

Military Order



of the

Loyal Legion

of the



United States



COMMANDERY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.



WAR PAPER 81.

A Loyal Man in Florida, 1858-1861.



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A Loyal Man in Florida, 1858-1861.

PREPARED BY COMPANION

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AND

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"A Loyal Man in Florida, 1858-1861."

My story to-night is not of battles, but of the days not long before the firing of the first shot; of the days, indeed, when the Southern heart was being fired that it might at the proper moment respond to the touch of the leaders. I was a resident of Florida from early in 1858 to early in 1861 and saw something of the preliminary movements. From 1853 to 1858 I had been in the practice of civil engineering and early in the latter year I reported at Fernandina, Fla., as division engineer to the chief engineer of the Florida Railroad, a line then partially completed, running from Fernandina on the Atlantic coast to Cedar Keys on the Gulf, a distance of some 155 miles. Stationed at different points till about the middle of 1859, I was from thence on in charge of the Gulf Division, some 40 miles long, with station on the Gulf coast.

I was well acquainted with many along the line—officials, workmen, citizens—and my intercourse with all was uniformly pleasant up to a certain time.

The President of the road during all my term of service was the Hon. David L. Yulee, U. S. Senator, but the chief engineer was changed thrice, the first two being Northerners. In 1860-61 that position was held by Capt. Martin Luther Smith, Corps of Engineers, U. S. A., on leave of absence from the Army for the purpose of holding this civilian position. Captain Smith was a native of, and appointed to the Military Academy from, New York, but in April, 1861, he resigned from the Army and entered the rebel service, becoming therein a major-general.

The principal contractors were—one, a firm of Southerners; the other an Irishman strongly imbued with Southern views. The laborers were all negroes, hired from their masters by the year, and were mostly from Virginia and North Carolina. The white

overseers were, with few exceptions, of the South. There were three other division engineers, one a German of whom I shall have occasion to speak again.

That part of the road over which trains were running was manned in part by Northerners. So much for my personal surroundings. The country through which the line passed was little settled save by the planters. In fact there was in the whole 155 miles but one settlement on the line—Gainesville, Alachua County. The Company established a waiting room with platform and siding about every ten miles, to which the country side might come. Sometimes these points served as a nucleus for small settlements. The road was expected to be a connecting link between New York, Havana and New Orleans with steamers plying from the termini of the road.

There was already a line of steamers running from New Orleans to Havana and touching at Cedar Key, and on the Atlantic side were lines from New York to Charleston and Savannah, and from the two last named places to Fernandina. The whole line of the road save in the center of the peninsula was heavily wooded—oak with its pendant Spanish moss, mahogany, palmetto, pine, magnolia, cedar, cypress, etc. The plantations were devoted almost entirely to cotton.

To one fresh from the North a visit to one of them was a revelation indeed of a new form of life, the few whites, the many blacks, the big house with its cluster of quarters for servants, the quarters for the field-hands, each family to itself to which was issued weekly its ration of hogmeat, meal, hominy and molasses; the white overseers with their brief authority, the mammies with their swarms of little ones, the cotton fields in their various stages—all made a picture not soon forgotten. Saving the house servants, of whom according to Northern ideas there were too many, all, women (with skirt to knee only) and men, worked in the field. Not too much time was allowed the mothers for maternity and its cares. The blacks outnumbered

bered the whites on these plantations 25 or more to 1, yet there was no disturbance. The blacks were in too much awe of the whites, they could not assemble for any purpose without white supervision, they could not go anywhere without a pass—they were 500 miles from the free States concerning which they had but vague knowledge—the Gulf and the Atlantic were on three sides of them and, besides, they seemed to be contented. They were well worked but also well cared for. They had their little privileges under white guidance—they even had some little money of their own gained by labor beyond what the master claimed. If any punishments were inflicted it was not for the stranger to see. It was a patriarchal system, the merits and demerits of which could not be discussed with or even before an outsider. The railroad negroes had their rights also. Hired from the master for a year they could not be taken from their homes till January 2 or after, and they had to be restored to their homes on or before December 24. All the blacks counted on the big holiday and much license was allowed them then.

Our railroad negroes were allowed to work on the job for themselves and to be paid therefor after they had done the work allotted for the day and some of them used to work at night by the light of pine knot fires. They were for the most part a jovial set and used often to sing at their work. Clothing for the blacks (provided by the owners) and shelter provided by contractors, were easy matters in that climate even in winter. During my service I was part of the time in tents, but the winter did not drive me from them. The climate on either coast was then delightful. On the Gulf side, which I preferred, there was always an afternoon westerly breeze and the temperature, save in the center of the peninsula, was never excessive. Along that backbone of the peninsula (called Trail Ridge) where all vegetation seemed to get its life from pure sand, it was so hot in summer that instrumental work could only be done before 8 A. M., or after 5 P. M. While I

saw no punishments inflicted on the plantations, I did see some, though not much, on the railroad work. It was generally done for neglect to complete allotted work. It was in the discretion of the chief overseers, sometimes with a long raw-hide whip, with shirt on or off according to severity desired, and I have seen a more terrible weapon used—the paddle—made of hard wood with a foot handle—a foot blade 4 inches wide pierced with augur holes. Half a dozen strokes of this on the naked rump, with the man bent over a log, was plenty and he carried the effects for a long time. There was no question of the cruelty of this punishment. To prevent permanent injury to the slaves it was stipulated in the hiring contract that the men were to be returned to their owners as sound as when taken away, barring unavoidable accidents and sickness. The poor whites or “crackers” as they were called from the whip which they carried to manage their small herds of cattle, which whip had a short handle and long lash, whose snapper they made to sound like the crack of a pistol, were owners or renters of small patches, where the women and children raised a little corn, sweet potatoes, etc., while the men hunted, fished and loafed—all chewed clay. With their razor-backed hogs which ran wild in the woods, being like the cattle duly marked, they had enough to eat and to trade at the stores. They were poor and ignorant, but not bad men when you got to know them, and they seemed as contented as the slaves. They fought bravely in the rebel ranks for what?

My life in Florida was pleasant, having congenial work, etc., but there was one slight drawback—the mosquito. In the rainy season especially he was much in evidence in the interior though on the coast itself there were but few. If in a house with muslin screens at doors and windows and a canopy of net to your bed, you could defy them, but in a tent they had you and often the only way to get sleep was to build in your closed tent a small fire of fat pine knots, giving out a

dense black smoke, wait till the tent was filled, open bottom flaps of tent and pull out fire, throw in your blankets on the ground, pile in yourself, tie up your tent and sleep as best you might, with a canopy of dense smoke but a few inches above your face. At Cedar Key, where my duty took me from time to time, I had a few friends. On this Key was an old hostelry called Willard's, whose exterior and interior would not have reminded you of the New Willard, but where you could get sea turtle served in many ways to a toothsome-ness that the New Willard could not excel. There could also be had venison, fish and birds, together with oranges and other fruits direct from Havana and sweet potatoes and palmetto cabbage from the mainland put up in great shape. The railroad hands had a bit of cookery of their own which I liked. It might be called a shovel cake, instead of the hoe cake of tradition. The men made a thin batter of cornmeal, salt and water and cooked the cake on their steel shovels. It was thin, brown, crisp, fine.

The Florida of that day was not like that of to-day. There was an indifferent tavern at Jacksonville, where a few invalids used to go, and St. Augustine, now that other noted health resort, had not then awakened from its slumber of say 200 years in the midst of its ancient houses of cokena.

But my pleasant sojourn in Florida was drawing to a close. In October, 1859, when the news came of the John Brown raid at Harpers Ferry, the Floridians began to look askance at each Northerner, unless he was one who had by word or deed or both, unmistakably cast in his lot with the South and its way of thinking. Then came the exciting year—1860—with its conventions at Charleston, Richmond, Baltimore and Chicago, and when Lincoln was put forth as the choice of the Republicans the southern leaders at once proclaimed that such a nomination was a challenge and that in the event of his election the South would be forced to leave the Union, in order to save its peculiar institution.

For myself, through all that fall of 1860 and winter of 1860-61 I went about my business without talk on political affairs, since there was no one with whom it was safe to talk, yet black looks met me at times and remarks were made in my presence with the evident intent of making me retort. That fall of 1860, I had a disagreement with a planter, whose lands we ran through, he claiming that my ditches injured him. After the election of Lincoln, I was in conversation with him one day, when he drew from me the statement that if a conflict was had, I should not fight against the Union. A small enough admission, but enough handle to use against me. When the election took place I had been in Florida nearly three years and over a year in one locality, so I suppose I was entitled to a vote, which right, however, I did not claim, for while in God's country a voter could cast his ballot for any one of the four candidates, in Florida one could vote for Breckinridge or let it alone. There was of course much braggart talk—of how soon the United States would bend the knee to the valiant South and boasts of the individual deeds of heroism that would be performed.

The latter part of January, 1861, arrived. Between that time and the preceding November, much had occurred. On the 20th of December, South Carolina had declared herself out of the Union. I was at Fernandina when a steamer arrived from Charleston, flying the palmetto flag and conveying to Florida the news that South Carolina, the mother, had seceded—would Florida, the daughter, follow? South Carolina always did claim all things for itself, but in fact Georgia contributed more to the settlement of Florida than any other State. The next State to declare itself out was Mississippi, January 9, followed by Florida on the 10th, Alabama on the 11th, Georgia on the 19th and Louisiana on the 26th. Perhaps you are thinking that I should have taken the hint and gone North. I can only say that, taken up with my work, although I had but few hands employed I did not perhaps appreciate the gravity

of the situation and in that respect I was much like others all over the Union. Besides the paper declarations of secession, there were many other signs of trouble. The little town of Fernandina with its 1,500 people had 200 men under arms. Men, in bodies and singly, with all sorts of firearms, were to be seen wherever one went. If there were any Union men they did not dare to show their colors and the talk was all one way simply because no one dared to talk otherwise.

At Fernandina I saw case after case of rifles and ammunition received from New York City, said to be sent by or with the cognizance of Fernando Wood, Mayor of New York. There was one unfinished fortification at Fernandina (Fort Clinch) which was seized—also the old fort at St. Augustine to which the United States had added other works. It did not take much bravery to seize most of the Southern forts, garrisoned as they were by one or two men only (caretakers). The Southerners did not wait for secession before seizing the property of the United States. The State entered on the possession of such property before having declared itself out. About the last of January, I had my construction engine back me down (we had as yet no turn-table at the west end) to Bronson, a new settlement some 30 miles east of the Gulf. On approaching the station I saw that there were an unusual number of men there, mostly armed. As I jumped off the cab I was seized by two or three armed men, who said "Come, you have got to give an account of yourself." I asked what they meant but got no reply, and my captors hurried me to the one store, which was well filled with men. The most prominent object as I entered the door was a rope, slung over one of the roof beams and swinging with a suggestive loop. Near this I was placed, in a chair mounted on a box, so that all could see me. I knew but one or two of those present. I was first asked what negroes I had tampered with and hired to get to run away. I replied that I had never talked with any one on such a subject. The question was an

absurd one and was not pressed, being asked only to help inflame the people against me; then they wanted to know on which side I would be when the war came on. I replied, "On the Union side." At that two men seized my arms and the rope noose was put round my neck and pulled up a little, till I could feel the tension. Then I was asked if I had anything more to say, to which I said "No." Argument would have been idle; brevity was best for me. After a few minutes of whispered discussion, the rope was taken off and I was taken to a small room in the building and left to myself. It is proper to remark here that as I was being hurried to the store, my locomotive driver, to whom I had had no time to give orders, reversed his engine and ran back toward Cedar Keys; why, I did not then know. I was left in the little room for, it appeared to me, a long time, but as I was in the dark I could not tell. I could hear confused noise from the store. I was finally brought out to the light again and was told I had been found guilty though not advised what the charge was; but as I was brought out I recognized a face or two here and there of friends. Their arrival was due to the common sense and quickness of my engine driver who, running back at once, fortunately met some of my friends on the mainland who were at once brought to my rescue. This party was but three in number, but they knew all the people of that section and had some influence. They were headed by the doctor of Cedar Keys, who was also master of the Lodge there. They agreed with my captors that I should be deported from the State (they could not of course have done otherwise), but that no violence should be done me. The Bronson men, however, persisted that I must be marked and with scissors cut off the hair, then jet black, on one side of my head and my beard. The next morning a guard of a few men accompanied me on the train to Fernandina. No insult was offered me on the train. Reaching Fernandina we were met by a great crowd who had been apprised of my arrival and as I

left the train I was saluted with cries of derision, but not otherwise annoyed.

In the front of the crowd as I came out of the car was the German engineer (P. W. Oscar Koerner) of whom I have already spoken. He stepped forward at once, seized my hand, put it within his arm and turning faced the crowd, which gave a shout or yell, though I can't say what feeling actuated them. Koerner asked the jailer who was there to receive me, to go on at once, which he did and we walked the half mile to the jail, Koerner holding me close to his side and talking quietly as if the occasion was an ordinary one. He had nothing to gain by such an act and perhaps much to lose, and he did not hold with my supposed Northern views. It was enough for him that we were friends and that I was in trouble. It was simply clean-cut courage and I shall never forget it. I wrote him after reaching New York, but mails did not go very straight in those days and I never heard from him, though, did hear that he joined the cause of the South. At the jail I was, though placed in a cell, treated kindly, though denied the loan of a pair of scissors. I was allowed, under guard, to go to railroad headquarters and get some money.

The road was much in debt to me and I got only a part of that which was due, and it may be remarked in passing that my debt has not been collected. The railroad officials received me without manifesting feeling of any kind. What they thought they kept to themselves

One of them—a Director of the Company—was afterwards a General in the rebel service, and it is said distinguished himself therein.

I was placed on the first steamer leaving for Savannah and, when the steamer left the wharf, was without guard, but with the statement that the authorities at Savannah would receive me and pass me on to New York. After the steamer left the wharf, I applied for and got a stateroom and, for a consideration

left in the hands of a chambermaid, I found a pair of scissors which I so used that, with my hat on, I no longer presented so remarkable an appearance. Reaching Savannah I disembarked without molestation (notwithstanding the threat of the Floridians), ate in a restaurant with my hat on and left next day by steamer for New York. I next saw Savannah in December, '64, when I entered it in company with W. T. Sherman and other boys in blue. Thanks to Cedar Keys friends my baggage and transit, packed by friendly hands, was placed on the steamer with me. As we passed up and down the Savannah River I saw Fort Pulaski in possession of the State troops with the State flag flying where had been the Stars and Stripes. En route from Savannah to New York I conversed with no one, and in fact had I wished to do so it would have been difficult, for all seemed to keep largely to themselves, as if talk, unless on very safe subjects, was not healthy. Left to my own thoughts on the steamer, I sometimes wondered why it was deemed necessary to call out the whole of the "Bronson Guards," said to be 75 strong, to effect the capture of my unarmed self, and came to the conclusion that the lure of the whiskey in Cobb's store had something to do with it.

Reaching New York, I went at once to a hotel, registered, and then to the barber shop where I invited the barber to do his best for me. He respectfully asked a few questions and I frankly replied. The story spread and before I left the chair a New York Times reporter was at my elbow thirsting for news. I tarried in New York a few days and found in conversation with various persons that the city at least was not a unit on loyalty. Copperheadism seemed to have a strong showing there. I returned to my native city, Portland, Me., where I stayed a few days and then went to Iowa, in whose volunteers I soon enlisted as a high private.