

Rowena Webster's Recollections of Huntsville During the Occupation 1862

By Bessie Russell

On April 13, 1862, Federal forces under the command of Brigadier General Ormsby McKnight Mitchel captured Huntsville and cut the important railway line of the Memphis and Charleston Railroad. For the visionary Mitchel, who had distinguished himself as an astronomer before the war, this accomplishment hopefully meant the quick capture of Chattanooga and East Tennessee. With that vast territory under Federal control Mitchel felt that Union armies could move in any direction they wished, threatening the Confederate rear in Virginia or marching southward into Georgia.

The Federal command did not accept this plan and left Mitchel in Huntsville as commander of the occupying army. This, of course, was not what he wanted and he chafed bitterly over the assignment. Various accounts tell of the harsh

manner with which he dealt with the populace. Probably he was venting his frustration with his superiors on the defenseless citizenry, who saw in him the epitome of Federal power and dominance, reaping dissolution in the wake of its control.

One such individual who witnessed General Mitchel's plight during this period was Miss Rowena Webster, who came to Huntsville from Beechwood, Tennessee, to escape from approaching Federal armies who had captured Fort Donelson in February, 1862. Her respite from the turmoil of war was short-lived, however, with the arrival of Mitchel's troops. In her later years Miss Webster recorded some of the highlights of the occupation. They offer an interesting insight into conditions in Huntsville at that time. The account, printed here in part, opens

with the fall of Fort Donelson.

What is all the commotion? Church bells ringing! Soldiers moving rapidly to and fro! Women and children leaving the various churches on the Sabbath morning! Darkies smiling at the scene! People running here and there, seeking a place of safety – a place to flee! DONALDSON HAS FALLEN – DONALDSON HAS FALLEN! Who brings the news? Says one, and another, and another! No mistake, Oh, where is my Father? Cries one, and where is my brother? And where is my husband? No tidings of any, as yet. Oh, this dreadful suspense! All may be either wounded or dead. Soldiers rushing to the Chattanooga Depot to join their command. Women and children fleeing to some place of refuge, crowding all of the trains that are leaving the City. Some going to one place and some to another. Many reaching the home of Mrs. Andrew Erwin of Beechwood, Tennessee, -

they find her doors wide open always to the Confederate soldiers, their sick and wounded, and her servants and provisions placed lavishly at their command-like Florence Nightingale who never wearied in her attentions – applying medicines and remedies for their relief.¹

What Tennessee soldier does not remember her kindness? Many, very many, under the sod, if able to speak would rise up and call her “Blessed”. She was noted monument among the living and will always be a precious memory to her many friends. While she was a rare exception, there were thousands of noble women who gave all they had to our Confederate soldiers for their comfort and relief. Grandly, nobly and beautifully did our women perform their part in this great sacrifice for their Sunny South. Many of the wounded arrived at Mrs. Erwin’s home and were kindly nursed and cared for until they were ready to again join their command. Every attention was given them by the army

physicians, some died and others soon restored. In the meantime, the Federals began to move in. The house was soon searched for soldiers and all of the provisions on hand used – nothing was ever left in their wake that they could possibly consume or destroy. Some officers of the Federal Army would protect our property, while the majority would encourage their soldiers to commit every depredation in their reach. Mrs. Erwin had many an altercation with them, but in a most ladylike way stood firmly to her principles.

It soon became necessary for the young ladies of the household to refugee to places south of the army; Colonel Willis, while two went to Huntsville, Alabama.² After having been in Huntsville a few days, the Federals came like a cyclone into the City. While I and my youngest niece (Miss Rosa Turner) were staying with friends (Mr. and Mrs. Matthews), Miss Turner was placed in school.³ I never received such a shock as when a

servant girl at daylight proclaimed, “Miss Rowe, the turnpike is black with the Yankees – I can hear them a mile off”. While I never was the least afraid of them, I was startled beyond measure. I looked out of the window and discovered that they had come to stay. Men, women and children were panic stricken, altho none ever showed the least fear of them. Every woman in the City was aiding Confederate Soldiers to escape, even disguising some of them in female attire. Soon they had all escaped. One of the first who was captured was a brother of General John T. Morgan. I said to the officer who held him captive, “I hope you will be kind to him”. He replied, “I will”. Soon Gen^l M., of Astronomy fame, Federal Commander, had possession of the City. A greater tyrant never lived in revolutionary times! An Ohio Regiment was encamped on Popes Hill, near us, - they would pass every day to water their horses at the famous Big Spring of Huntsville. One of them chanced to see Miss

Sallie Matthews and Miss Rosa Turner, playing with grace hoops wrapped with red, white and blue. The soldiers were quite amused until they saw a tiny Confederate Flag attached to my arm. Altho it was simply hanging on my arm, one ordinary soldier, without any authority, rushed in the yard, saying, "miss, I want that flag". I replied, "You haven't the bravery to capture one on a battle field, but ask for a baby flag from a woman"? He replied, "If you don't give me that flag, I will put a case of smallpox in this house and one in the house opposite". I said, "Bring your smallpox case, I am not afraid of you, nor your smallpox, "and I immediately tore up the flag, placing it in my pocket, and threw the hoop into a reservoir at the foot of the hill, saying, "If you are a good diver, you can get that hoop". In the meantime, the Captain came up with his Company and saw me destroy the flag and put it into my pocket, saying, "You shall not have this flag". He informed the

Officer, and the next day Mr. Matthews, his daughter Sallie, Rosa Turner and I were arrested. Mr. Sam Matthews ordered his carriage, saying we had to go into Camp by order of Gen'l M. I rebelled and said I would not go if they brought a regiment for me. Seeing that Mr. Matthews was in earnest, I was compelled to yield and remarked to him, "I am very indignant and vexed but if I have to go, I will try to be a lady, even among my enemies". On arriving at Camp several officers offered to assist us out of the carriage and escort us to the tent, but we all refused to accept their offer. Under the trees, in Gen'l Lowe's grove, the tents were arranged and the General's son received us with far more politeness than his father, saying the General would receive us in a few minutes.⁴ Not in the least excited, I waited my summons. Soon we sallied to the tent where the General was seated behind a table with a pile of "green backs" placed before him. The young school girls were

a great deal frightened and kept on their veils. Mr. Matthews, being a stammering man, was very slow in his introductions, first introducing the girls. I awaited my presentation and my wrath began to stir at the thought of being held to account for such a trifle. I sneered, looked to the right and to the left, and was a long time taking my seat, trying to keep as calm as possible. When Gen'l M. began his questions, asking Miss Matthews if she had not insulted his soldiers, she replied, "I did not; one of them asked me for the little flag and I gave it to him". Then I said, "It was not larger than my hand". He said, "I don't care if it was mite, it was a flag". Then turning to me, he said, "Don't you know that you are in open rebellion". I said, "I am a Rebel open and above board". Growling like a lion, he said, "No man, or woman, or child shall say that they are Rebels in my tent". I replied, still more firmly, "I am a Rebel". He then said, "Don't you know that I could send you to Fort La Fayette in

five minutes". I replied, "that is very rapid traveling". I could see a lurking smile pass over his face, and he said, "Are you a lady"? I replied in a most indignant manner, "Who doubts it"? He then said, "You women, get to your homes". He was surely no gentleman but an arrant coward and a tyrant. He seemed particularly bent on insulting the women and children and went into the Army for gain. No worse order was ever given in the days of the French Revolution than that he issued to old Gen'l Turchin (a Dutchman) when he told him to march into the town of Athens, Alabama and to give the soldiers the liberty of the town for two hours.⁵ And they surely obeyed the order, in every sort of mischief and crime of which soldiers are guilty, without restraint. The people of Athens will never forget this outrage, as long as any inhabitant is left to tell the story. At the home of Judge C. they completely demolished the place, to punish the family - they pitched their tents as close

to the house as they could get them and never removed them until they had orders to leave. All of the vehicles, carriages, buggies and everything of the kind were rolled miles away unless they destroyed them by chopping them up with axes or hatchets. One of their chief delights was to strew molasses and lard all over the carpets, break up the furniture and smash the mirrors, and to leave nothing that they could possibly destroy. Had not the Rebels, in their shrewdness, hid much of their provisions, they would have perished. This Ohio Regiment did the fighting of that command for they went out 1400 strong and only fifty survived, but this old General never went out with them – he was too busy buying and selling cotton and enriching himself.

One day, in Huntsville, Alabama, a rumor came that a Confederate General, with 10,000 Indian soldiers, was crossing the river a few miles off, which created a great panic among the Federal troops. Artillery, infantry and every

available piece of armor was ordered out. Such clashing and clattering of arms through the streets we had not heard before. This gave the ladies a chance to exult and clap their hands for joy, hoping that the Yankees might have to retreat. It was soon found to be a false alarm and the citizens, and never did they have any peace while this branch of the army remained. We often kept the Yankees in hot water, reporting that Forrest, Morgan or some famous General was in the neighborhood, when we had no tidings from them. It was a mere ruse to defend ourselves from insult.

On one occasion Gen'l M. gave an order that the Rebel ladies might attend the burial of a nephew of Gen'l C. Whether it was a kind streak he took or whether it was to ascertain the feeling of the ladies we did not know, but believed it was the latter, and altho they were using all of the horses and carriages in the City, every lady in town robbed all of the gardens of flowers and each carried an immense bouquet and

walked behind the hearse for a mile and a half to decorate, not only his grave, but all of the Rebel Soldiers' graves in the cemetery. Gen'l M. might have known that it was a good time to show their principles and they never lost an opportunity to exhibit them.

The first Yankee soldiers that I encountered, I was walking with my lovely friend, Mrs. William Mastin, Sr., and I shut my eyes as I passed. She remarked, "Miss Rowe, it is all lost on then for they will think that you are a blind woman".

Some of us went to an old Baptist Church, out of use, and found many soldiers there waiting to be exchanged. They were always a jolly, wholesome set and one of them remarked, "People cannot say that we don't stand by our church".

Shortly after the Battle of Shiloh, Major C. arrived limping on crutches. We had told him, when he left, not to come back wounded in the foot and limping on crutches. Miss Fannie Donegan had told him, if he

was wounded to come to their house and we would nurse him. The Yankee Surgeon attended him and the surgeon remarked that "Huntsville was a lovely place, so full of flowers early in the Spring that it was like a fairyland". Maj. C. said, "Doctor, the flowers are nothing, the society is charming, so refined, so cultured". A short time after, many of our soldiers returned, wounded from this battle. One Sabbath about a dozen Yankee soldiers came to arrest Major C. We endeavored to conceal his crutches and disguised him, but they rushed into his room saying that by the authority of Gen'l M. they must arrest him. Maj. C. seemed calm, but the ladies, Miss Mary H. (to whom he was engaged at the time), Mrs. B., her mother, Miss Donegan and I, were very indignant and asked them if it took twelve of their men to arrest one of ours. We thought Maj. C was getting along very well with his wound but from imprudence he was threatened with lockjaw and his features were rigid

and extremities cold. He threw a book at the head of a servant to awaken him, and sent him to wake Miss Fannie Donegan and myself. We went to him, kindled a fire, gave him a strong toddy, put a cloth of laudnum on his foot and heated it with our hands. He declared that we had saved his life. A short time after this, when he joined his command, he was married to Miss Mary H. at Brentwood, Tennessee, and returned to his command without his bride.

We had two soldiers concealed on the flat roof of Mr. Donegan's house – Mr. W. and Mr. R – we used to pass their food to them every day until they could steal a chance to escape from the Yankee soldiers.⁶ They finally made their escape and joined their command. One day a woman, in deep mourning and heavily veiled, was seen getting over the cemetery fence to decorate some Yankee graves, when a man's boots were seen and some of the Rebel ladies discovered that he was a Rebel spy who brought

letters to them through the lines.

Miss Fannie Donegan and I had never seen the burial of an officer so, as one of the noted Yankee officers had died, we concluded to conceal ourselves in the dense shrubbery and watch the procession as it was passing the cemetery. The body was in an ambulance, draped with crape; his war horse was draped also; the officers were riding with reversed arms; many soldiers; a band was playing the dead march with muffled drums. It was a solemn sight to us. The cemetery was just a short distance from Mr. D's residence, near enough to hear the guns and cannons fire quite frequently, for he was Col of Artillery and was a great loss to them. On their return, after the procession was out of sight, three grave diggers came along; Miss Donegan asked the first one if they had buried an officer. He said "No, it was one of their men". I said, "that is not so, I know it was one of your officers". He passed on; a second one came by, she

asked again if that was not one of their officers. This one said the same thing and denied it. I said, "I will ask the next one". The third one passed; I halted him and said, "What officer was that you have just buried"? He said he was not an officer. I said, "I know better, he was one, for I have noticed you have buried five or six of your men and did not make any parade over them – did not even fire a gun – now this man had all of the honors and flourishing of trumpets accorded to him, there is no use in denying the fact". He at last acknowledged that it was an important many they had lost.

Another day I was sitting on the front porch with Harvey Donegan and one or two more friends, when a number of Yankee officers passed along, escorting a daughter of Gen'l M. She was also dressed in a blue riding habit with a sword at her side, which seemed coarse to us Southern women. Harvey Donegan remarked in their hearing, "Miss Rowe, there are some beaux for you". I replied,

loud enough for them to hear, "I hope never to be reduced to such as that – I keep better company".

Daily depredations were committed as long as the Federal soldiers were in our midst. Many say that this is the result of war, but I am sure they must have had many an officer who was merely vested with a little authority who took advantage of it and abused it by all the arbitrary acts they could show. Many had never commanded soldiers before, and showed even their own soldiers the greatest tyranny, but when their regular officers commanded they were born gentlemen, they were always polite and controlled their men and were willing to have wrongs redressed and grant favors, when not unreasonable. You may say that about one-third of the latter class controlled their army, while two-thirds were turned loose to do what they pleased. Most of the population of Huntsville were Confederates and would have died before they would have denied their principles. In the

beginning, I admit, that we often tantalized the Yankees by walking along the streets and giving ourselves the titles of our noted Generals – but take it to yourselves, if you were about to be robbed of all your possessions and accumulation of wealth

which was honestly gotten by our parents and your rightful inheritance, would you not have felt the same way, especially when the parents and grandparents of these Yankees had bought and sold slaves? They were once as much their property as ours!



¹ The typewritten copy of Miss Webster’s account is in the Manuscript Section at the Tennessee State Library and Archives. The original is titled “Memoirs of a Southern Girl”.

² Miss Webster was probably in her late thirties when she came to Huntsville with her niece, Rosa Turner.

³ According to the 1859-60 edition of the Huntsville City Directory, Samuel Matthews lived on the north side of McClung between Adams and California. It appears from the manuscript that the Matthews yard was just above the city reservoir.

⁴ Lowe’s Grove where Matthews and the girls were taken was located on Gallatin Street on the site where the Royal Funeral Home one stood.

⁵ Miss Webster’s reference here is to Colonel John Turchin.

⁶ The James J. Donegan home was a large brick house on the site of the present Huntsville Jr. High School on Randolph Avenue. The stone wall in front of the school was built by Mr. Donegan.