

Meadows recorded humor and horror of Civil War

By Rebekah Davis

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With 2012 being the second year in the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, we've seen lots of folks coming into the Archives looking for anything and everything detailing Limestone County's involvement in the war.

One of my favorites is a skinny little book titled *The Diary of R.B. Meadows*. Riley B. Meadows was a sandy-haired, hazel-eyed, 18-year-old Athens boy who volunteered for Captain Hiram Higgins Company, the Confederate Bricks, which were mustered by candlelight in front of the Limestone County courthouse door, Aug. 1, 1861.

Meadows' account of his wartime is well-written and fascinating, as much for the little funny incidents as for his recollections of battlefield deaths and of escape from behind enemy lines.

One of my favorite funny stories is right at the beginning, when Meadows was so excited to receive a package from home. "My first and only thought was that my dear old Mother had sent her soldier boy a piece of pound cake," he said.

Not wanting to split it among his comrades, he stuffed it into his shirt and "walked down the road out of sight of camp, the hot water running out of my mouth thinking of that cake. I turned and went up on top of the hill, sat down on a log, took out my knife and went to work cutting the stitches from the cloth that wrapped up this dear old pound cake. I could hardly wait to unwrap it, but what did I find? A pair of old time home knit socks my precious Mother had knit her soldier boy! Someone passing through the neighborhood told her they were fixing up a box to send to Higgins' Company. This party was going back to town, so this was all she had at hand to send. After I got over the sting of disappointment, it was alright, and I enjoyed the woolen socks."

In April 1862, Meadows' company was taken prisoner of war in Tiptonville, Tenn., at the Battle of Island No. 10. He and his mess mate, W.B. Byrd, escaped the camp, running to the edge of Reelfoot Lake. There they threw together a raft and paddles out of cottonwood fence rails and donated nails from a farmer close by. "The farmer gave me a handful of nails and a hand-axe, and told me if the Yankees came on us, to throw them in the lake, and swear he did not do anything for us," Meadows said.

When Meadows and Byrd sat on the raft, that cold water came up to their waists, but they set out anyway, not realizing that the lake was a good three miles across at least at that point and what they thought was the other side was merely an island in the middle. When they realized that, "What were we to do now in that cold ice water up to our waists, with freedom in that distant timber, with Northern Prison behind us only a short distance? We decided we would be free or die in the attempt, so we kept paddling for our lives on our light raft, for the far off shore."

By sundown, Meadows and Byrd had been paddling for about 12 hours. The water was coming up under their arms and they were still 200 yards from shore when they saw a man in a small boat and flagged him down. "We crawled off our raft into his boat, with our lower limbs more dead than alive," Meadows said.

The man took them back to his farmhouse for a night's shelter. "When we were invited out to supper, what did we find on the table? A large dish of stewed squirrel, cooked so tender and nice the meat would fall off the bones!" Meadows said. "How do you think this went with two starved rebels that had not had a bite to eat for about three days and nights except a pone of egg bread

the good lady gave us just before going on our raft on the lake? How good it tastes to me yet, although it was fifty years ago.”

To read more about Meadows’ adventures, you can pick up your own copy of his diary for just \$15 at the Limestone County Archives. All proceeds benefit the Friends of the Archives and their mission to help preserve and share Limestone County history. We hope to see you soon!

About the Archives:

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