

# Doctor's nerve helps him ride out war

## Union army veteran recalls Chester tale

**C**apt. Zenas R. Bliss, a West Point graduate from Massachusetts and a Union army veteran, spent four months in 1866 in Chester as commanding officer of a company of infantry and a company of cavalry who were serving as federal occupation troops of four counties.

Bliss represented the only law the district had, and the district was in a state of upheaval following the recent Confederate defeat. Daily he held court hearing slaves' complaints. Sometimes he handled as many as 100 cases a day.

In his memoirs, Bliss recalled his stay in a hotel whose proprietor was a man named Nicholson. Bliss wrote: "The Hotel was run on Southern principles. In one of the rooms back of the bar room, was a barrel of Moonshiner Whiskey, raised several feet from the floor, and from its spigot ran a small stream of whiskey into a funnel filled with burnt peaches, and thence into an ordinary wash tub.

"Around the edge of the tub, nails were driven, and on these pint cups were hung. Friends of the proprietor were permitted to help themselves, gratis, from the tub, but if anyone wished to purchase a quantity, it was drawn from the barrel at two dollars a gallon, or taken from the tub at four dollars."

Bliss went on to explain that the peaches colored the whiskey and took off "the rough edge." The general atmosphere of the hotel along with the "Rebel sentiments" of the Nicholson women caused Bliss to look for quarters elsewhere, finding a room over a drugstore for his family.

There was a doctor by the name of Wiley in Chester who remained a Unionist throughout the war, which left him ostracized by most of the town. Capt. Bliss hired Dr. Wiley to care for the troops stationed in Chester.

Wiley told Bliss an interesting story about an event early in the war. Wiley had closed his combination drug and grocery store one rainy evening but stayed at his desk to work on his books. About 11 p.m. someone knocked on the door, and Wiley went to answer it. It was so dark that the doctor barely saw a raised arm with an iron bar ready to strike him. Defensively, he raised his hand to stop the blow.

The blow was struck with such power that it severed the doctor's thumb and penetrated the left side

of his skull about 2 inches. The doctor staggered but did not fall. Near the door was a cheese knife, and the doctor struck with the knife at the unknown figure. While he could not see the man, Wiley knew he had plunged the knife into his abdomen.

The doctor collapsed on a pile of coffee sacks.

A few minutes later someone came to the door for the doctor to treat a man who was very sick. The sick man was the doctor's assailant, laid out on the counter with his entrails protruding. Wiley said, "I can do nothing for you, my friend; salt would not save you."

He knew the man well, and their past relationship had been friendly. Wiley believed the man was hired to kill him.

Wiley was tried for murder, but he had two or three friends on the jury and they refused to find him guilty. The result was a hung jury, and the doctor was removed from prison.

Bliss said of Wiley: "The Doctor was a man of great nerve, and no one without it could have stayed in that place through the War, and have been persecuted as he was ... Most people would have hunted a cooler clime, but he stuck it out, and finally died a natural death."

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