

Sarah E. Thompson Papers

Sarah Thompson's account of Morgan's Defeat, September 3, 1864

Many thanks to **Joan Yehl** for providing this cleaned up transcription. [A literal transcription, including page images, is also available.](#)

September 3 1864 at Greenville, E Tennessee on the Knoxville and E Tenn. road.

[It] is an old town which I will not stop to describe, though I will say it is the home of President Johnson and one of the oldest towns in Tenn. Well it was a beautiful day and as clear as a bell. Everything was very quiet until near 3 o'clock when there came a rush and every Union haste{house?} [was] heaped with fear for they had long since had lessons in these raids till they learned to fear the results for, when they came, they would make you feel their presence and fear them too. Well, to my subject of the day in question. Something near 3 [o'clock] I was very busy preparing something for Sunday and making tomato butter when a rush was heard in the street and then a knock at the door, and then when I opened it I was surprised to see John Morgan, the rebel raider, the king of terror in that part of the country, for he was feared by all who knew him and a great many who did not know him, for he was the lion of the South. The rebels know I don't want any hard feeling for I have none and some of the dearest friends I have was rebels.

He came in and sat near the door and smoked his pipe. It was not the pipe of Peace, though, [but] the pipe of war and strife. He tilted his chair back near the door and said he was going on to Knoxville to change guests with General Carter and when he would get there he would change things, and one thing he would do would be to send for me and give me a close home for the rest of the war and see that my devilish mouth was stopped, for if I was as good a rebel as I was a D_ Union woman I would make some rebel a good wife, and [he] used a great deal of flattery as it made [me] mad and it did him good to tantalize me for I disliked it very much. After a while in came a number of rebels and took my kettle of tomato butter off of the fire and poured it out in dishes and carried it off and turned my bread out of the Baker. I mean a small Baker, one as was used [in the] south before they had stoves, for I had [lost] all I had, too, little by little. Now I had no stove and so it was a small baker I was baking in at this time, and they took it and turned it out, and when I called to Morgan to protect me, he laughed me to scorn and said I need not fear, for I had never starved and they had to live and the Union women had to help to feed them.

After sitting and smoking several pipes of tobacco and tantalizing me as long as he wished, he went to Mrs. Williams who is a cousin, I have been told, of Morgan's to stop for the night. After the pickets was placed on guard around the town, he and his body guard stopped at the house of Williams which is on the rear of the scall[hill?] where I lived and a handsome southern home with

beautiful yard and garden and a very large vineyard in the rear of this house. You can imagine the grandeur of this home for it was one of the wealthy homes in this little town, and to this elegant house Morgan and his men went. One of Mrs. Williams' sons was a [colonel] on his staff, William Williams, though [he] was usually called Bill for short. Capt. Henry B Clay of Rogersville, Tenn, with others, they went to the house and stopped for the night and everything was settled, as was that, and they was fixing for a good time. When I and Morgan was talking, I told him he would run on a snag before morning, though he did not think it possible to do, for he was confident of success in capturing Knoxville in a few days at least.

As it drew near the evening, I took my sunbonnet in hand and went to the street and met Colonel Williams and, after I had passed the time of day, I asked him to pass me out after my cow, as there was several cows on the hill, and he told the guard to pass me out and to pass me in when I returned and I would give him some milk. So I was through the enemy's lines and went on after the cow and, when I got to it, I throwed [something] at her and she went down the hill and I after her and, when out of sight, I crossed over in a corn field and went to [a] friend's house that had aided me more then one time, and got a horse and went to our forces that was at Bull's Gap and sent the word in to our forces.

When Gillem, who was general then, when he heard the news he did not believe it as he said it was a woman's tale. The colonel of the 3rd Tennessee, whose name is Brownlow, and the 10th Michigan and seven others said they would go and, after, they talked and at last they started, though I must say Gillem did not deserve any of the honor of that great deed for, had it been left to him, he would not of went; and, when he did go, he went behind so far there was no danger of any harm in any way coming at him; and the Advance guard went to Mrs. Williams' house and did not find him [Morgan] and was in a rage, as it was now about seven o'clock.

The morning of the 4th of September: as Mrs Williams said he was gone to Abingdon Virginia, when I went to leave Greenville the evening before, I had given a colored woman 25 [cents] to watch him and, when I got back and found he had gone, I went and asked her where he was. She said, Come, and after going through the house she pointed [to] a man under a bush or

grape vine in the middle of the garden and said to take him, for that was Morgan. Now he was undressed, only his underclothes, [and] he was crunched down; and I stepped to the street and laid my hand on a man's shoulder and said, Sir, if you will tear the fence down, I will ensure you Morgan. Now the fence I spoke of was a board fence for the partition of the grapes and it was very heavy, boards or planks set up end-ways, and it is not necessary to say it came down, for it did. Then I advanced and showed him to the man, and they tried to get him to surrender though he would not. He sat as long as he had anything to sate[state?], then he was shot near the middle and fell back, and he did not more than strike the ground when he was caught by two of our men and thrown on the horse of the 3rd party and carried to a distance of a few miles on the Knoxville road, and [they] guarded him there till Gillem came up.

Then, when he was gone, the rebels took the town and the cannon balls fell thick and fast and a grate and mte rash[?] came down, and I was captured and guarded at my door, and the rope was there to hang me on the same limb that Fry and Harmen hung for 3 days; and they was not cut down and, as the trains would pass, the men would strike their dead bodies with their canes, and this is the limb I was to hang from, so said the rebels. But God has so often cared for me and mine and he did now, and they swore and raged and shot. The bullets fell like hail in a short time, though it seemed like a long time, around the corner of McDalles store like a bloke clad [blockade?]. And E J Brooks of the 10th Michigan, and the 3rd Tennessee, and a number of others came and captured me and took the man a prisoner that was guarding me, one of them was. And I stepped back in the house to my 2 children to enjoy the freedom of a free American woman again.

The Union won the victory, for he who was a terror to the people was now still in death, and it stood with him and his God, for it matters not what man says, if God is judge, he will do all well. In a short time, an ambulance[?] drew [up] to the door and General Gillem['s man?'] asked if Mrs. Thompson was in and, when I stepped to the door, he asked me if I knew him [Morgan]. I answered I did. He laid there in the street some time, then was taken from there to Richmond and is laid in his grave there. In a haste[y] time, Gillem['s man?'] sent an ambulance to my Door and my 2 children was placed in the ambulance and was took to Bull's Gap as the army fell back. [We] stayed there 2 days, then was sent to Knoxville and boarded in a hotel and, in a few days, I was sent over the river to the hospital where they had nothing, only tents. It was the Holson hospital. There was some very dear friends of mine in after years and [Mr. Thompson?] went to work in a shoe shop at Brolesville, Washington County, E Tenn., to keep from going in the war, for he did not want to go away from home and was determined not to go in the rebel side if he could help it. His trall [trial?] kept him out of the service a year and a half, then it got so a union man could not speak his an that[own thought?] once.

They was not safe to even go through the county in daylight and they was not safe at home at night, for the rebels was searching every house to whip and kill union men and force them to go in their army, and they did not stop at that. They pilfered and stole all they could, and abused the wives and daughters of union men in many ways that would not be proper for me to state here for more than one reason. The whole country was conscripted and raped and men had to either leave the county and scat through the mountains or go in the rebel army against their will, which a great many of them would sooner die than to do it. The suffering of union men was beyond description, for it was not only suffering in the body but a [mental] suffering is the very worst of suffering. Then they could not carry enough of food to last over the mountains though it looked like god had a laugh too to see the poor weary souls.

Just for the colored people, all was very good to help to feed and care for the union men though they very often fell in the hands of the rebels, and they was some of them shot and others took to prisons. Some had to go in the rebel army against their wills. I can relate some vary hard sins that will be remembered as long as the world stands. Take, for example, the case of a union man in Knox County who was tied upon a log, his back stripped bare and cut all to pieces with hickories; and, when he was brought in to the Callert house and his back exhibited, he was told that these were revolutionary times and that he had no remedy. Every man had to assert his own rights and avenge his own wrongs or, as most were compelled to, to submit to insult and injury; for squads of six to ten rebel troops, or rebel men for they was not always enlisted men, but they would go on their own responsibility [and] scour the country arresting whom they chose and [they] treated them as their malice and beastly habits of life suggested.

There is hundreds and thousands of cases that never will be told. Turn to history and see for yourselves: for one, there was W. G. Brownlow, one of our truer sons of liberty and a man with strong will and a true heart. [He] was promised thirty-nine lashes and a coat of tar and feathers, and they did put him in jail, and another case was one in Washington County, E Tenn. [He] was Wilman Milbaem[sp?], a nuthes [Methodist?] minister, one of the best and truest Christians I ever knew. He was arrested and sent to Knoxville jail and starved for even praying and in the church for the [...]ing; and, after he was kept there a while, he prayed or preached and had a revival in jail. They said he would do more good in jail than harm and they award[ed] him leave and sent him home, though they limited him to go to the doctor's, blacksmith shop, and the mill, and then not to go off the farm. The church was just over the line and he could not go to it. He went to the house and the people came and the seats was made in the park and they met there and had meetings with their union minister, and God pored his grace down and it was [a] wonderful meeting [with a] number of conversions and the rebels could not hinder.

Thus days and months passed and still Mr. Thompson worked at his trade at a small place called Brolesville, E Tenn., Washington County and, as he was a shoemaker, he escaped several draughts before they was taking everyone they could get, old and young. But things got worse every day and it was not safe for a union man to even express his sentiment at all, and all they did had to be done secretly, and they was watched very close by day and by night. You could see rebels around your house at night to see if you was aiding the union in any way, though it was surprising to see what the union men [were?] ready to [try to?] sustain their pirmissible [principles?]; and many of them [were] forced to go in the army against their will, and the remainder was carried to some camp to be graded still[guarded until?] they would agree to enlist and their rations was so short it forced to them to render service [sooner?] or later, and then they began to go to the other side. And it cost many [a] one their life, to start, and some got through and others was captured and was sentenced to some of the rebel prisons.

And, in June 1862, Mr. Thompson went to Kentucky and, after many days of hard travel and exposure and hardships with blistered feet, they arrived at a small town in Ky. called Barberville and there they enlisted in the Co. I, 2nd Regiment of Tennessee cavalry. [He] was enrolled July 12 1862 and, soon after, he was sent back to his old home to raise recruits for said regiment; and you will see that is why I am trying in a [..]ille[an ill?] way to note some of the truths done that is written in my memory with the pen of blood, never to be erased from my memory, back to when and how and why Mr. Thompson came home. He came to help the union men to escape from the wrath of the enemy, and he had to stay in some secret place and keep himself hid, as a matter of course, some one had to help him and, as he had more confidence in me than anyone else ,he asked me to aid him, which I did never that anyone would know it. I went to the males such as I knew to be true to our cause and told them, if they would meet me at a certain place, I would see they would go through to the union army.

And we found a great number of friends of the tense[Tennessee?] die[lie?] among the colored people and of course they was slaves, some of union men and some of rebels. But [of] course we knew who to trust, and it is strange how these pore souls would work all day in their master's service and then go all night for what they called their ease of freedom. So, by the help of these and our friends we found among the white[s], we was about to soon raise a good number of our best men; for upper East Tennessee was a good deal more then one half union, and it was no trouble to get a crowd to meet at a named place. And then I would go to where Mr Thompson was and report to him, and then the next thing was to cook a good lot of food and put [it] in sacks. Then, when the time would come, I would meet them and see that our plans had not been found out by the enemy and take them to where they met me, Jc[?] and he took [them] through the lines and they went to Ky. [and] was mustered in[to] the army.

And then that gave them new life and made them see that they now had something to strive for, for they had left their families and property, and well did they know how other men's families had been treated. And, of course, they was afraid almost to hear from home and dear ones left behind, for it was [not] enough for the rebels to carry off all you had--let it be little or much it was your all--

but they must burn your barns, and a hass[harass] and ravish your wives and daughters, and hang by [their] necks our young boys to try to scare out of them what they did not know. And in several cases in Washington and Green counties, to my knowledge and by which I can prove, they hanged them and never cut them down and they was found by their friends dead because they could not tell what they did not know.

When Mr T. got there and gave his men over, he was taken sick and was not able to travel for a long time, and while he was sick he sent me a letter by one George Kirk and, as I think it proper, I will give it.

My Dear wife, I arrived here and am safe. The men are all well and very anxious to come home, but we can not tell anything about it for the ways of the army is Shame and sure[?] and men's tears. We will do all in our power to come to our dear ones' help, for it makes blood boil when we hear of the treatment you all receive from [the] enemy. I send this by our old friend, George, and as I am fine, I want you to help him to get some more of our men out of bondage. I will write as often as I can. Send me a letter by our friend. From your husband, S. H. Thompson

March 4 1863

Somerset, Ky.