

Recollections of a most uncivil war

Captured by 'Guerrillas'

By George Adams Parkhurst
Contributing Writer

Current interest in the Civil War, as exhibited by plans to conduct battle reenactments in the Greater Lowell area in the near future, bring to mind the previously unpublished story of a Westford-related soldier who spent seven months as a POW in one of the war's most notorious prison camps.

William Chase Norris was only 19 years old (although he gave his age as 21) when he enlisted in Company F, 2nd Regiment Vermont Volunteers on June 2, 1861 at Burlington, VT.

Norris' connection to Westford is through his daughter Bertha (Mrs. Arthur G. Hildreth) and his granddaughter Barbara (Hildreth) Parkhurst, who resides at Hildreth Hills. Bertha Hildreth was a teacher at Westford Academy for several years.

William C. Norris originally enlisted for four years and re-enlisted Jan. 31, 1864. He was taken prisoner on July 21st of that year and was paroled Feb. 22, 1865.

Sometime after his release, he wrote in pen and ink of his experience, the original manuscript of his capture, yellowed with age, is treasured by his descendants:

"I was captured by Mosby's Guerrillas on the morning of July 21, 1864, on the Leesburg turnpike near Snickers Gap. The details of my capture are something like this.

"Just at daybreak as the 6th Corps passed through the little village known as Snickersville, after having crossed the mountain range through the pass so well known to the army of the Potomac as Snickers Gap, a thing that attracted special attention was what seemed to be many of Uncle Sam's officers sitting in front of the stores and dwelling houses, smoking and chatting with each other while their horses were tied to trees and fences in and around town. These horses, as well as their equipment, were all marked US and, as their riders were dressed as US officers, no fears were entertained as to their belonging to the other side.

"But had we only heeded the warning given by an old negro to 'look out for dem fellers; dey isn't what dey seem to be,' perhaps we might have avoided that long term of prison life, for these same men proved to be a part of the gang that captured us that same morning and

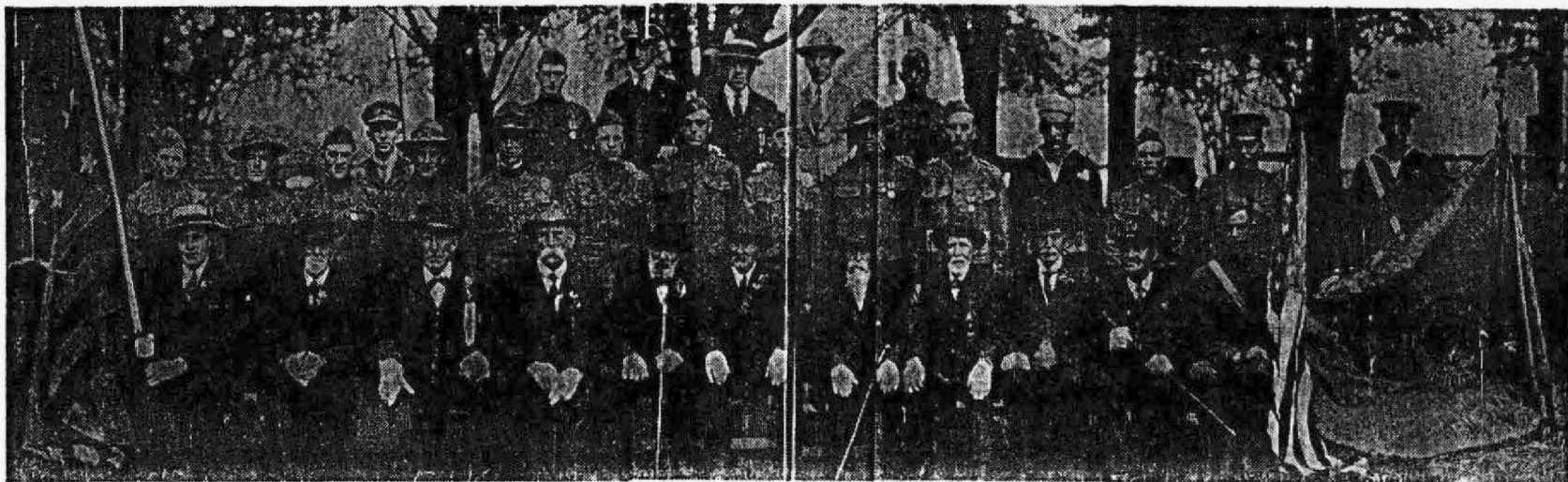


Photo courtesy Westford Recollections by June Kennedy

According to family tradition, William Norris (third from right in front) forgot to bring his white gloves when he came to Westford for this photo of war veterans on Memorial Day 1921. He wrapped a white hankie around his right hand and hid his left hand from the camera.

only about three miles further on." **In search of food**

"The Corps, as was its custom when on a march, stacked arms about 6 o'clock in the morning, and all hands went about preparing breakfast. Those of you who have been there know very well of what that consists: coffee, hardtack and

salt pork, the three indispensables to a soldier, and right here let us bear in mind that, although the hardtack was very good, yet there was such a sameness to it that we couldn't help hankering for something more palatable - occasionally, and this hankering business among the soldiers has been the cause of the disappearance of many a turkey and hen, and yes even sheep and hogs have been known to lay down their life for the cause - not voluntarily perhaps but were sort of pressed into the service, as it were.

"Well, I being of a roving disposition and remembering the fact that we had crossed a road only a short distance back running at right angles with the turnpike, and I

also remembered a tempting-looking farm house which stood about a half a mile from this crossing. These facts I had stored up for future reference, little dreaming at the time I should ever be allowed to make any practical use of them."

"But while the boys were engaged in making coffee, others went back

to this farm house to see if we could not make the acquaintance of the inmates and perhaps purchase a few edibles.

"Well, we got to the house all right and soon made arrangements for all we could carry off. In fact, we found not a living soul in or about the premises. So we naturally took it for granted that we must be the rightful owners, being the only inhabitants.

"We did not destroy anything, nor did we go inside the house at all, but in a spring house nearby we found quite a lot of bacon and other things. One article that we prized more from the fact that it cost us some bee stings was a pail full of honey. If I remember rightly, we did not get this all from the hives, but found some in the spring house.

"Well we started back as soon as possible, some of the boys having bacon, some butter, but all something with which to help out on our breakfast and all happy as clams, when all at once there came a burst of thunder sound in the shape of a volley of muskets in our rear.

"Make a stand, boys,' was shouted by Sgt. Green whom we had learned to recognize as a leader.

"Instantly turning around and bringing our guns to the shoulder, we were somewhat dismayed in seeing about 50 of Mosby's Guerrillas bearing down upon us with their horses at a full run. They made a pretty formidable foe for us to face and yet, when we gave them a volley from our muskets, they slackened speed only for an instant, but again, putting spurs to their horses and leveling their carbines, they dashed down upon us like a whirlwind, giving us no time to reload.

"Then they quickly dismounted and, with carbines at our heads, ordered us to smash our guns, which we did, having no alternative. They then went through us regular bandit style, making us give up our watches and pocketbooks. After this they went through us again, appropriating such articles of clothing they saw fit to take. We were then hurried back along the pike where there were other prisoners under guard; and before we reached Winchester, our numbers were swelled to six hundred that had been taken that morning."

The move to prison

"We were kept at Winchester about ten days under guard in an open field. Then started for Staunton. Making the distance of 92 miles in four days, arriving at Staunton in a pretty exhausted condition having eaten nothing but green apples, with the exception of an occasional swill hole which we were kindly allowed to clean out on the way.

"We were kept in prison at Staunton overnight and the next morning put on board a freight train, which was partly loaded with old iron, and taken to Danville Junction where we were transferred to another freight train and taken to Danville, reaching there, I think, on the 6th day of August.

"There we were taken to Prison No. 4 as they called it. We were then divided into squads of 50 and over each squad was placed an officer - one of our own men of our own choosing, whose business it was to see that we kept in our proper places and did not disturb other prisoners and also to see that the prison rations were equally divided."

Life in Danville Prison was rough by any standards. In another report, William Norris states, "The Rebs had taken our clothing and given us brown cotton pants and other things to match. We dug some old bricks out of the wall which we used for pillows."

The cold winter days were particularly hard. Although the Northern government had sent winter clothing, it was not given to

the men until they were paroled, then only one article to a man: a shirt for one, a pair of pants or a blanket for another.

Once Norris and some of his fellow prisoners did gain their freedom for a few hours. At a time when the number of guards had been reduced, as he later wrote, "A signal was sounded and in less than two minutes every gun was taken from the guards and smashed on the rocks and the prisoners were on the hike."

No soldier escaped alive from Danville Prison.

Finally they were crammed into filthy cattle cars and transported to Annapolis to be paroled. Most of them were "virtually skeletons - hungry for months, weak and faint."

In due time Norris returned to normal life, married and raised a family. He became a railroad telegrapher and worked at many stations, including Nashua. He visited his daughter's family in Westford and is pictured with the Westford Civil War veterans on Memorial Day in 1921 as shown in the picture on pages 90-91 in *Westford Recollections* by June Kennedy.

Family tradition tells us that Norris (third from the right in the front row of the photo) forgot to bring his white gloves when he came to Westford that day, so he wrapped a white hankie around his right hand and hid his left hand from the camera.

He died in 1928.

George Adams Parkhurst is an avid historian and the author of two books about his childhood in Chelmsford.



Photo courtesy George Parkhurst
William Chase Norris