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SOME NOTES ON A TRAGIC CHAPTER OF KENTUCKY HISTORY

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South central Pennsylvania was becoming rather heavily populated by the mid to late 1700's. Farm lands, too, were beginning to show the strain of continuous cultivation. Godfrey Van Deren and his wife, the former Charity Van Horn, sturdy Dutch settlers of this Buck's County area, were to see four of their five children migrate to and on down the great Valley of Virginia during the following three decades. Barnard, their oldest son secured an Indian Traders License from the proprietary government of the Colony of Pennsylvania in 1768. His pursuit of the Indian trade took him southward into Loudon County Virginia where he married Sarah Murray about 1778. They joined the ever increasing wave of pioneers moving down the Valley toward the Cumberland Gap and the fabled forests and rich lands of the new District, called Kentucky. Barnard and his family settled near the present town of Paris in Bourbon County in 1788 moving on a few years later to Harrison County, near Cynthiana. To them were born nine children. At the death of Barnard, James Van Deren, the oldest son, retained the farm.

Thirteen children were born to James and Sarah (Journey) Van Deren: Barnard, Polly, Nancy, Margaret, Josephus, Sarah, Ellen, James, Stephen, Alfred, John, Archibald, and Frances. Margaret, the third daughter, married Samuel Hinds Riley in 1833 in Harrison County. Shortly thereafter, in 1837, they moved to the rich Eden Shale tobacco, hemp and pasture lands of nearby Owen County. Owen County occupied an enviable place in Kentucky's agricultural history during the years between 1830 and 1860. Large acreages of tobacco and hemp justified a large slave population, innumberable flocks of sheep and beef cattle herds provided a diversified farm economy. Agricultural products were easily transported to ready markets down the Kentucky River to the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. The county's population, indeed was larger in 1850 than in 1980. The County had another interesting tradition, a military tradition. County musters, of the so-called "corn stalk" militia, were held in many counties during these early decades of the 1800's. Such musters and drills were held monthly in Owen and were still being conducted

as late as 1860. An unusually large number of Revolutionary War Veterans had settled in the county, a great many young men had traveled to Georgetown and Lexington to offer their services in the War of 1812, Presley O'Bannion who had led the Marines to Tripoli had served as a county official, the largest part of Company E, 1st Kentucky Volunteers which was mustered into Mexican War service was from Owen. In 1863, General Jeremiah Boyle, who commanded Union occupation forces in Kentucky, was quoted as saying that while Owen provided its quota of Union troops, the "pickings had been mighty slim". Truth of the matter, far more and, indeed, the cream of the county's young men had marched south a year or two earlier - in uniforms of Gray. Companies C, D and E of the 4th Regiment, Kentucky Volunteers, Confederate Army, plus units of many other Kentucky and Virginia regiments had been raised in the county. Two confederate recruiting stations were actively operating. Joining Company C of the 4th Kentucky in Owenton were two of Samuel Hinds and Margaret Van Deren Riley's sons, John Marcus and James Van Deren. No less than eight of their cousins also saw action in the Regiment. The 4th Kentucky became a part of Bragg's command, saw action at Perryville and Mill Springs.

Its first blood bath came at Chickamauga Creek in northeastern Georgia where one of the largest and deadliest engagements of the War was fought. Bragg's forces reinforced by Longstreets met Rosecran's Federal troops head on and thousands on both sides fell. The 4th Kentucky was opposed by elements of the 21st Wisconsin, 6th Ohio and 79th Illinois Regiments. While the South may have gained an advantage at Chickamauga the real test for control of the key railroad center of Chattanooga was still to come. Rosecrans withdrew his Union troops to the city but left Bragg free to control the high ridges and points of fortification surrounding the city. Realizing that to control the city and the all important railway to Atlanta, the Confederates had to be dislodged from the ridges and heights. The bloody battles of Missionary Ridge and Lookout Mountain soon began, again with

the 4th Kentucky holding the center of Bragg's Confederate line of defense. Moving slowly up the mountain side under a rain of shot and shell to dislodge them was the 79th Illinois. Serious losses were inflicted on both sides. John Marcus Riley died for a lost cause at Missionary Ridge and his brother, James, suffered wounds that crippled him for the rest of his life.

Returning now to Harrison County and the family of James Van Deren. Nancy, the second daughter, married George W. Brannock in 1831. They, too, moved several years later to Owen County and then, joining many other Central Kentuckians, journeyed westward to the flat and rich lands of Central illinois. The Brannocks, along with several of the Riley and Van Deren kin, settled in Edgar County just west of Terre Haute, Indiana in the newly made state of Illinois. Patriotic fervor in Paris and Edwardsville reached a fever pitch with the fall of Fort Henry and Fort Donaldson. Young men from Edgar County thronged to join the newly formed 79th Illinois Regiment. Among those answering the call to preserve the Union was Cyrus Brannock, oldest son of George and Nancy (Van Deren) Brannock. Second in command of the Regiment was Major Archibald Van Deren, brother of Margaret and Nancy and young Cyrus' uncle. The 79th trained for a time then began its journey south along the Tennessee River - in the process, seeing brief action at Nashville. After Chickamauga its next baptism of fire came in the ascent of the steep hillsides above Chattanooga and directly into the face of a hail of minnie balls raining down from Missionary Ridge. Cyrus Brannock was captured by Confederate units during the battle's second day and along with a number of his companions from the 79th Illinois was immediately marched to the rear. The prison train slowly made its way southward to Savannah. All arrangements and all hopes for prisoner exchange had now been broken off and Union - and Confederate - prisoners were to languish and die in the filth, alternate cold and heat, malnourishment, mistreatment, lack of even the most primitive medical or sanitary facilities, and utter and gross neglect of prison camps - on both sides. Brannock's

confinement in Savannah lasted three months after which he, along with some 800 of his fellow prisoners, again were herded into a prison train for a new prison facility in South Central Georgia. Its name - Andersonville.

While statistics of deaths indicate that the union prison for captured Confederates at Johnson Island, Point Lookout, and Rock Island, indeed, held the deplorable records of having the most, and the largest percentages of deaths, conditions at Andersonville defied human description. Enclosing but some 26 swampy acres, there was nothing provided in the way of shelter from the rain and the summer heat, no source of water except a putrid cess pool of a small clogged creek, the stench and the presence of human excrement covered the camp, food - generally coursely ground corn meal - was reduced to a near starvation level and medical facilities were all but non-existent. Nearly 32,000 prisoners were incarcerated at one time within the high pine log walls of Andersonville - and as many as 1,200 died daily. Young Cyrus Brannock, reduced now to one ragged blanket and his few tattered clothes survived these conditions for seven long months. Dysentery, acute diarrhea, gangrene, the bitter cold that even South Georgia can produce, finally claimed their victim. Cyrus Brannock died in December, 1864 and was buried in one of the many shallow mass graves alongside the stockade.

Moving now to another part of Kentucky and going back some years. Dr. Augustine Webber was one of the early settlers of Hopkinsville. Meacham, in his History of Christian County describes him as one of the foremost citizens of Southern Kentucky, prominent not only in his profession and as a man of affairs, but standing equally high in his church. Dr. Webber, a physician by training, was born in 1790 in Virginia and was residing in Hopkinsville in 1818 when he was a member of a group organizing the town's first bank. The New Providence Baptist Church, later to become Hopkinsville's First Baptist Church, received him into membership in August, 1818. He became a deacon of the Church and prominent during his entire life in all matters coming before the Church. It is of interest

to note that in 1823 the Church, because of Webber's spiritual gifts, passed a resolution granting him license to exercise his talents in preaching the gospel. Webber, however, apparently chose not to exercise this right. We do find him listed as one of the charter Trustees in 1851 of the Baptist Female Institute. The institute was, indeed, constructed in 1854 and would later become Bethel College. A railroad for Hopkinsville also occupied his interests during the 1850's and we find the good physician working to organize such a venture in Hopkinsville.

Over the years, a number of beginning physicians began their practice under the tutelage of the well-known Dr. Webber then moving on to independent practice in other localities. Webber was pleased to enter into such an arrangement with a young Swiss by the name of Henry Wirz who, newly arrived in the United States, was currently located in the German community in Louisville and professed to be trained in the medical arts in France.

Thousands of German immigrants settled in the Ohio and upper Mississippi Valley region during the decades of the 1830, 40 and 50's. Allied with them were those from neighboring countries of Austria and Switzerland. Such immigrants cut across many backgrounds: miners, farmers, iron workers, craftsmen of many types, bakers, and on and on. Many professionals, with backgrounds in the legal, medical, scientific arts, were included in the tide of German migrants to Pittsburg, Cincinnati, Louisville, St. Louis and the smaller towns and cities in between.

Certainly during the three decades, German educated scientists were reputed to be the best trained in the world and any University or medical school, certainly a local medical practitioner who could secure their services gained in reputation immediately. A German sounding name helped, a German accent was even better - and the German scientific luster encompassed the neighboring countries, Austria, Switzerland, etc., as well. Webber had landed a real prize in the young Wirz who spoke fluent German and French but halting English and professed to have gained his medical training in Switzerland and in Paris.

Wirz was to last but three months in Hopkinsville practicing with Webber in the old brick building immediately behind the Christian County Courthouse, the building which stands today beaming Webber's name. Whether Webber suspected his level of training, whether the German language was a hinderance in 1850 Hopkinsville, or whether his short and impatient temperament caused the partnership to end may never be know. But Wirz relocated to nearby Cadiz in the summer of 1854 and began practice on his own. His office and his apartment being located in the large two story frame building demolished several years ago when the Cadiz water treatment plant was constructed. It has never been established that Wirz had received any medical training in Europe. He had been interested in the profession and had worked as an apprentice to several of the leading physicians of the time in Paris. Such apprenticeship, however, may have equaled the training of many physicians practicing medicine on the frontier and in the back country of America.

Wirz practiced medicine in Cadiz for three years and, as one of the few physicians in the village, gained a local reputation with the community. He was a dapper young man, dressed with a European flair, mustached, above average height, and the heavy German accent lent a certain charm, professionalism and air of mystery to the man. The young ladies of Cadiz seemed to find considerable relief from their palpatations, fainting spells, etc., when aid was rendered by Wirz, all of whom assumed him to be a most eligible bachelor. As a matter of fact, Wirz had divorced a wife and left two small children with their grandparents in Switzerland when he departed hastily for American in 1849. They remained in Zurich awaiting the message and the passage fare to join him - if, in fact, they even knew his whereabouts.

Wirz had had a brush with the law, something to do with shortages in his employers accounts and, as a result, had served a brief prison sentence. The Swiss government ordered him deported.

Swiss family not withstanding, Trigg County marriage records indicates

that Wirz married a local widow, Elizabeth Wolfe, on May 27, 1854. She, the former Elizabeth Sivels had been married in 1846 to Alfred C. Wolfe who had died in 1853 leaving the young widow with two children, Susie (7) and Cornelia (9). It might be noted that the Sivels (Sivells) family is still a prominent Cadiz area family.

Wirz and his young wife, Elizabeth, her daughters, Susie, Cornelia, and now an infant daughter, Coralie, joined many other south central Kentuckians in moving south and westward to Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas in the late 1850's. They located and purchased acreage in the rich delta lands of Millikens Bend in Madison County, Louisiana just south and west of Vicksburg. The family was located here when Mississippi and Louisiana succeeded from the Union and the full fury of the War Between The States began. Their home later would be taken over and finally destroyed by Union troops during the siege of Vicksburg.

Wirz enlisted in the 4th Louisiana Infantry on June 16, 1861. The Regiment became a part of the Army of Northern Virginia. He was promoted to the rank of Captain on June 12, 1862 after having his arm shattered at the Battle of Seven Pines near Richmond only two weeks previously. The wound would never totally heal and would cause intense and continuous pain for the rest of his life. Shortly after receiving his commission and, being unfit for active service on the line, Wirz was detailed to the command of General John H. Winder who assigned him to command the military prison at Richmond, Virginia in late August. He was subsequently given command of the prison at Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

During the latter part of 1863 Wirz, because of his fluency in the French language, was given a special assignment to board one of the blockade runners and to deliver dispatches from the Confederate government to French officials in Paris. Wirz had readily volunteered for the assignment in the hope of having his shattered arm treated by his old friends among the medical specialists in Paris. His trip was successful, the treatment, however, was not and the intense pain continued as he made the return trip with his blockade runner barely eluding the

Federal gunboats. Upon his return to Virginia in March, 1864, Wirz was assigned by General Winder to the newly constructed Prison in Sumpter County, Georgia, near the village of Anderson Station, a place considered to be relatively safe from Union forces. It soon came to be known as Andersonville.

Capt. Sidney Winder, the General's son, had been in charge of the prison's construction and he and conscripted area slaves had simply cut down the pine forest and used the logs to build the walls. The prison stockade enclosed a rectangle 750 feet by 1540 feet or about $26\frac{1}{2}$ acres. This was thought to be able to hold some 10,000 prisoners. When Wirz arrived, there were about 500 prisoners in the stockage but no shelter had been provided - and there never would be. Prisoners continued to arrive until August of 1864 and there would be as many as 31,693 under Wirz charge. In his August report, Wirz listed "August 1: In Camp 29,985; in hospital 1,693; received 3,078; died 2,993". Shelter was never provided, prisoners fortunate enough to be able physically to do so constructed shelter of whatever they could find, scraps of wood, holes under tree roots, pieces of tent or blanket. All scraps of wood were soon to be used for fires to cook or for warmth - even tree roots were dug up by the only means available, the men's fingernails. A rude shelter was finally constructed outside the stockade to serve as a hospital for the dying - few, however, survived their stay in the hospital. Medical supplies, proper food, trained personnel simply were not available.

It should be noted that Wirz had requested, had pleaded with the Commanding Officer of Southern Prisons, General John H. Winder for additional medical supplies, for lumber to build shelters, for much increased food supplies - all to no avail. Winder seemed to take satonic glee in the fact that he was killing more enemies than were being shot in battle lines. Wirz, too, was probably the most incapable prison official in Southern service and was undoubtedly giving more attention to his own wound than to his prison responsibilities.

Following Sherman's March to the Sea and as the War came to a close,

General James H. Wetson, from his command post at Macon, sent Capt. Henry Noyes with a small detachment of Union troops to Andersonville to arrest Wirz and bring him back to Macon to confirm reports from the Prison. Orders from Washington required Wirz to be taken there. In Atlanta, Wirz was recognized by some of the former prisoners and a small riot ensued. It happened again in Chattanooga and in Nashville. By this time Wirz' clothing was in shambles. He was able to secure suitable clothing and a beaver hat from friends in Louisville and, over strenous objections, Noyes had Wirz' beard shaved. From Louisville to Washington there was no more trouble as he was not recognized. Wirz was delivered to Army authorities and a military court was convened to try him. General Lew Wallace served as president of the military trial commission. The charge against Wirz: (1) conspiring to impair and injure the health and destroy the lives of large numbers of Federal prisoners, and (2) murder, in violation of the laws and customs of War. He was found guilty and sentenced to the gallows thus becoming the only Confederate officer to be hanged for military crimes following the Civil War.

It is difficult 120 years later to place this tragic chapter of Kentucky's - and America's history - in any <u>sort</u> of perspective. The spector of deeply divided points of view and firmly held loyalties; of brothers fighting - and killing - brothers, of thousands of Kentuckians dying for the cause of the Confederacy and even more for the Union and its preservation. Certainly the hatreds, the deep seated feelings, the loyalties, and the comradships didn't just suddenly stop with Appromatox. Many of the feelings and traditions would be passed down for generations. Following a serious tactical error - at the time - of a new preacher, there is on the minute books of the little Baptist Church where the writer grew up a notation that the hymn "Battle Hymn Of The Republic" would never again be played or sung in <u>that</u> Church. The good deacon and Church pillar making the motion was the writer's grandfather. One can remember, too, the hundreds of little Confederate flags waiving in the June breezes over the graves of Confederate veterans in the town's

old cemetery. This was Northcentral Kentucky within eyesight of Indiana across the Ohio River. Traditions die hard. This was Kentucky and the aftermath of a tragic chapter of history.

As to Henry Wirz, commanding officer of the notorious Andersonville prison camp, undoubtedly, he was a victim of and, certainly, a part of the cruelty to defenseless enemies. Little, however, would or could have been changed had there been a different commander. Food, medical supplies, trained personnel were simply not available. Other priorities of the War assumed far greater importance for the Confederate Army during the closing months of the War. Union commanders of prisons at Johnson's Island, Point Lookout, Rock Island who could have had food and medical supplies available to them were equally guilty of the same crimes against captured Confederates. Northern newspapers and periodicals, understandably, chose to vent their wrath against Wirz and Andersonville and his counterparts at Lilly and Tuscaloosa. Few in the North knew, or, perhaps, cared about the atrocities of Johnson's Island. Such, again, was the nature of the deep-seated background of feelings and events making this chapter of Kentucky's history so tragic.