.