3-2002

The Old Flag behind the Wire: Union Soldier Morale in Camp Ford Texas

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UNION SOLDIER MORALE IN CAMP FORD, TEXAS

by Philip D. Dillard

From November 1863 to April 1864, fewer than 800 Union prisoners occupied Camp Ford near Tyler, Texas. Despite their small numbers, these prisoners of war took significant steps to maintain morale and to organize their world. Under the leadership of Colonel Charles C. Nott, they designed and built their own compound, organized theatrical productions, and persistently frustrated their Southern captors. This Union island within the Confederacy comes alive in the pages of its newspaper, the *Old Flag*. Although only three issues appeared, they provide an excellent view of life within a Civil War prison camp, illuminate the soldiers' attempts to maintain control of their lives, and provide an intriguing contrast to many postwar prison accounts.1

Appearing first on February 17, 1864, the *Old Flag* sought to entertain its readers and to reinforce their faith in the Union cause. "It is our fixed and inflexible purpose," the editor declared, "to nail it [the old flag] to the loyal mast head, ... and defy the combined hosts of treason to blot out a single star or erase a solitary stripe."2 Claiming to represent "the advance guard of liberty and intelligence," Captain William H. May edited and published the four-page paper with an edition coming out every two weeks. Laboring without a press, the editor carefully printed one copy of each number with a steel pen on letter paper. For $5 a year in U.S. currency, the subscriber would receive the paper, read it himself and to his fellows, and then return it to the editor for redistribution.3 In lieu of specie, a patron could pay his subscription in coffee, tea, food stuffs, or tobacco.4 Enlisted men from the Forty-Second Massachusetts Infantry made room for May’s editorial office in their quarters and praised his work highly in their postwar memoirs.5 Although strictly concealed from prying Confederate eyes, the pages of the *Old Flag* provide a window into the world these Union prisoners built as the paper displays their industrial efforts, amusements, celebrations, and vices.

Prisoners at Camp Ford pursued a number of industrial enterprises to improve their circumstances and to pass the time as they waited to be exchanged. Faced with an open stockade, most new prisoners spent their first days in camp trying to build some form of quarters. Although the prisoners lacked tools, they felled trees in the vicinity and built cabins while others used shovels to create dugouts.6 To impose order, Camp Ford’s new residents laid out streets named for places they held dear. For instance, officers from New York located their mess near the corner of Fifth Avenue and Battery Place.7 Other streets suggested a more jovial flair as 10 Pin Alley, Mule Avenue, and Shin Bone Alley paralleled each other. On February 17, May reported that a new block of barracks was rising as others expanded their quarters: ‘‘We learn that Col. B [urell] of 42d Street has contracted for an extension of his mansion and that Lt. McFinnigan contemplates the addition of spacious dormitories to his

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suburban residence." After completing construction, some men tried their hands at farming while others attempted to ply their civilian trades. Editor May compared the prisoners who enclosed small garden plots to Cincinnatus as they deserted "Mars for Ceres." S.G. Bailey offered his services as a watchmaker while Dr. David Hershey boasted of his surgical experience in Europe. Similar advertisements appeared in the Old Flag for R.C. Anthony's boot blacking and Charles Bailey's barber shop. For these service-oriented businesses to continue, a viable internal economy had to emerge.

Instead of entering the service trades, some innovative prisoners attempted to produce goods for sale to their fellow prisoners and to their captors. Patrick Walsh attained rave reviews from the Flag's editor for cigars manufactured in the camp. Although a free sample might have influenced him, May praised the item and highlighted Walsh's ad for "Segars" for wholesale or retail purchase. H. Hay-Ley also sought new customers for his soap factory. In the same issue in which he introduced his product he advertised for raw materials: "WANTED! 500 Chine-bones - beef preferred - at my SOAP MANUFACTORY." True to Yankee capitalism, John Woodward and William Johnson soon found themselves competing in the production of chess sets. In a camp filled with bored men, Woodward's pieces brought significant praise and remuneration. "They are of holly-wood and finished in splendid taste," May opined. "He has already been offered as fair as $50 in good money - ie: Lincoln Green." While Woodward's men remained the editor's favorites, both manufacturers found numerous customers. On March 13, the Flag reported that more than forty chess sets had been produced in the camp in the previous six months. During this period, several budding entrepreneurs fashioned a series of lathes that markedly increased the camp's productive capacity. A wide variety of items were produced in limited quantities, including furniture, musical instruments, and mess equipment. Although no one became wealthy from the items manufactured in Camp Ford, editor May presents a picture of thriving, successful businesses that provided much-needed items and services to the prisoners and offered a sense of purpose to the businessmen.

Many of the Old Flag's columns were designed to amuse the reader and to brighten otherwise monotonous days in camp. May displayed a rich and varied sense of humor as he poked fun at his fellow prisoners and his captors. For example, on February 13, the Flag claimed to copy, from the Shreveport Fire-eater, the "text" of a Confederate congressional effort to raise more men: "An Act in addition to an Act relating to an Act entitled An Act to prevent the enlistment of men over 95 years of age, except as Nurses, Cooks and Blacksmiths." At other times the jibes were even more direct: "Conundrum - Why is the Southern Confederacy like a tea-kettle? Ans. Because the Black is at the bottom of it, and hollow within." Although intended to be funny, such comments reinforced Northern conceptions of the cause of the struggle. May turned his wit upon his comrades as often as his captors. On March 1, he announced that Navy Acting Master John Dilingham would soon complete a scientific volume entitled, "An Investigation into the Cause of Old Age in Mules, and Suggestions as to the Remedy." Noting the author's difficulties
because "the disease seemed to progress right along, without any apparent cause," May chronicled Dilingham's patient, scientific study of the animal. 19 Dilingham's purchase of a one-eyed mule while enroute to Camp Ford was the basis for this "larger study." 20 On some occasions the jokes had an ironic twist. For instance, on February 17, the Flag announced "that all prisoners in the State of Texas, all rumors to the contrary notwithstanding, both the Navy and the Army have been exchanged." 21 The most intriguing joke played in the newspaper was the announcement of the elopement of Henry C. Dane with "Miss" S.E. Thompson. May's contention that the two prisoners were blissfully ignorant "that the particulars of their disgraceful elopement was [sic] well known" suggests that these two were among the large number of prisoners who were discovered to have escaped through a roll call ruse. 22 Such wit, whether aimed internally or externally, allowed the prisoners to laugh at their captors and at each other, and thereby brightened the day.

In response to the editor's call for original fiction, two lengthy stories appeared in the March 13, issue of the Flag. In "High-Bird or The League of Blood," the author, identified as "Meigh, D.K.," told a tale set in Camp Ford. The hero, High-Bird, was described as "graceful in carriage, and as handsome in feature as 'Honest Old Abe himself.'" The pipe-smoking heroine was drawn to High-Bird despite his likeness to a mule because he remained so committed to the Union cause. At a mass meeting in the camp, the hero declared, "I want none to engage with me in this work but those whose hearts are of iron and whose hands grow stronger and more steady at the flow of blood." 23 A large fire and Indian warriors eventually entered the story but not before it lost coherence. To add to the confusion the story is stopped prior to the conclusion. In the other tale, "An Ocean Adventure," "Harry H." spins a humorous yarn about a whaler outfitted from Cincinnati with a cargo of mess-pork and missionaries for the Fegee Islands. Having related how a whale impaled itself on the ship's sky-sail boom, the narrator settled down to tell his story: "I had arranged at the extreme end of the bow-sprit my arm chair, and was seated therein, and if I remember rightly, was reading a speech of W.H. Seward, which I had taken down in short hand the week previously." 24 Again, the premise appeared interesting but the story quickly turned into a farce. May continued to call for original stories and offered "FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS! Payment to be made two years after the conclusion of the present war, in Confederate money." 25 These original tales allowed a form of escape, but, based on the prize offered, seem to have disappointed the Flag's editor.

Chess competitions and musical performances also provided welcome entertainment for the prisoners. On February 17, the Flag highlighted the prisoners' interest in the game of chess. First, May announced "that a Chess Tournament is in contemplation between the Commandant of Camp and a noted abolition officer to decide the question of exchange between black and white combatants." 26 Although no such competition was recorded, the choice of chess instead of cards or other games illustrated the game's importance. On the same page, a "Chess Problem" devised by Phoebus Lyon and Alexander Logan challenged the prisoners to achieve "white to mate in 3 moves." 27 For those
fond of music, Camp Ford offered some options. The Camp Ford Band, "consisting of R.W. Mars on banjo, S.E. Thompson on flute, E.J. Collins on the fife, and editor May on violin," advertised for engagements on March 1. In the next edition of the Flag, a large headline announced that the group would play for "A Grand Masquerade and Fancy-Dress Ball" on March 19. The fiddler guaranteed his own sobriety but made no mention of any ladies who planned to attend. While an exchange of prisoners continued to haunt the minds of the men, they undertook a variety of pursuits to fill their time. From editor May's wry wit to the creation of original stories to the manufacture of a banjo for the band, the residents of this Union island at Camp Ford committed considerable time and effort to the amusement of themselves and their comrades.

Both the Federal prisoners and their Confederate captors laid claim to the legacy of George Washington. As Washington's birthday approached the prisoners endeavored to find an acceptable means to celebrate the day. On February 17, "Pat-riot" called for the formation of instrumental and vocal groups as well as the preparation of speeches to honor the first president. That evening, representatives from each unit met in Undaunted Hall to discuss the proposed celebration. Editor May, who served as the group's secretary, described the men gathered there as "patriotic an assembly as the 'oldest inhabitant' of our bourough remembers ever to have seen." A committee of fifteen, chaired by Colonel Issac Burrell of the Forty-Second Massachusetts, immediately began preparations. These representatives further divided themselves into subcommittees on poems, music, toasts, refreshments, and finance. After several days of diligent planning, the committee conceded the "improbability of successfully carrying out the Programme" as planned. Neither love nor money, they discovered, could provide the refreshments originally expected.

Despite the committee's misgivings and through its resolute efforts, the Flag reported that at "eleven o'clock A.M. of the 22d of February, the buildings and streets about Fifth Avenue and 42d Street were literally blue with the 'Yanks' assembled." Lieutenant Colonel J.B. Leake of the Twentieth Iowa addressed the men and challenged them to emulate Washington's glorious example by remaining firm "in the hour of trial and darkness to the great cause." Further, he called on the men to place "faith in the moral power on the side of the Union." At the end of Leake's remarks, Lieutenant Colonel A.J.H. Duganne of the One Hundred Seventy-Sixth New York presented an original poem entitled "Washington." In this work, Duganne spoke to his brothers about the changing purpose of the war:

Who bids me sing? What theme my soul dictates!
A Captive, whispering to its captive mates! ...

Land of the North! Where loud Niagara's roll
Voices to heaven a free-born Nation's soul!
Land of the North where wild Atlantic waves
Baptize for Freedom's faith the souls of slaves! ...

Having stated the cause, Duganne reflected on the costs to the nation and looked for Divine assistance:
And whence the gain? what heritage survives
O'er wasted treasures, and o'er wasted lives, ...
O Washington! thou drewest your faith from heaven!
By heaven, through thee, our freedom's love was given! ...

Finally, the New York colonel called on the spirit of Washington to forgive his countrymen:

But veil thine eyes and bow thy sorrowing head!
These hands, this day, with crimson drops are red –
With crimson life-blood from thy country's veins!
O Father! weep! weep! and wash out the stains!

Leake's and Duganne's remarks struck May and many of the prisoners as quite appropriate and left the committee well pleased.

The residents of “Ford Borough” continued the celebration by holding an election. On February 17, May had suggested that the prisoners begin the Reconstruction of Texas. “The tenth part of the people of Texas,” May declared, “represented by the Union inhabitants of Camp Ford, ... have sworn to uphold our magnanimous President in his generous endeavor to unite all parties for his own support.” While clearly questioning Abraham Lincoln’s motives for his ten-percent plan of Reconstruction, May and his fellows decided to have a little fun with it. The editor called on the loyal inhabitants to register to vote with Lieutenants Avery, Robens, and Sherfry and included a “U.S. telegraph” message from Lincoln calling for elections to be held on February 22 to fill the vacant positions of governor, lieutenant governor, and superintendent of insane hospitals.

On March 1, the Flag announced the election of Samuel Morton of Indiana as Governor of Texas. The story describing the election included accounts of high-ranking men being escorted to the polls and of half-drunk bullies being dragged away. In his acceptance speech, Morton promised to free the slaves, to support Lincoln, and to keep saloons open until two o'clock a.m. The new governor, variously described as a country fellow and as a half-wit, appeared to enjoy his election. The editor enjoyed the scene even more as he recounted Morton’s actions at the “Governor’s Ball” that evening: “His Honor Gov. Samuel Morton, who, with a clean ‘filed’ shirt on and his feet clean-washed, was the admiration and pride of all present!” In the aftermath of his own election, Governor Morton called for the election of congressmen: “In komplianse with the 4going order from Mister Abe Linkun, I do now hereby order that said election taik plais.” Whatever May’s intentions toward Sam Morton, the election topped off the Washington Day celebration and made for an interesting inversion of roles.

In the pages of the Old Flag, a seedier side of the camp also emerges. On February 17, the paper published a letter from Lieutenant Charles E. Page calling for the destruction of all gambling halls and saloons. Calling these establishments “a nuisance which is doing much to corrupt the morals of the youth of our community,” Page demanded that the prisoners band together to avert the threat. In the same issue, May warned his readers to avoid being hood-
winked by a series of fraudulent lotteries being conducted within the camp. “Those who give the articles,” the editor proclaimed, “in two thirds of the cases, draw the prizes themselves.” Although May recorded that “Governor Morton” threatened to call out the militia to keep order on election day, the editor paid little attention to the vices of his comrades until they struck him directly.

On March 13, May described an assault on himself by a number of Irish soldiers under the leadership of a street-tough named McFinnigan. After McFinnigan was assured that the editor was not a member of the Know-Nothings, he returned the editor’s possessions. In the immediate aftermath of this incident, “Big Kerbee,” identified as the owner of much British gold, led a mob that surrounded the offices of the *Flag*. Kerbee’s men erected a gallows and dug a grave for the editor. May attributed this assault to jealousy and a hope to steal the money the editor had made from subscriptions: “No sooner had we this little fortune in our grasp than secret enemies, jealous of the success and rapid growth of our loyal little sheet sprang up all about us, and that which was intended as a blessing to us threatens to become our bane.” Although he refused to give up the money, May decided to cease publication. In utter frustration, he penned his own ironic epitaph: “Here lies AN EDITOR, Who died from the effects of his patrons paying up their subscriptions.” Yet, the paper did not die there. May sewed the copies of the three issues of the paper into the epaulets of his uniform jacket and smuggled them out of camp. Upon arrival in New York after his exchange, May, with the assistance of J.P. Robens, produced a limited number of lithographic copies of the *Old Flag*.

William May’s little newspaper provides invaluable insights into the lives of Union prisoners of war quartered in Tyler, Texas. Deep in the heart of Dixie, these Federal prisoners built a world of their own inside the walls of Camp Ford. The advertisements in the *Flag* for chessmen, soap, cigars, and items of furniture produced in the camp illustrate the industrious and innovative make-up of the prison population. The tobacco in Walsh’s cigars clearly show that trade with guards and townsfolk must have developed to a considerable extent. Further, the willingness to manufacture and trade goods signifies the rule of law and order. Although the attack upon May would seem to dispute this, it may be that some of the enlisted men saw an editor as a form of parasite feasting too well upon his fellows. Clearly, gang attacks were not the normal order of things. The celebration of Washington’s birthday contains all the remaining pieces. Confederate leaders allowed the ceremony to take place without disruption, thereby discrediting tales of fiendish, unthinking commandants. The accompanying election shows that the prisoners could laugh at the politicians and at themselves.

The prison population increased dramatically in the months after the *Flag* stopped publication, but none of the unit histories that describe Camp Ford after the arrival of the new men paint a dramatically different picture. Unlike the tales of warring factions within the prison population at Andersonville, the account of the “citizens of Ford Borrough” in the *Flag* produces an image of men following the direction of their officers, poking fun at their captors and themselves, and pulling together to make the best of a bad situation. William
May and the men he chronicled in the *Old Flag* took control of their lives and made them livable.

### NOTES


2. William H. May, “This day we spread upon Texas breezes . . .” *Camp Ford (Texas) Old Flag*, February 17, 1864, p. 3.

3. J.P. Robens, “Preface,” in *The Old Flag: First Published by Union Prisoners, at Camp Ford, Tyler, Texas* (New York, 1865).

4. May, “This day we spread upon Texas breezes . . .” *Camp Ford (Texas) Old Flag*, February 17, 1864, p. 1.


10. *Camp Ford (Texas) Old Flag*, March 1, 1864, p. 4; *Camp Ford (Texas) Old Flag*, February 17, 1864, p. 4.

11. *Camp Ford (Texas) Old Flag*, February 17, 1864, p. 4.

12. May, “Before Us Lays . . .”, *Camp Ford (Texas) Old Flag*, February 17, 1864, p. 3; *Camp Ford (Texas) Old Flag*, February 17, 1864, p. 4.


17. May, “We copy the following . . .,” *Camp Ford (Texas) Old Flag*, February 17, 1864, p. 2.

18. May, “Miscellaneous,” *Camp Ford (Texas) Old Flag*, February 17, 1864, p. 3.


20. Nott, pp. 133-4


May, "In Accordance With ...," Camp Ford (Texas) Old Flag, March 1, 1864, p. 1.


May, "Vote Early," Camp Ford (Texas) Old Flag, February 17, 1864, p. 3; May, "By U.S. Telegraph," Camp Ford (Texas) Old Flag, February 17, 1864, p. 3.

May, "Triumph of Loyalty," Camp Ford (Texas) Old Flag, March 1, 1864, p. 3.

May, "Governor's Ball," Camp Ford (Texas) Old Flag, March 1, 1864, p. 3.

May, "Proclamation by the Governor," Camp Ford (Texas) Old Flag, March 1, 1864, p. 4.

C.E.P., "Correspondence," Camp Ford (Texas) Old Flag, February 17, 1864, p. 2.

May, "Caution," Camp Ford (Texas) Old Flag, February 17, 1864, p. 2.

May, "Copperheadism in our City," Camp Ford (Texas) Old Flag, March 13, 1864, p. 3.

May, "A Still Later Assault," "Yet Later," Camp Ford (Texas) Old Flag, March 13, 1864, p. 3. "Big Kerbee" might have been Charles Kerby or Ed. Kerby of the 176th New York who appear in a list of officers in the camp. More likely, he was an enlisted seaman. May makes veiled references to Kerbee's support among the navy prisoners.

May, "Donation," Camp Ford (Texas) Old Flag, March 13, 1864, p. 3.

May, "Donation," Camp Ford (Texas) Old Flag, March 13, 1864, p. 3.