

ZENAS R. BLISS IN CHESTER

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

Besides being commanding officer of the district, post and his company, Bliss was post quartermaster and commissary, assistant commissioner of freedmen and abandoned lands, provost judge, and provost marshal--seven offices in all.

The 6 ft., 2 inches and 260 pound officer was one of the most competent men the Union Army could have placed in the position. Chester was fortunate for Bliss represented the only law the district had and the district was in a state of upheaval following the recent Confederate defeat.

Years later Bliss wrote that when he arrived in Chester there were no offices available so he set up his own in a tent in "a beautiful grove on the outskirts of the town."

Each morning Bliss held court in the tent. From 20 to 100 ex-slaves were lined up to state their complaints to the officer. For four hours he listened to anywhere from 20 to 50 cases keeping careful notes of what he heard and his sentences. Most of the cases were "trifling" but he also handled "murder, rape, arson, theft, assault, and battery cases."

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 spicket 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.

Dr. 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 Dr. 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 two 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, Dr. Wiley knew that 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. Dr. Wiley said, "I can do nothing for you, my friend, salt would not save you." He knew the man well and their past relationship was friendly. Wiley believed that the man was hired to kill him.

Dr. 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.

Capt Bliss said of Dr. 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.

Louise Pettus