



"A Texas Farmer's Civil War: Pvt. William Elisha Stoker"

by Don Sailer

<http://housedivided.dickinson.edu/sites/journal/2010/03/22/stoker-2/>

The National Civil War Museum in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania holds original manuscripts from hundreds of Civil War soldiers, including Private William Elisha Stoker, a young father from Texas who fought for the Confederate army. We have no photograph of Private Stoker, but his collection of 30 letters written between August 1862 and May 1864 offers as vivid a snapshot as any of wartime life for a young, scared, soldier and a lonely husband and father. Stoker hated that the war kept him away from his wife Elizabeth or Betty and their young daughter Priscilla, both of whom he missed deeply. "When I reflect back upon the happy days we have spent together at that sweet little home and then think where I am now it nearley makes my heart sink with dismay," he wrote. Stoker was a member of General John Walker's Texas Division, which historian Richard Lowe considers "the single most formidable Confederate fighting unit" in the trans-Mississippi theatre.



Envelope, William to Elizabeth Stoker

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Historians know little about Stoker's life before his military service began in 1862. Born in Alabama in 1837, he moved with his extended family to Troup County, Georgia at some point before 1850. Then Brother Elisha, as his step-brothers called him, moved to east Texas, married a young woman named Elizabeth, and established a farm outside of Coffeenville in Upshur County. The young couple had at least one daughter, Priscilla, before Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln won the 1860 election and southern states seceded from the Union. The Stokers did not live on a plantation and were not active in politics, but they owned two slaves. The conflict over slavery's future was a conflict about their way of life. Yet it appears that William Elisha Stoker was not among the 25,000 Texans who volunteered for service as the war started. The Confederate government authorized a draft in February 1862 and Stoker entered Company H of the 18th Texas Infantry in May. His letters suggest that he was conscripted into service.



Bombardment of Fort Sumter



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Stoker's Texas company marched to Arkansas over the summer of 1862, arriving by September, but they did not actually receive combat rifles until November. While stuck in camp, Stoker's thoughts turned repeatedly to his family in east Texas. He desperately wanted to hear from his young daughter Priscilla: "When you write fill a sheet every time if you can and cant think of nothing get Priscilla to say some thing and write it. You wrote that she was as smart and as pretty as ever. I wish I could see you and her. I am afraid you and her your features I will forget. I have wished lots of times that I had your likeliness taken and brought with me." Stoker also loved and missed his wife. Occasionally he included a poem – "My pen is bad my ink is pail / My love to you will never fail."



To Arkansas

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For thirteen months, Stoker's military experience consisted mostly of marching. But that changed dramatically in early June 1863. Confederate generals decided to employ Walker's Texas Division as part of a desperate effort to stop the Union campaign to seize Vicksburg, the last remaining Rebel stronghold on the Mississippi. Yet the result was a major engagement at Milliken's Bend and then a series of smaller skirmishes across northern Louisiana –none of which succeeded in preventing the Union takeover of the Mississippi. Merely a young private, Stoker didn't fully appreciate the larger strategic picture, but he knew the situation was bad for his side. He told his wife Betty that even General Walker had admitted they had "done well to come out with any men at all."



Siege of Vicksburg



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Whenever William Stoker wrote home, he did not hide the harsh reality of army life. He claimed he only wanted “to let [Elizabeth] know how soldiers had to live.” One issue that the young farmer mentioned repeatedly in his letters was the lack of good food. “Plant lots of vegetables,” he instructed Betty, claiming that once he returned home his family would “see some of the powerfulest eating” because he was “nearley perrished out for something good to eat.” In addition, Stoker’s assessment of the medical care that he and his colleagues received was harshly critical. “We are all getting verry much dissatisfide. Up hear there is so much sickness and so many dyeing. They just dye all the time. The Doctors is out of medisens and if they had a waggon load it wouldnt do any good for they are so lazy they want get up when they are setting down to give a sick man a dose of medisens.”



Wounded Solider

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Both the grueling army life and his loneliness contributed to Stoker’s belief that the war simply had to end. One year into his military service, the Texas farmer concluded – “Times gets harder with the soldiers Ive got so I just wish this confederacy was toar all to smash and turned bottom [up?].” Stoker was especially tough on the officers in his unit. Enlisted men, he reported, had “give up all hopes of us gaining our independence,” but he told Betty that the officers never would admit defeat since then “[their] big pay would stop.” Stoker’s involvement in the war ended in late spring 1864, following the Battle of Jenkins Ferry, which took place on the banks of the Saline River in Grant county, Arkansas. This battle was part of the Red River campaign, a failed effort by the Union military to end Confederate resistance west of the Mississippi.



Red River Campaign



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Stoker's half brother Thomas McKissack informed Elizabeth Stoker in a short letter dated May 7, 1864 that her husband had been shot in the chest during the battle. Thomas was hopeful, or at least appeared to be in the note. "I think he will get over it...[and] he said he would come home as quick as he could," he wrote gently. William Stoker, however, never returned home to his wife and daughter. He was one of the nation's more than 620,000 casualties of war. What he left his family, however, was a rich testimony about the hardships of that conflict and the sacrifices of a generation of Americans who fought with each other so bitterly over the meaning of their great national experiment.



Battle of Jenkins' Ferry



Further Reading

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Document 1– William Elisha Stoker to Elizabeth E. Stoker, January 22, 1863

<http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/26544>

Source Citation –

William Elisha Stoker to Elizabeth E. Stoker, January 22, 1863, William E. Stoker Papers, National Civil War Museum, Harrisburg, PA.

Overview –

From battlefield losses to poor living conditions, Confederate Pvt. William Elisha Stoker reveals the bleak outlook of his Texas regiment during the Confederate attempt to hold onto the Trans-Mississippi territory in 1863. While Stoker overestimated the number of Union troops that took part in the Battle of Arkansas Post, the five thousand Confederate soldiers defending the fort were still outnumbered six to one. Upon hearing of the Confederate loss, Stoker's regiment attempted to curb Union control of the Mississippi River. He also points out the poor weather conditions and food "unhealthy to eat" that contributed to Confederate desertions. (By Shane Harding)

Transcribed Text –

Dear Wife I embrace the presant opportunity of writeting you a few lines to let you know how I am. I am well and I hope when thees few lines comes to hand it will find you and familey enjoying the same blessing. I wrote to you when we was hear before it wasent more than an hour after I sent my letter off before we got orders to march to Arkansas post on a force mach to reenforce Church Hill [Churchill] but we didnt get there in time. The fight had ended before we got there. We was about 48 hours too late. There was about 45 thousand of the feds attacted the post with there gun boats and land forces. There wasent more than six thousand of our troops there. The feds charged our batteryes several times and was repulced but finaley sucseeded with a veavy loss and captured all of our troops and amunitions waggon teemes and other accoutlements too tedious to mention. We got in about fifteen miles of the place and stopped on the river and throwed up brest works expecting that they would come up the river and aim to go to little rock but they turned back after they taken the post. They are more on the Missippi [Mississippi] some where they attacted the post with the same forces that they attacted vixburg [Vicksburg] with. They got whipped at vixburg but they thought they wouldnt stay whipped. They got lots of our boys that livs in upshur Co. Sipsos that lived in gilmer his companey was all taken. Tell Net that Gib Buaz has gone up the spout besides lots of others that lived in that settlement. There was right smart of them got away. I understand that several of Ritchersons Companey got away. Earn Colyer and several others and has gone home. We hav left our best works and come back up hear. I dont know where we will go from hear. [We may] go back to Little Rock or we may go to Camdon [Camden] on the washtaw river. If we come back to camdon I dont think I can keep from comeing home. We hav a hard time now there has ben one of the deepest snowes up hear I ever saw. This is one of the worst placees for wet wether I ever was in. We are in the river bottom and it is hard matter to keep out of the water and we dont get any thing to eat but corn bread and the poorest kind of beef unless we bye it. The beef we draw is so poor we want hav it. It is unhealthy to eat it. The beef we drewed last night was so poor we wouldnt hav it. We throwed it away and we havent had any thing to eat to day but bred. Betty I dont write the hardships and the suff way we hav to liv to distress you. I just want to let you know how soldiers had to liv. I hav heard lots of tails told about the hardships of soldiers life but the story hasent yet ben told...



Document 2– John T. Cuddy to John H. Cuddy, January 16, 1863

<http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/32755>

Source Citation –

William Elisha Stoker to Elizabeth E. Stoker, February 28, 1863, William E. Stoker Papers, National Civil War Museum, Harrisburg, PA.

Overview –

Even as harsh conditions worsened, Confederate Pvt. William Elisha Stoker sent his family what money he had. Shortages led to very high prices for staple food such as pork, eggs, and salt. Forced to eat only Confederate Army rations, Stoker states “I am nearly ded” and instructs his wife to “plant lots of vegetables” in order to prepare for his return home. Stoker also followed up on the fates of the deserters mentioned in his February 4th letter. Amnesty was offered to any Confederate deserter that turned himself in. The three that did were released and placed back into rotation. (By Shane Harding)

Transcribed Text –

Camp Near Pine Bluff February the 28th 1863

Dear Wife I embrace the presant opportunity of writeting you a few lines to let you know how I am. I am well at the presant hoping thees few lines may find you and familey enjoying the same blessing. Ive received yours of the 23rd of January. It came to hand the 24th of this month. I was glad to hear from you. I cant tell you what kind of feelings it puts on me to get a letter from you. I dont know what kind of flessings I would hav to come home and come walking up into the yard. Ive thought about that lots. I would be so over joid I would trimble like a leaf if I am ever blessed with that opportunity. I think I must get about half tight to keep from Fainting when I get there with over joy. Ive got a letter wrote that has ben wrote some time that I was entending to send by Capt Duncan but I dont know when he will start. When I wrote it I thought that he would of ben home in this time but he hasent started yet nor I dont know when he will. I stated in the first letter that I would send you a ring and a ten dollar bill but I want send it without he gose before the mail gose. It is time this letter was there but I keep waitting on him. I aint going to wait any longer. You wrote to me that you received that money that I sent by Sam Stephens and you was sorry that I sent it. You wanted me to keep it and bye me something to eat. That is good polacy. If every thing want so high we bye pork. Some times we hav to pay from 2. to 4. bits a pound. When we can find it Chickens sell from \$1.00 to \$1.25cts, eggs \$1.00 per dozen, butter \$1.00 per pound, salt sells from 70cts per pound which is a hundred and forty dollars per sack. I thought that I would send you all that I could spare so you could lay in yours this spring. John Heathcox and Jo Day and Bill Reaves was releaced without being hurt. They was put under gard three days. When Col. Cuberson [Culberson] came up he had them releaced but there is some that was caught and brung back. They are under gard and yet I dont know what will be done with them... I am nearley ded and the thoughts of Priscilas forgetting me it hurts me. Maby Ile get the chance to come home this spring. Plant lots of vegetables. If I get to come home youL see some of the powerfulest eattng you ever saw for I am nearley perrished out for something good to eat. I havent had any milk since last summer. If I could get some milk and butter and eggs and chicken and Biscuit and some ham and pyes that is too good to think about. I close by saying I remain your effectionate husband untill death.

William E. Stoker

To Mrs. Elizabeth E. Stoker

Kiss Priscilla for me and Ile return the compliment when I come.



Document 3– Thomas F. McKissack to Elizabeth E. Stoker, May 7, 1864

<http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/27321>

Source Citation –

Thomas F. McKissack to Elizabeth E. Stoker, May 7, 1864, William E. Stoker Papers, National Civil War Museum, Harrisburg, PA.

Overview –

Confederate Private Thomas McKissack (19th Texas Infantry, Company C) informed his half-brother's wife that Private William Stoker (18th Texas Infantry, Company H) had been shot on April 30, 1864 during the Battle of Jenkins Ferry in Grant County, Arkansas. Confederate forces failed to prevent Union forces from retreating across the Saline River during the Battle of Jenkins Ferry. While McKissack was confident that his half-brother would survive, William never returned home to Elizabeth and his daughter Priscilla in Coffeetown, Texas. (By Don Sailer)

Transcribed Text –

Camp Near Camden

[Illegible] May the 7, 184 [1864].

Mrs. Stoker: Take the Privealig to write you a few lines in regard to Brother Elisha. He was wounded in the 30 day of April in the Battle at Jenkins Ferry. He was shot just above the right nipple and it came out under his right shoulder. I went to see him twice. The last time I saw him he was doing as well as could be expected. He requested to write to you. He has a good Doctor to tend to him an a good nurce. I am going to try to get a horse an [and] go to see him. He is about 50 miles from here. He would of been Brought to this place but he could not be halled. You must not greave too much. I think he will get over it. He said he would come home as quick as he could. I will write againe as quick as I here from him. Tell Mas I have been through another fight unhurt an [and] the hardest ones we ever have been in. So I will Close. Excuse my writing an spelling but it was done in a hurry. Give my love to silles.

Yours Truly

T. F. McKissack