

Richard Albert Clarkson The Civil War

Richard Albert Clarkson was living with the family of his uncle, Joseph Albert Clarkson, when the Civil War began. He was a young man of about sixteen. His primary service during the war was with the 14th Regiment, Virginia Cavalry from Charlotte county Virginia. Many years after the war, RA was asked to share his war recollections. Following are two letters written by RA Clarkson detailing his experiences during the Civil War. The first letter is addressed to Captain Edwin Bouldin. Captain Bouldin headed RA's regiment and they remained in touch with each other throughout their lives. The second letter is addressed to Mrs Falconer. Her identity is unknown, but the letter suggests that she was collecting Civil War reminiscences. In this second letter RA shares his experience at the Battle of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

RA Clarkson to Capt EC Bouldin of Danville, Virginia

No date

Dear Old Friend:

Ever since your last very kind letter came to hand I have thought like Felix of old – “when I have a convenient season” – I will endeavor to set forth briefly my recollections of camp life and Civil War record. After waiting so long I am convinced the “convenient season” will never come so, here goes.

In 1862 – while living in Richmond, Va, I joined a Company of Junior Volunteers, organized by Capt Henry Dusenberry, and was elected 3rd Lieut. It was our purpose to act as sharpshooters along the James River but our parents, defeated us by having the Co. assigned to the bat. of Home-Guards then on duty in the City guarding hospitals and prisons. Our boys were youthful (ranging in age from 15 to 17 years) but very ambitious. Our duty was chiefly to guard “Libby Prison” – which we did for months, and during the time not a man escaped, nor did we allow any of the prisoners mistreated. I served alternately in the position of officer of the day and officer of the guard. We were there when McClelland was digging his way to Richmond via the peninsular, and during the seven days of fighting the number of prisoners brought in was very large, “Libby” was filled to overflowing, and thousands sent further South till a plan of exchange was affected.

During the summer of '62, my Uncle, Col JA Clarkson (whose son I was by adoption) and family moved from Richmond to Charlotte co, and in the Autumn I resigned my position and followed them. In December 1862 I applied for membership with your Co. – the Charlotte Cavalry, and was accepted. In January '63 I joined the Company, then in Winter Quarters near Salem, Roanoke co, Va. (I think our Camp was on the farm of a McLowry). On arriving there I was introduced to you (had never met you before) and by invitation occupied a bunk in an adjoining tent to yours, and became a member of your mess. During the months we remained there, our Mess was a large one composed, if I remember right, of your honorable self, . . . Roberts of Drakes Branch, Sam Gaines of Charlotte CH [Courthouse], Ad West of Halifax, McMorris of Dupree's old store, Sam'l

McCargo and myself of Wyliesburg, and the two servants . . . your man (whose name I have forgotten) who always indulged in the Indian war-hoop when he got a little "red eye" ahead, and the Negro Gilas employed by Roberts, McCargo and myself. Guard duty around the camp, and the usual morning and afternoon drill was all that bothered us. The remainder of the time was spent in pleasures and sleep. I had a violin, and Ad West a banjo, -by-the-way, I have never seen his equal as a banjoist since, and we used to almost raise the tent with our musical performances the principal 'air' being 'Git up Liza Jane'. This I believe was your favorite instrumental piece, and we gave it to you till you would often cry, "hold, enough". The music ended, games were taken up, those who liked cards engaging in the ever continued game of bluff, while others would satisfy themselves with checkers, chess, etc. McMorris and I whittled out of cedar, red and white, a set of chess-men and our occupation, when not on duty, or making music, was wholly chess-playing. All over the camp could be heard the terms, "I see you better" and "I'll straddle you", etc. etc. Occasionally Sam Gaines and I who were inclined to be ladies-men would, with your permission, visit the young ladies in Salem, and at Hollins' Institute. Well do I remember the first time I heard the sweet song "Lorena". Modest, gentle Miss Margy Logan of Salem sang it for Sam and I, to perfection. Never since, have I heard it as she sang it. Association may have something to do with it, I was captivated, just old enough to fall in love, and vain enough to think all girls loved me. Alas! I was mistaken in this case, for the other fellow (Sam) made the impression, and I was left.

After awhile came the information that the Salt-Works in SW Va (near Wytheville) were being menaced, and we were ordered there, went by train, remained about a week, without a fight, not even a skirmish, then returned to Salem, and soon afterwards the order came for us to go home and mount ourselves, which we did. From Charlotte, our line of march was through Farmville, to James River which was crossed at the old Gen Cox place, up through the village of Palmyra and the Green Springs neighborhood, to Gordonsville, where we camped several days awaiting orders from Gen Lee, thence we went to Charlottesville where, my memory says, we met the remainder of the regiment under Col Cochran, thence across the Blue Ridge to Staunton. I must not omit to record that one morning while encamped at Gordonville, I awoke and arose, taking up my bed, and immediately under the oil cloth upon which I had lain, was a huge moccasin, dead. My supposition was that he had crawled under me during the night, for shelter from the cold, and in my restlessness I had mashed him to death. O! how thankful I was to a Kind Providence that He had delivered me.

I remember many incidents, but unfortunately I cannot recall the dates. I somehow mix up our active Summer's campaign in West Va (Greenbrier, Monroe and other Counties) with that of the Shenandoah Valley and Piedmont Section, as to dates – and I will content myself with simple statements, and leave you to straighten out and settle the dates.

We moved from Staunton down the Valley over into Monroe and Greenbrier Counties and cooperated with Stuart's Cavalry as advance guard to Lee's Army on the Gettysburg campaign. We crossed the Potomac at Charlestown followed by Ewell's Corps, Stuart

crossed lower down the River and led the advance of other Infantry Corps. We continued our march through Hagerstown, Greencastle, Chambersburg and as far as Carlisle. Here I was detailed from our Company and sent as scout with a lot of others, through the country and under cover of darkness to Little York, on the Susquehanna. One of the infantry corps had gone that far, and as the enemy had begun to concentrate forces at Gettysburg, and would force an engagement, Gen Lee ordered this body of men back. I rejoined the Company at Gettysburg and was in the fight with it there, saw our brave Gen Jenkins brought off the field wounded. During the engagement you ordered me to the Ordinance Wagon for Ammunition. Directly I returned Sam McCargo was shot down, and before we could get him off the field, he was shot twice more, Roberts, who was helping me, also received a slight wound in hip from a spent ball. I remained with McCargo until we evacuated G.- Oh! how I hated to leave the brave boy. He begged me to stay with him, but I had to obey orders. After this fight we were in our Saddles continually four days and nights guarding roads and passes, and cut off from supplies, during the time I got one meal from an old citizen composed chiefly of light bread and spread with apple butter. The dreadful truth finally dawned upon us, We were defeated, and Gen Lee was retreating across the Potomac. To cover his retreat the Cavalry was particularly active, and one afternoon about three o'clock we found ourselves in the vicinity of Hagerstown, confronted by the Enemy's Cavalry drawn up in the line of battle. As we approached there were two board fences between us and them. We advanced hurriedly under fire, and very unexpectedly Gen JEB Stuart dashed in front of us – drew his sword and hallowed “boys, lets charge them, follow me”. Away we went with the old rebel yell. We leaped our horses over the board fences and bounded forward, but those Yanks scattered. Thus we saved our wagon trains and safely recrossed the Potomac – this time at Williamsport, but ho! how sad, it seemed our lot to always cover closely a retreat, as we were going out of the water on the Va side, the enemy run up on the Maryland side – planted a battery and picked off some of our best men, among them our brave and genial 3rd Lt D Shepperson – Poor fellow, He and his horse went down together. Another of our beloved boys was killed, but I can not remember his name. The news was given us afterward of the fall of Vicksburg. Our hearts almost sank within us and well so – for these two battles – Gettysburg, and Vicksburg – in my humble opinion decided the fate of our Confederacy.

Do you remember Gettysburg? I know you do. How terrific and continuous the cannonading. The artillery seemed to vie with the small arms in ceaseless roar and death-dealing power, terrible! terrible!! May our beloved land ever be delivered from another such clash of arms and bloody carnage. We retreated up the Valley – slowly – and late in Autumn our command was again detached going to West Va where Averill and Crooks were making raids. Our chief activity in these parts consisted in picket duty, occasionally a scouting party was sent out. At one time during the campaign the enemy advanced under Crooks and we met them on a mountain in Greenbrier, the name of which I have forgot. We fell back – This was only a faint – by Crooks enabling Averill to make a forced march to Salem and destroy property, tear up the RR and confined their operations to Kanawha. After which we went into “WQ” [winter quarters] (our company_ in a church, I think it was in Monroe County. During this time I obtained a furlough of 15 days. The mail came to camp about 3 o'clock pm. I think six of us were

furloughed. We started at once walking till nearly day next morning and stopped at Fincastle to rest a few hours, got breakfast and started again, arriving at "Big Lick" (Va and East Ken RR now Norfolk and Western) in time to jump first homeward-bound train.

After Spring opened in '64 and we had remounted ourselves, as I remember, we again repaired to Staunton and down the Valley. Soon we were called back to Staunton to meet Averill and Crooks who were coming from the West. Our (McCausland's) brigade retired slowly in their front our squadron covering the retreat and contending for every inch of ground. You remember it took them eight days to make the march from Staunton to Lynchburg, and we encountered them daily, charging and receiving their charges. You displayed particular valor on that retreat. I remember we had halted in the road, awaiting the enemy's approach, when in a moment our rear guard dashed in pursued by the advancing enemy in a cavalry charge. You immediately exclaimed "Mount your Horses, right about" and leaving your place at the head, rushed to the rear – which then became the front, drew your sabre and commanded, "follow me". At same time putting spurs to your horse and rushing right into the advancing columns of the enemy. We obeyed and after a hand to hand tilt they retreated. Soon however, after having arranged an ambush for us they came again. You repeated the former charge, they turned and galloped back hastily, we trying to catch them, ran into the trap. I think two of our boys got through the line and were captured, and some were wounded, but none killed. Roberts had his horse shot. We held the enemy in check long enough for Gen Lee to send Early to Lynchburg, and save the City. Hunter it seems had taken command of the Federals and retreated hastily. We followed as far as Salem, or nearly there, then turning took up our line of March towards Staunton and down the Valley again, crossed the Potomac, and turned up at Frederick, Maryland. Early fought Lew Wallace at Monocacy Junction – who beat a hasty retreat. Early marched on towards Washington. I was with a squad to go up the tow-path on Canal, and destroy Canal Boats and government supplies. We went in sight of Georgetown. On the trip I was detailed as Courier, and took a dispatch to Gen Early in person. Soon he began to retreat and recrossed the Potomac at some point I do not remember.

Soon after this our brigade advanced on Chambersburg, Pa, having crossed the Potomac at Williamsport, Md. Our squadron leading the advance charged through Chambersburg just about daylight and were fired upon. We dismounted just outside and after repeated demands by Gen McCausland for money (as we understood) the command proceeded to burn the town. On this occasion I was among those who held horses and have always been glad that I did not have to apply the match. Retreating from Chambersburg, via Cumberland City, Md, we were soon in Va again, and I think near the town of Romney. Once in Va, we ventured to turn our horses loose and stretch tents or blankets. During our activity all extra baggage was with the wagon trains. I needed a change very badly and McMorris kindly consented to wash my shirt. I took it off, and sat in our tent (the small one we carried on horse-back) till he accomplished the task. We foraged a little and succeeded in getting some chickens and had several square meals. We had one chicken left (tied by one foot) for breakfast. It is daylight, hark! we hear firearms and arise hurriedly. A little Rest. "Tis Bradley T Johnson's men fighting off wet guns", said a comrade. But, hark! the firing increases. Our bugle sounds "Saddle

up". Our horses are in pasture. We hurry to obey, but before we can count or form in lane, *Bang, Bang, Bang!* Lo!! – we were surprised. It is Averill!! He surprised BTJ (Bradley T Johnson) and rushes on for our Camp. Our men fight gallantly as individuals, but without organization. And soon we re running – and scattering in all directions. 'Twas on this memorable occasion (if I am not mistaken) you were captured. When we again reached the Valley Lt Gaines commanded. John Hamlet was chosen to fill Lt Shepperson's place and . . . Moore was elected OS. Just before the battle of Winchester, by Early, we were having short rations and one afternoon I was terribly hungry and went to a corn-field for roasting ears. I had pulled seven, when a voice exclaimed, "Hold em there". I was too frightened to run. A guard came to me and counted my ears of corn, informing me I must report to Gen Kershaw, who would make me dig a stump for every ear. I told him I was not one of K's men, and begged him to let me off. He did so, but I went without my supper.

Our Company – small though it was at that time – was in the fight at Fisher's Hill in the Valley, and also at Cedar Creek. I think it was the latter place; we were advancing steadily under a heavy fire, when NOEL was shot by my side. He dropped over, throwing his arm on my neck, and asked me to take care of him. I accompanied him to the rear meeting our Regimental Surgeon (whose name was Moore, I think). He probed the wound and found it dangerous. He instructed me to hail an ambulance, and take Noel to the nearest hospital. It took us three days to reach Staunton, where I left him, I never saw him afterwards though He recovered after many months.

The winter of '64 and '65 was spent in much activity. Our boys could not establish Winter Quarters. Grant had been assigned to Army of the Potomac, and our cavalry was kept busy, watching his movements. There was some intensely cold weather, and Boys endured much suffering. In the early months of '65 our regiment applied for transfer from McCausland – whom none of us admired. He was very unlike our beloved Jenkins. Permission being given for the transfer, we joined Chamblis' brigade of WHF Lee's division, South of James River. For about two weeks afterwards it rained almost incessantly; but as soon as ground would admit of it, active operations were renewed. Sheridan had scoped Early's command near Waynesboro, Va and pushed on towards Richmond, finally coming up on Grant's left, near Petersburg. If I am not mistaken it was just about the time you rejoined up – having been exchanged – and you took your place at the head of our company. The evening before the "Five Forks" fight there was considerable skirmishing in that vicinity. The enemy pushed their lines forward just before sunset, and our dismounted cavalry met them vigorously and repulsed them, after which our squadron reconnoitered on their flank. Learning of their wonderful force we were convinced that a general attack was near at hand. The following day verified it. Grant had discovered our weakness, and hurled his minions upon us with unusual vigor. Later in the day our columns were broken, and a general retreat – amounting to almost a stampede – begun by our forces. My horse failed Company without delay. I started, and all along the way I encountered stragglers. I know our cause was failing and the critical moment was upon us. Hastening home I procured another horse and started getting as far as the Appomattox co, lien – when I learned of the surrender of Lee's Army. OH! what anguish pervaded me at that moment, I shall never forget my feelings. If I could

only have been in the ranks, and surrendered like a brave man! but could I not yet be of service to my country? Yes, thought I. I'll go to Johnson's Army. With a sad heart I changed direction of travel, crossed the Roanoke River, and wined my way through Halifax and Pittsylvania cos. Just before crossing into NC I learned of Johnston's surrender. I then turned my course towards home.

Alas! the struggle of ARMS was over but the agony of the submission was terrible. You know the rest – yea – you know more of our struggles than I have related, but take this, my dear friend, and cull from it what you may decide will be of interest to our surviving comrades.

I had been steadily with the Company for twenty-eight months (save two furloughs of 15 days each) and sometimes in the thickest of the fight. Had many hairbreadth escapes but come out unscathed. On one occasion while deployed on the skirmish line near New Market, in the valley of Virginia, the enemy shelled us at long range. I saw the smoke from the whizzing sound, which proved to be a long shell almost spent. I saw it just in time to dodge it, and it fell without bursting just behind my horse [letter concludes here with no closing]

RA Clarkson to Mrs Falconer

No date

Dear Mrs Falconer,

Your valued letter of the 27th at hand. My Civil War experience was so varied that I scarcely know what to offer you as a contribution to your historical record. However, having recently attended the Semi-Centennial anniversary of the battle of Gettysburg, Pa, in which I participated July 1, 2, 3, 1863, some items of that awful struggle may prove of interest to your Chapter.

I enlisted Jan 1st, 1863, in the Charlotte co, Va Cavalry, at the age (Jan 29th 1863) of 17 years. Our company was assigned to the 14th regiment Va Cavalry and the regiment to Gen Albert Gallatin Jenkin's brigade.

In June 1863 Gus Jenkins advanced into Maryland and Pennsylvania crossing the Potomac at Charlestown, and acted as advance guard to Lt Gen Ewells corps (formerly Stonewall Jackson's) which followed immediately, marching via Hagerstown, Md to Chambersburg Pa, where Gen Early's (Jubal A) division was detoured and sent via Gettysburg, North to York and Wrightsville on the Susquahana, the remaining divisions proceeding North up the Cumberland Valley to Carlisle. Hill and Longstreet's corps followed, but were halted at Chambersburg. It was Gen Lee's purpose to advance as far as Harrisburg, Pa before bringing on an engagement, but the Federal Commander Hooker, finding Lee had invaded Pennsylvania hastened to place his army between Lee and the Nation's Capitol, Washington, concentrating it at Gettysburg. Jenkin's brigade of cavalry was the only one to keep Gen Lee posted as to the Enemy's movements as Gen JEB Stuart had gone around in Hooker's rear and was menacing the Capitol.

At Carlisle I was detailed on a scouting party of thirty and traveling all night took a dispatch from Ewell to Marly. We, of course, didn't know the nature of our mission then, but it afterwards developed 'twas to recall Early from his advanced position back to Gettysburg where Gen Meade, who had meanwhile succeeded Hooker in command of the federals was concentrating his army to attack Lee. The scare was so great at Washington that the Governors of Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, Maryland and West Virginia called out their Militia force.

The great battle opened on July 1st. Gen Mead on assuming command placed his left wing under Gen John F Reynolds. Heth's division of Hill's corps composed by Davis, Archer, Brokenborough and Pettigrew's brigades advanced on the Chambersburg pike. There had been several cavalry dashes on our (Jenkin's) brigade in reconnoitering, but it remained for Heth's division to bring on a general engagement, which they did with dismounted cavalry. Gen Reynolds arrived on the field in advance of his corps, and dashing out the Chambersburg pike in company with Gen Buford (the Federal Cavalry commander) was instantly killed by a rifle ball. Later Gen Howard took command of Reynolds corps and the fighting became general with all the forces then at hand, the day ending with a complete victory for the Confederates, who drove the enemy from their position on Seminary Ridge, occupied and held throughout the entire three days struggle.

Ewell's corps occupied the left of Gen Lee's line of battle, and our brigade of cavalry was placed on his (Ewell's) left flank, which Buford's cavalry tried to turn. 'Twas here that our Brig Gen Jenkins was badly wounded by the bursting of a shell. I saw him brought off the field. Our ammunition gave out and the Captain of my company, Edwin E Bouldin, ordered me to find the ordinance train. After I returned the fighting in our part of the field became fierce. My mess mate, Samuel McCargo, was wounded and throwing up his arms exclaimed "Clarkson, get me off the field." I tried to support him but had to call help. Meantime he was shot again, and John Roberts, whom I had called was also shot. His wound however was slight, and in taking McCargo off he (McCargo) received a third wound and finally had to be left in the enemy's hand, where he died.

On the afternoon of Jul 2nd Longstreet's corps attacked Meades right flank very vigorously. Meade seeing the heaviest attack was against his left hurried reinforcements from his center. Batteries of artillery from both sides belched forth death and destruction. The Confederates obtained some advantage, and the heights of Round Top were temporarily in our possession but our brave boys were driven back by an overwhelming weight of numbers. Ewell's corps on the Confederate left gained important ground and held it.

Pickett's division having been held in reserve did not reach the field 'till the morning of the 3rd. About noon of that day Gen Lee massed his artillery in front of Hill's corps, and directed at a given signal a tremendous fire on the enemies center. The very earth shook beneath our feet. The artillery firing was as incessant as the roar of musketry. No tongue can tell or pen describe the awful carnage of that fateful afternoon. The tempest of missiles caused the bravest to be appalled. Just at this time Pickett's Virginians

stepped out in line of battle, marching as though on dress parade. The Federal guns then opened a galling fire. Solid shot and shell struck the ranks of Pickett's men but in spite of this rain of death their gaps quickly closed and they charged gallantly forward. Then the Union infantry supporting the batteries sent a perfect hail of destruction into their ranks, while the batteries themselves hurried double canister into them as they pressed forward to conquer or to die. What a sublime spectacle! but how deadly to our brave Southern heroes! Pickett's line simply melted away but his valorous soldiers never wavered. They swept up to the rifle pits, across them and over the barricades. Brig Gen Armistead followed by his men leaped a stone wall and rushing upon the Federal batteries bayoneted the gunners, and waved their banners triumphantly within the Union lines. This was a fatal point, Armistead fell mortally wounded and his men reeled back in fragments.

But, enough! I could write much more about the awful struggle and the suffering and hunger which came to our brave boys as they journeyed back to Virginia, broken in spirit because overpowered. I did not witness it because, as before stated, our command was on another part of the field, about three miles distant.

The battle of Gettysburg was not a Union victory. All day of the 4th Gen Lee held his army for attack by Gen Meade failed to attack him. Then he leisurely withdrew to Hagerstown, Md and offered battle for about eight days before recrossing the Potomac. Meade and his generals were afraid to attack. We had a cavalry fight at Hagerstown, the enemy shooting at us at long range. Gen Stuart rode up in front of our company, and remarked, "Boys we can't reach them, let's charge." He pulled off his plumed hat and waving it overhead exclaimed, "follow me." We set up the rebel yell and charged vigorously soon scattering the Federal cavalry and opening the roads for our wagon trains, etc, which safely recrossed the Potomac.

It seemed the lot of our brigade to always occupy the front on an advance and the rear when retreating. We recrossed the Potomac at Williamsport, Md and just as we did so the enemy ran a light battery up on the Maryland side and shelled us briskly. Two of our company were killed here, one of whom was our third Lt D Shepperson.

Heavy rains followed the great cannonading at Gettysburg and our cavalry had the mountain passes and roads to guard. We were four days and nights in our saddles without food save such as we could forage. Many "cat-naps" were caught as we moved cautiously from one position to another, and if perchance a halt was called the men would drop down on the damp earth or a rock and doze till the next order to move.

Fifty years have passed. The semi-Centennial of the battle was held on the field Jul 1, 2, 3, and 4th 1913, and 'twas my privilege to be present. I spent much time with former enemies and was delighted to find that the period of true brotherhood had dawned upon our Nation. I had the satisfaction of hearing many of the old Union veterans say, "You fought for the right, and if we had lived where you did during the strife we would have been on your side." May we not conclude that God's hand was in it all? "My Country 'tis of Thee." (no closing)