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Among all the thrilling incidents in the history of Libby Prison none exceeds in interest the celebrated tunnel escape which occurred on the night of February 9, 1864. I was one of the 109 Union officers who passed through the tunnel, and one of the ill-fated 48 that were retaken. I and two companions - Lieutenant Charles H. Morgan of the 21st Wisconsin regiment, who has since served several terms in Congress from Missouri, and Lieutenant William L. Watson of the same company and regiment - when re-captured by the Confederate cavalry were in sight of the Union picket posts. Strange as it may appear, no accurate and complete account has ever been given to the public of this most ingenious and daring escape made on either side during the civil war. Twelve of the party of fifteen who dug the tunnel are still living, including their leader.

Thomas E. Rose, colonel of the 77th Pennsylvania Volunteers, the engineer and leader in the plot throughout, - now a captain in the 16th United States Infantry -, was taken prisoner at the battle of Chickamauga, September 20, 1863. On his way to Richmond he escaped from his guards at Weldon, N.C., but, after a day's wandering about the pine forests with a broken foot, was retaken by a detachment of Confederate cavalry and sent to Libby Prison, Richmond, where he arrived October 1, 1863.

Libby Prison fronts on Carey street, Richmond, and stands upon a hill which descends abruptly to the canal, from which its southern wall is only divided by a street and having a vacant lot on the east. The building was wholly detached, making it a comparatively easy matter to guard the prison securely with a small force and keep every door and window in full view from without. As an additional measure of safety, prisoners were not allowed on the ground-floor, except that in the day-time they were permitted to use the first floor of the middle section for a cook-room. The interior embraced nine large warehouse-rooms 105 feet x 45 feet, with eight feet from each

floor to ceiling, except the upper floor, which gave more room, owing to the pitch of the gable roof. The abrupt slant of the hill gives the building an additional story on the south side. The whole building really embraces three sections, and these were originally separated by heavy blank walls. The Confederates cut doors through the walls of the two upper floors which comprised the prisoners' quarters, and they were thus permitted to mingle freely with each other, but there was no communication whatsoever between the three large rooms on the first floors. Beneath these floors were three cellars of the same dimensions as the rooms above them, and, like them, were divided from each other by massive blank walls. For ready comprehension, let these be designated the east, middle, and west cellars.

Except in the lofts known as "Streight's room" and "Milroy's room", which were occupied by the earliest inmates of Libby in 1863, there was no furniture in the building, and only a few of the early comers possessed such a luxury as an old army blanket or a knife, cup, and tin-plate. As a rule, the prisoner, by the time he reached Libby, found himself devoid of earthly goods save the meager and dust-begrimed summer garb in which he had made his unlucky campaign.

At night the six large lofts presented strange war-pictures, over which a single tallow-candle wept copious and greasy tears that ran down over the petrified loaf of corn-bread, Borden's condensed milk can, or bottle in which it was set, over the petrified loaf of corn-bread, and where it struggled on until "taps," when the guards, with unconscious irony, shouted, "*Lights out!*" at which signal it usually disappeared amid a shower of boots and such other missiles as were at hand. The sleepers covered the six floors, lying in ranks, head to head and foot to foot, like prostrate lines of battle. For the general good, and to preserve something like military precision, these ranks (especially when cold weather compelled them to lie close for better warmth) were subdivided into convenient squares under charge of a "captain," who was invested with authority to see that every man lay "spoon fashion."

No consideration of personal convenience was permitted to interfere with the general comfort of the "squad". Thus, when the hard floor could no longer be endured on the right side, - especially by the thin men, - the captain gave the command, "*Attention, Squad Number Four! Prepare to spoon! One - two - spoon!*" And the whole squad flopped over on the left side.

The first floor on the west of the building was used by the Confederates as an office and for sleeping-quarters for the prison officials, and a stair-way guarded by sentinels led from this to Milroy's room just above it. As before explained, the middle room was shut off from the office by a heavy blank wall. This room, known as the "Kitchen", had two stoves in it, one of which stood about ten feet from the heavy door that opened on Carey street side-walk, and behind the stove was a fire-place. The room contained also several long pine tables with permanent seats attached, such as may be commonly seen at picnic grounds. The floor was constantly inundated here by several defective and overworked water-faucets and a leaky trough.

A stair-way without balusters led up on the south-west end of the floor, above which was a room known as the "Chickamauga room", and chiefly occupied by Chickamauga prisoners. The sentinel who had formerly been placed at this stair-way at night, to prevent the prisoners from entering the kitchen, had been withdrawn when in the fall of 1863, the horrible condition of the floor made it untenable for sleeping purposes.

The uses to which the large ground-floor-room east of the kitchen was put varied during the first two years of the war, but early in October of 1863, and thereafter, it was

permanently used and known as the hospital, and it contained a large number of cots, which were never occupied. An apartment had been made at the north or front of the room, which served as a doctor's office and laboratory. Like those adjoining it on the west, this room had a large door opening on Carey street which was heavily bolted and guarded on the outside.

The arrival of the Chickamauga prisoners greatly crowded the upper floors, and compelled the Confederates to board up a small portion of the east cellar at its south-east corner as an additional cook-room, several large caldrons having been set in a rudely built furnace; so for a short period, the prisoners were allowed down there in the day-time to cook. A stair-way led from this cellar to the room above, which subsequently became the hospital.

Such, in brief, was the condition of things when Colonel Rose arrived at the prison. From the hour of his coming, a means of escape became his constant and eager study; and, with this purpose in view, he made a careful and minute survey of the entire premises.

From the windows of the upper east or "Gettysburg room" he could look across the vacant lot on the east and get a glimpse of the yard between two adjacent buildings which faced the canal and Carey street respectively, and he estimated the intervening space at a about seventy feet. From the south windows he looked out across a street into the canal and James River, running parallel with each a other, the two streams at this point being separated by a low and narrow strip of land. This strip periodically disappeared when protracted seasons of heavy rains came, or when spring floods so rapidly swelled the river that the latter invaded the cellars of Libby. At such s times it was common to see enormous swarms of rats come out from the lower doors and windows of the prison and make head for dry land in swimming platoons amid the cheers of the prisoners in the upper windows. On one or two occasions Rose observed workmen descending from the middle of the south side street into a sewer running through its center and concluded that this sewer must have various openings to the canal both to the east and west of the prison.

The north portion of this cellar contained a large quantity of loose packing straw, covering the floor to an average depth of two feet; and this straw afforded shelter, especially at night, for a large colony of rats, which gave the place the name of "Rat Hell".

In one afternoon's inspection of this dark end Rose suddenly encountered a fellow prisoner, Major A.G. Hamilton, of the 12th Kentucky Cavalry. A conflicting friendship followed, and the two men entered at once upon the plan of gaining their liberty. They agreed that the most feasible scheme was a tunnel, to begin in the rear of the little kitchen apartment at the south-east corner of Rat Hell. Without more ado they secured a broken shovel and two case-knives and began operations.

Within a few days the Confederates decided upon certain changes in the prison for the greater security of their captives. A week afterward the cook-room was abandoned, the stair-way nailed up, the prisoners sent to the upper floors, and all communication with the east cellar was cut off. This was a sore misfortune, for this apartment was the only possible base of successful tunnel operations. Colonel Rose now began to study other practicable means of escape, and spent night after night examining the posts and watching the movements of the sentinels on the four sides of Libby. One very dark night, during a howling storm, Rose again unexpectedly met Hamilton in a place where no prisoner could reasonably be looked for at such an hour. For an instant the

impenetrable darkness made it impossible for either to determine whether he had met a friend or foe: neither had a weapon, yet each involuntarily felt for one, and each made ready to spring at the other's throat, when a flash of lightning revealed their identity. The two men had availed themselves of the darkness of the night and the roar of the storm to attempt an escape from a window of the upper west room to a platform that ran along the west outer wall of the prison, from which they hoped to reach the ground and elude the sentinels, whom they conjectured would be crouched in the shelter of some door-way or other partial refuge that might be available; but so vivid and frequent were the lightning flashes, that the attempt was seen to be extremely hazardous.

Rose now spoke of an entrance from the south side street to the middle cellar, having frequently noticed the entrance and exit of workmen at that point, and expressed his belief that if an entrance could be effected to this cellar it would afford them the only chance of slipping past the sentinels.

He hunted up a bit of pine-wood which he whittled into a sort of wedge, and the two men went down into the dark, vacant kitchen directly over this cellar. With the wedge Rose pried a floor-board out of its place, and made an opening large enough to let himself through it. He had never been in this middle cellar, and was wholly ignorant of its contents or whether it was occupied by Confederates or workmen; but as he had made no noise and the place was in profound darkness, he decided to go down and reconnoiter.

He wrenched off one of the long boards that formed a table-seat in the kitchen, and found that it was long enough to touch the cellar base and protrude a foot or so above the kitchen floor. By this means he easily descended, leaving Hamilton to keep watch above.

The storm still raged fiercely, and the faint beams of a street lamp revealed the muffled form of the sentinel slowly pacing his beat and carrying his musket at a "secure" arms. Creeping softly towards him along the cellar wall, he now saw that what he had supposed was a door was simply a naked opening to the street; and further inspection disclosed the fact that there was but one sentinel on the south side of the prison. Standing in the dark shadow, he could easily have touched this man with his hand as he repeatedly passed him. Groping about, he found various appurtenances indicating that the south end of this cellar was used for a carpenter's shop, and that the north end was partitioned off into a series of small cells with padlocked doors, and that through each door a square hole, a foot in diameter, was cut. Subsequently it was learned that these dismal cages were alternately used for the confinement of "troublesome prisoners" - i.e., those who had distinguished themselves by ingenious attempts to escape - and also for runaway slaves, and Union spies under sentence of death.

At the date of Rose's first reconnaissance to this cellar, these cells were vacant and unguarded. The night was now far spent and Rose proceeded to return to the kitchen, where Hamilton was waiting for him.

The very next day a rare good fortune befell Rose. By an agreement between the commissioners of exchange, several bales of clothing and blankets had been sent by our Government to the famishing Union prisoners on Belle Isle, a number of whom had already frozen to death. A committee of Union officers then confined in Libby, consisting of General Neal Dow, Colonel Alexander von Schrader, Lieut.-Colonel Joseph F. Boyd, and Colonel Harry White, having been selected by the Confederates to supervise the distribution of the donations. Colonel White had, by a shrewd bit of

finesse, “confiscated” a fine rope by which one of the bales was tied, and this he now presented to Colonel Rose. It was nearly a hundred feet long, an inch thick, and almost new.

It was hardly dark the following night before Rose and Hamilton were again in the kitchen, and as soon as all was quiet Rose fastened his rope to one of the supporting posts, took up the floor-plank as before, and both men descended to the middle cellar. They were not a little disappointed to discover that where there had been but one sentinel on the south side there were now two. On this and for several nights they contented themselves with sly visits of observation to this cellar, during which Rose found and secreted various tools, among which were a broad-ax, a saw, two chisels, several files, and a carpenter’s square. One dark night both men went down and determined to try their luck at passing the guards. Rose made the attempt and succeeded in passing the first man, but unluckily was seen by the second. The latter called lustily for the corporal of the guard, and the first excitedly cocked his gun and peered into the dark door through which Rose swiftly retreated. The guard called, “*Who goes there ?*” but did not enter the dark cellar. Rose and Hamilton mounted the rope and had just succeeded in replacing the plank when the corporal and a file of men entered the cellar with a lantern. They looked into every barrel and under every bench, but no sign of Yankees appeared; and as on this night it happened that several workmen were sleeping in an apartment at the north end, the corporal concluded that the man seen by the sentinel was one of these, notwithstanding their denial when awakened and questioned. After a long parley the Confederates withdrew, and Hamilton and Rose, depressed in spirits, went to bed, and Rose as usual concealed his rope.

Before the week was out they were at it again. On one of these nights Rose suddenly came upon one of the workmen, and, swift as thought, seized the hidden broad-ax with the intention of braining him if he attempted an alarm; but the poor fellow was too much paralyzed to cry out, and when finally he did recover his voice and his wits, it was to beg Rose, “for God’s sake,” not to come in there again at night. Evidently the man never mentioned the circumstance, for Rose’s subsequent visits, which were soon resumed, disclosed no evidence of a discover by the Confederates.

Hamilton agreed with Rose that there remained apparently but one means of escape, and that was by force. To overpower the two sentinels on the south side would have been an easy matter, but how to do it and not alarm the rest of the guard, and in consequence the whole city, was the problem. To secure these sentinels without alarming their comrades on the east, west, and north side of the prison, would require the swift action of several men of nerve acting in concert. Precious time was passing, and possibly further alterations might be decided upon that would shut them off from the middle cellar, as they had already been from their original base of operations. Moreover, a new cause of anxiety now appeared. It soon transpired that their nocturnal prowling and close conferences together had already aroused the belief among many observant prisoners that a plan of escape was afoot, and both men were soon eagerly plied with guarded inquiries, and besought by their questioners to admit them to their confidence.

To be continued ...