

Ben Van Dyke's Escape From the Hospital at Pleasant Hill, Louisiana

ISSN 0003-4827

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Recommended Citation

"Ben Van Dyke's Escape From the Hospital at Pleasant Hill, Louisiana." *The Annals of Iowa* 7 (1906), 523-532.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.3324>

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BEN VAN DYKE'S ESCAPE FROM THE HOSPITAL AT PLEASANT HILL, LOUISIANA.

HIS NARRATIVE, REVISED BY S. F. BENSON.

I was a member of Company D, 14th Iowa, W. T. Shaw, Colonel. Our brigade consisted of the 14th, 27th, and 32d Iowa and the 24th Missouri; it was the 3d Brigade, 2d Division, 16th Army Corps.

At the battle of Pleasant Hill, the enemy made a charge about four o'clock P. M. which we were unable to check, and we were ordered back, and on this retreat I fell nearly in the Mansfield road, shot through the right thigh above the knee.

The advancing rebel line ran over me, driving our line back to the reserves, where they were repulsed, and soon came back over me a second time, and then our army came charging over the dead and wounded. All this time the air was full of flying bullets, and we were in great danger of being killed.

Finally night put an end to the fighting, and we fondly hoped that now we should be gathered up and receive medical aid. But the Union army marched away, and there we lay all night among the dead and wounded, the latter calling piteously for water and help.

Near me lay a soldier of the 15th Maine (McMillan's brigade, 19th Army Corps), and he came to my relief. He gave me a drink from one of the two canteens he carried. (You old soldiers will understand why he carried two.) That draught gave me renewed strength, but it did not taste much like water. In fact, I have an idea that it came from the cellar of some old southern gentleman, and had been kept in a barrel.*

The long night after the battle finally wore away, and the

*Miss Sallie Chapman, daughter of Stephen Chapman, now Mrs. R. A. Rembert, who then lived in the middle of the little town, states that the Union soldiers robbed her mother of everything she had in the house to eat, except a barrel of molasses, which her mother sat down upon and forbade them to take, and that after wrangling a little over the matter, they granted her request, and to prevent other soldiers from taking the barrel, they rolled it into the house, and in so doing, they discovered her family wine, and had a fight over it. It is likely that this was where the spirits of Ben's narrative came from.

bright sun rose on the beautiful morning of Sunday, April 10th, with the dead and wounded yet uncared for.

About 10 o'clock A. M. the rebel army, discovering the retreat of the union army, came following them up. And these southern men gathered us up and conveyed us about two miles east of Pleasant Hill, to a country place where our people had established a hospital the previous day, and there we remained as prisoners of war.

At that place we found surgeons from both armies, and they were amputating arms and legs, almost by the wagon load. I remember, in particular, one, Henry Nulton, of my regiment, who had the misfortune to lose an arm near the shoulder. He begged me to stand by him and see him through the operation, and when the doctors were through with his arm, to bury it under a near-by tree, which I did.

Doctor Huston, of the 32d Iowa, made me steward of one ward, and cautioned me not to remove any of the bandages. But one day, a comrade came to me complaining that his wound was itching intolerably. I took off the bandage, and lo! the wound was literally alive with maggots, such as revel in putrid carcasses. I removed an immense quantity of them, and then thoroughly washed the wound. (This was a common experience in that hot country.)

A few days after the battle, I contrived a pair of crutches out of some fragments of an old wagon, and I was then able to move round with a degree of comfort.

The little supply of rations left us by our army was soon exhausted, and after that we got very little to eat, and we had so few cooking vessels that we were compelled to keep them going nearly all day and night.

No guards were kept round our hospital, and I meditated an escape from that unwelcome place. I reasoned that we could expect nothing better than to go from here to some military prison; and it subsequently developed that all the prisoners captured at this place were ultimately dragged away to that miserable den called "Camp Ford," near Tyler, Texas, where they remained fourteen months, until June, 1865.

And now, after more than forty years have passed, when I

reflect on all these matters, I regret nothing connected with my escape, unless it be the effect of the exposure and hardships I endured during three weeks' journey through storms and mud and scalding sun, without shelter or blankets, and much of the time without food.

Believing our army was still at Grand Ecore, I determined to go in that direction. Accordingly, on the 27th of April, nineteen days after the battle, I walked out on the road about a mile, and seeing no one in any direction, I took to the brush, and lay quietly hidden till long after dark, and then moved on.*

I had not traveled far on the road when I saw a light in a house, and determined to investigate. I found the place occupied by an old colored man and his wife. Going to the door, I spoke to them and walked right in. I told the old man that I was a Union soldier, and was hungry and wanted something to eat, and that I was in a hurry. He gave me a piece of corn bread and some buttermilk. While I was eating my supper, the thought struck me that possibly I might trade my blue uniform for a suit of this man's clothes, and I at once mentioned the matter, and got a coat, pair of pants, and an old white hat. The clothes were not an ideal fit, especially the hat, as the darky was a much larger man than I, but I looked and felt like quite a different man. I fear, however, that I should not have passed muster in my own regiment.

The old darky hid my blue uniform under the bed, and giving me a small piece of bread and some meat, said he knew where there was a boat, or skiff, which I might use to advantage, as I was quite lame yet, and he even offered to go with me to the boat, a distance of some four or five miles.

It proved to be on Bayou Pierre, and I was now able to glide down that water-course like a true sailor. This was quite a relief, as I had started with a crutch, though I was able, in a few days, to throw it away.

*Henry Nulton states that Ben came silently to him beforehand, and informed him of his intention to leave, and that he, Nulton, gave him what little money he had, and wishing him Godspeed, requested him, in case he was successful, to write his (Nulton's) father, in Bloomfield, Iowa, which Ben afterwards did, directing his letter to "The Father of Henry Nulton, Bloomfield, Iowa."

It was pretty dark that night, and before I had gone far my boat began to act very strangely, getting quite unmanageable. I could hear a great roaring like a mill dam, and I got considerably frightened, lost an oar, and as a last resort, clung to the rope. Finally the boat stopped short, and I discovered I had passed over the rapids. Pulling my boat to shore, I remained hidden all the next day, April 28th, and at night glided again down the stream.

That night I saw a light ahead of me, and apparently in the same stream I was on. Thinking it might be one of our government gunboats, I felt greatly elated, and steering my boat close to shore, I allowed it to drift noiselessly down toward the strange craft. As I neared the stranger, I saw a man on board, but he was not wearing the blue, and I drifted past him without being seen, and a little farther on, came to a place where there were a lot of tents. In only one tent could I discover any light. Tying up my boat, I slipped cautiously up and peering into the tent saw four or five rebel soldiers playing cards. Not being interested in the game I returned to my boat and floated silently down stream.

I found I was now in Red River, and I could see artillery on the bank, and at one place I saw a man standing on guard, but he was not a very vigilant watch, for he did not see my craft, or at least he paid no attention as I went on past him. A mile or two farther on I went into camp for another day.

Having now passed a rebel camp at the very place where I had hoped to find our army, you may imagine that I was much worried and depressed, thinking I must have made some serious mistake, and was now in a decidedly bad environment. I was, in fact, now between the two armies, Banks having moved down the river toward Alexandria and the enemy having occupied Grand Ecore.

April 29th, I lay hidden in the brush nearly all day. Saw a darky hoeing in a field, and crept along the fence till I came to a point where he would arrive when he hoed out his row. After joking with him a little I told him squarely that I was a Union soldier and had been captured and had escaped, and he then told me the rebels were camped five or six miles up

the river, a fact I knew too well already. But he added that the "blue coats" had gone down the river only a day or two since. This was bad news for me, and I knew then that I had a long hard trip before me. I told the darky that I was hungry and wanted something to eat, and he said, "stay where you are till night, and I will bring you something." I remained there quietly, and about nine or ten o'clock at night he brought me some corn bread, meat and milk. Going back to my boat, I began again my journey down the river, this being the night of April 30th.

After a few hours I saw ahead of me a great light, and on getting nearer, thought best to tie up my craft and investigate the affair. I found a lot of rebels at work on a boat that had been sunk. I afterwards learned that it was a gunboat that our fleet had blown up, because they were unable to get it down to Alexandria.

At this point I was obliged to leave my boat and proceed on foot. I lay in hiding during the day, and traveled by night. I built no fires, having no matches.

About noon, on May 2d, while I was hiding as usual, I noticed a woman at a little log house on a hill side, distant about sixty or eighty rods. I observed her passing into and out of the house, being apparently the only person about the premises. Presently she built a fire in the great fireplace, and I conjectured that she was about to prepare dinner. After a little she went out into the forest in a westerly direction, I being south of the house. I thought this was my opportunity to secure a free dinner, so I approached the house and found near the fire a "Dutch oven" or skillet, with a lid on it, having coals on the lid. On removing the lid, I found three corn biscuits in the oven. Turning the bread into my hat, I replaced the lid, and as I left the house I took along with me a small ham from the near-by smokehouse, and retired unseen to my hiding place, much pleased that I had now plenty of provisions for the immediate future. The corn bread was somewhat raw, and I had no knife with which to cut the meat, and was obliged to use my teeth, but I did not mind these small inconveniences.

While I was enjoying my dinner the woman returned, and I suppose her first care was to see how her meal was coming along. In a moment she rushed out in great excitement, ran two or three times round the house, after which she returned, and I saw smoke again issue from the chimney, so I presume she prepared dinner for two that day. The distance was so great that I was not able to discover whether she was a white woman or colored.

By this time, as I had now worn citizens' clothes for some time, I began to think it safe to travel in daylight. So I walked along both day and night, resting whenever, and wherever I got tired. The nights were quite cold, and having no blankets, I found it comfortable to sleep part of the time by day.

On May 4th, I met an old man and his son. I had a long talk with them: asked them to what command they belonged, and when they named a Louisiana regiment, I decided that I would be much safer as a member of a southern regiment, so I told them my regiment was the 13th Texas.

This old man said they had been paroled at Vicksburg, and had not been exchanged yet, and were hiding out to avoid reporting to Gen. Dick Taylor until they were exchanged. I am of the opinion they were Union soldiers in disguise like myself, and had we all dared to tell the plain truth, we might have traveled together. But were I again a prisoner, seeking escape, I would deem it the safer way to go alone as I did then.

On May 5th, while I was sitting on a log over a small creek, towards evening, washing my wound, I heard a noise a short distance up the creek, and glancing in that direction, I saw two young ladies, and they observed me about the same time. One of them said to the other: "Why! There is a soldier." To which the other replied: "Yes, and he is wounded, too."

Then they came down where I was, and one of them assisted me in washing the wound. And to these ladies, also, I belonged to the 13th Texas, and said the "Feds" had captured me at Pleasant Hill, and I had escaped.

Nothing would do but I must go home with them. They

said they were after their cows, but I noticed they did not look further for the cows.

I went to their home, and their mother, after examining my wound, said she could make a salve that would cure it in a few days. She prepared the salve, and then urged me to feel just as if I were at home with my own mother and sisters, for they would do for me everything that my own people could.

Long after dark the old lady bethought herself that I might be hungry, and said, if they had anything about the house which I especially liked, to name it and I should have it. I replied that a soldier's life was a hard one, and that I had become accustomed to eat everything, and whatever they could get easiest and quickest would be good enough for me. I had eaten nothing all that day, and the ladies, probably had little conception of the full meaning of the terms, "easiest and quickest."

But the good lady called up the colored cook, and soon had a splendid supper ready—ham and eggs, hot biscuits, sweet potatoes, and good coffee. And I want to assure the reader that I did full justice to the bill of fare.

After supper the old lady dressed my wound, and showed me into the parlor bed-room, and when I was snugly in bed, the old lady and the girls came in and remained till morning. We had then another good meal, and as I prepared to go, they urged me to remain till I got well, but I pleaded that I feared the "Federals" would find me there, and re-take me prisoner of war; but they said they would keep me hid.

The time wore away, and about 11 o'clock four rebel cavalymen rode up and wanted their dinners and their horses fed. They were told to get right off and come in. When they had cared for their horses, I inquired to what regiment they belonged, and when they named a Louisiana regiment and inquired mine, I said "Thirteenth Texas."

One of these men who seemed to do most of the talking, remarked that I appeared to have my hair cut just like a *Federal soldier*; and said that he had seen a few Federal soldiers. This put me in rather a tight corner, and I explained

that I had been in a federal hospital after being wounded, and that the boys had laughed at my long hair, and wanted to cut it off, and I had permitted them to do so. Nothing more was said on that subject, and we all five sat down to dinner together. After dinner, one of them inquired what their bill was, and when the lady replied that she had never charged a soldier for a meal, and never would, he threw down a twenty dollar bill (Confederate money), and they rode away.

When they were gone, I thought it high time that I too was moving on, though both the old lady and the daughters begged me to stay. But I told them I was "awfully afraid of the Yankees." So in the evening of May 6th I said goodby to my kind hostess, and resumed my journey.

At first I went south about a mile, and then turned west into a body of timber. By the next day I began to get very hungry, and looking about for another meal, I observed a small house about a half mile from my course.

On approaching the place, I discovered that in order to reach the house I must cross a public road, and I had formed a sort of dislike for all public highways. But I ventured across, and found only an old lady at the house, to whom I communicated my desire for food, and at that very moment I discerned a solitary footman approaching, and so near that any attempt to escape would be impossible.

When he arrived I found he belonged to a Mississippi regiment, and I, of course, was again a 13th Texas boy.

When we had both informed the old lady that we were in need of something to eat, she said she would get us a bite, "But," she added, "you young men ought to be ashamed, fighting against the best government the sun ever shone on." I was sorely tempted to grasp the old lady by the hand, and divulge my identity, but the Reb gave me a timely warning by calling to the old lady, to get that meal ready, and do it quick, or we would come in and get it ourselves.

While the old lady was preparing our meal, the Johnny pulled a navy revolver from his belt, and passing it over to me, said, "I took that one from a Yankee soldier with this one," drawing another from his belt, "and," said he, "mine

was not loaded either." When I took the revolver, I was strongly inclined to capture the other one, and eat my meal without his company. But I reflected that if I should kill him, I would get the old lady into trouble, and perhaps myself also, so I returned the weapon with the remark, "It takes a Confed. to disarm a Fed. every time." At which he laughed and began boasting that he would never surrender to a d——d Yankee, nor would he ever take the trouble to capture one. I set him down for a coward, which was very likely the reason why he was not then at the front.

Thanking the old lady for my breakfast, I took the road running westward and soon met a darky who told me he was from Alexandria, and had seen several blue clad men along the road, and that they were all lying down except one, who was standing by a tree. I decided that this must be one of our Union picket posts, and I determined to visit it. I had gone but a short distance when I saw a whole regiment coming my way, and I could see no way of escape, so I bravely walked up to the advance guard, and asked who they were. They said, "Quantrell's men," and that made me again a 13th Texas man.

In conversing with the Colonel, he said it would be impossible for me to reach the 13th Texas as the Federals would get me sure.

Then I inquired if I could not reach my command by going down the Washita River with his men, to the mouth of Red River. He thought the plan feasible and by his consent I turned back and joined his command on their march. May 8th, marched all day without any guard, and at night, for the first time in my life, I drew rations as a rebel soldier. May 9th and 10th, rode part of the time, and even carried a gun.

On May 11th I thought I would play them a Yankee trick. So I lay down, and when one of the guards rode up, I told him I was too tired to go a step farther. He simply drew a bead on me with his carbine, and commanded me to move on, and I moved. He remarked, "I don't like the looks of you, anyway," and I know I did not like his talk. After that I

found it unnecessary to get tired any more, though I remained with the rear guard all the time.

That night they took alarm at something, and removed their horses to a place some distance from their own camp. An officer came to me and said they would be able to land me in my regiment the next day. I said I was awfully glad of it, but I mentally resolved never to be landed in the 13th Texas.

We were encamped on the bank of the Washita River, and had been burning rails to cook with. After supper I lay down, and near me was still the same man who did not like my looks. Along in the night I got cold and asked him to fix the fire, but he only cursed me, and directed me to fix it myself. This was his mistake, and my opportunity, for in replenishing the fire I got hold of a solid piece of rail, and being very close to him, I said, "What is that coming out there?" and when he turned in the direction indicated, his head came into violent contact with the rail, and I ran quickly into the Washita River, and have never seen anything of Quantrell's men since.

On May 18th, I walked into my old regiment, 14th Iowa, and was able to give Gen. A. J. Smith valuable information about the enemy. Our men were then near Yellow Bayou.

I was nineteen days a prisoner at the hospital, and twenty-one days making my escape, in all just forty days.

ORIGIN OF THE MAINE LAW.—Congress in 1836 passed an act prohibiting the sale of intoxicating liquors among the Indian tribes. This is said to be the first prohibiting act of the kind, and is attributed to the recommendation of Gen. Jackson, who was president of the United States at that time. It may turn out yet that the Maine Law will be claimed as a plank of the Democratic platform.—*Dubuque Herald*, Jan. 6, 1854.

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