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LIFE IN THE CONFEDERACY

by Nathaniel W. Stephenson

When the fortunes of the Confederacy in both camp and council began to ebb, the life of the Southern people had already profoundly changed. The gallant, delightful, carefree life of the planter class had been undermined by a war, which was eating its foundations. Economic no less than political forces were taking from the planter that ideal of individual liberty as dear to his heart as it had been, ages before, to his feudal prototype. One of the most important details of the changing situation had been the relation of the Government to slavery. The history of the Confederacy had opened with a clash between the extreme advocates of slavery - the slavery-at-any-price men - and the Administration. The Confederate Congress had passed a bill ostensibly to make effective the clause in its constitution prohibiting the African slave trade. The quick eye of Davis had detected in it a mode of evasion, for cargoes of captured slaves were to be confiscated and sold at public auction. The President had exposed this adroit subterfuge in his message vetoing the bill, and the slavery-at-any-price men had not sufficient influence in Congress to override the veto, though they muttered against it in the public press.

The slavery-at-any-price men did not again conspicuously show their hands until three years later when the Administration included emancipation in its policy. The ultimate policy of emancipation was forced upon the Government by many considerations but more particularly by the difficulty of securing labor for military purposes. In a country where the supply of fighting men was limited and the workers were a class apart, the Government had to employ the only available laborers or confess its inability to meet the industrial demands of war. But the available laborers were slaves. How could their services be secured? By purchase? Or by conscription? Or by temporary impressments?

Though Davis and his advisers were prepared to face all the hazards involved in the purchase or confiscation of slaves, the traditional Southern temper instantly recoiled from the suggestion. A Government possessed of great numbers of slaves, whether bought or appropriated, would have in its hands a gigantic power, perhaps for industrial competition with private owners, perhaps even for organized military control. Besides, the Government might at any moment by emancipating its slaves upset the labor system of the country. Furthermore, the opportunities for favoritism in the management of state-owned slaves were beyond calculation. Considerations such as these therefore explain the watchful jealousy of the planters toward the Government whenever it proposed to acquire property in slaves.

It is essential not to attribute this social-political dread of government ownership of slaves merely to the clutch of a wealthy class on its property. Too many observers, strangely enough, see the latter motive to the exclusion of the former. Davis himself was not, it would seem, free from this confusion. He insisted that neither slaves nor land were taxed by the Confederacy, and between the lines he seems to attribute to the planter class the familiar selfishness of massed capital. He forgot that the tax in kind was combined with an income tax. In theory, at least, the slave and the land - even non-farming land - were taxed. However, the dread of a slave-owning Government prevented any effective plan for supplying the army with labor except through the temporary impressments of slaves who were eventually to be returned to their owners. The policy of emancipation had to wait.

Bound up in the labor question was the question of the control of slaves during the war. In the old days when there were plenty of white men in the countryside, the roads were carefully patrolled at night, and no slave ventured to go at large unless fully prepared to prove his identity. But with the coming of war the comparative smallness of the fighting population made it likely from the first that the countryside everywhere would be stripped of its white guardians. In that event, who would be left to control the slaves? Early in the war a slave police was provided for by exempting from military duty overseers in the ratio approximately of one white to twenty slaves. But the marvelous faithfulness of the slaves, who nowhere attempted to revolt, made these precautions unnecessary. Later laws exempted one overseer on every plantation of fifteen slaves, not so much to perform patrol duty as to increase the productivity of plantation labor.

This "Fifteen Slave" Law was one of many instances that were caught up by the men of small property as evidence that the Government favored the rich. A much less defensible law, and one which was bitterly attacked for the same reason, was the unfortunate measure permitting the hiring of substitutes by men drafted into the army. Eventually, the clamor against this law caused its repeal, but before that time it had worked untold harm as apparent evidence of "a rich man's war and a poor man's fight". Extravagant stories of the avoidance of military duty by the ruling class, though in the main they were mere fairy tales, changed the whole atmosphere of Southern life. The old glad confidence uniting the planter class with the bulk of the people had been impaired. Misapprehension appeared on both sides. Too much has been said lately, however, in justification of the poorer classes who were thus wakened suddenly to a distrust of the aristocracy; and too little has been said of the proud recoil of the aristocracy in the face of a sudden, credulous perversion of its motives--a perversion inspired by the pinching of the shoe, and yet a shoe that pinched one class as hard as it did another. It is as unfair to charge the planter with selfishness in opposing the appropriation of slaves, as it is to make the same charge against the small farmers for resisting tithes. In face of the record, the planter comes off somewhat the better of the two; but it must be remembered that he had the better education, the larger mental horizon.

The Confederacy had long recognized women of all classes as the most dauntless defenders of the cause. The women of the upper classes passed without a tremor from a life of smiling ease to a life of extreme hardship. One day, their horizon was without a cloud; another day, their husbands and fathers had gone to the front. Their luxuries had disappeared, and they were

reduced to plain hard living, toiling in a thousand ways to find provision and clothing, not only for their own children but also for the poorer families of soldiers. The women of the poor throughout the South deserve similar honor. Though the physical shock of the change may not have been so great, they had to face the same deep realities - hunger and want, anxiety over the absent soldiers, solicitude for children, grief for the dead. One of the pathetic aspects of Confederate life was the household composed of several families, all women and children, huddled together without a manor even a half-grown lad to be their link with the mill and the market. In those regions where there were few slaves and the exemption of overseers did not operate, such households were numerous.

The great privations which people endured during the Confederacy have passed into familiar tradition. They are to be traced mainly to three causes: to the blockade, to the inadequate system of transportation, and to the heartlessness of speculators. The blockade was the real destroyer of the South. Besides ruining the whole policy based on King Cotton, besides impeding to a vast extent the inflow of munitions from Europe, it also deprived Southern life of numerous articles which were hard to relinquish - not only such luxuries as tea and coffee, but also such utter necessities as medicines. And though the native herbs were diligently studied, though the Government established medical laboratories with results that were not inconsiderable, the shortage of medicines remained throughout the war a distressing feature of Southern life. The Tredegar Iron Works at Richmond and a foundry at Selma, Alabama, were the only mills in the South capable of casting the heavy ordnance necessary for military purposes. And the demand for powder mills and gun factories to provide for the needs of the army was scarcely greater than the demand for cotton mills and commercial foundries to supply the wants of the civil population. The Government worked without ceasing to keep pace with the requirements of the situation, and, in view of the immense difficulties which it had to face, it was fairly successful in supplying the needs of the army. Powder was provided by the Niter and Mining Bureau; lead for Confederate bullets was collected from many sources - even from the window-weights of the houses; iron was brought from the mines of Alabama; guns came from newly built factories; and machines and tools were part of the precious freight of the blockade-runners. Though the poorly equipped mills turned a portion of the cotton crop into textiles, and though everything that was possible was done to meet the needs of the people, the supply of manufactures was sadly inadequate. The universal shortage was betrayed by the limitation of the size of most newspapers to a single sheet, and the desperate situation clearly and completely revealed by the way in which, as a last resort, the Confederates were compelled to repair their railroads by pulling up the rails of one road in order to repair another that the necessities of war rendered indispensable.

The railway system, if such it can be called, was one of the weaknesses of the Confederacy. Before the war the South had not felt the need of elaborate interior communication, for its commerce in the main went seaward, and thence to New England or to Europe. Hitherto the railway lines had seen no reason for merging their local character in extensive combinations. Owners of short lines were inclined by tradition to resist even the imperative necessities of war and their stubborn conservatism was frequently encouraged by the shortsighted parochialism of the towns. The same pitiful narrowness that led the peasant farmer to threaten rebellion against the tax in kind led his counterpart in the towns to oppose the War Department in its efforts to establish through railroad lines because they threatened to impair local business interests. A striking instance of this disinclination towards cooperation is the action of Petersburg.

Two railroads terminated at this point but did not connect, and it was an ardent desire of the military authorities to link the two and convert them into one. The town, however, unable to see beyond its boundaries and resolute in its determination to save its transfer business, successfully obstructed the needs of the army.

As a result of this lack of efficient organization an immense congestion resulted all along the railroads. Whether this, rather than a failure in supply, explains the approach of famine in the

latter part of the war, it is today very difficult to determine. In numerous state papers of the time, the assertion was reiterated that the yield of food was abundant and that the scarcity of food at many places, including the cities and the battlefronts, was due to defects in transportation. Certain it is that the progress of supplies from one point to another was intolerably slow.

All this want of coordination facilitated speculation. We shall see hereafter how merciless this speculation became and we shall even hear of profits on food rising to more than four hundred percent. However, the oft-quoted prices of the later years--when, for instance, a pair of shoes cost a hundred dollars--signify little, for they rested on an inflated currency. Nonetheless they inspired the witticism that one should take money to marketing a basket and bring provisions home in one's pocketbook. Endless stories could be told of speculators hoarding food and watching unmoved the sufferings of a famished people. Said Bishop Pierce, in a sermon before the General Assembly of Georgia, on Fast Day, in March, 1863: "*Restlessness and discontent prevail.... Extortion, pitiless extortion is making havoc in the land. We are devouring each other. Avarice with full barns puts the bounties of Providence under bolts and bars, waiting with eager longings for higher prices.... The greed of gain...stalks among us unabashed by the heroic sacrifice of our women or the gallant deeds of our soldiers. Speculation in salt and bread and meat runs riot in defiance of the thunders of the pulpit, and executive interference and the horrors of threatened famine.*"

In 1864, the Government found that quantities of grain paid in under the tax as new grown were mildewed. It was grain of the previous year which speculators had held too long and now palmed off on the Government to supply the army.

Amid these desperate conditions the fate of soldiers' families became everywhere, a tragedy. Unless the soldier was a landowner his family was all but helpless. With a depreciated currency and exaggerated prices, his pay, whatever his rank, was too little to count in providing for his dependents. Local charity, dealt out by state and county boards, by relief associations, and by the generosity of neighbors, formed the barrier between his family and starvation. The landless soldier, with a family at home in desperate straits, is too often overlooked when unimaginative people heap up the statistics of "desertion" in the latter half of the war.

It was in this period, too, that amid the terrible shrinkage of the defensive lines "refugeeing" became a feature of Southern life. From the districts over which the waves of war rolled back and forth helpless families - women, children, slaves - found precarious safety together with great hardship by withdrawing to remote places which invasion was little likely to reach. An Odyssey of hard travel, often by night and half secret, is part of the war tradition of thousands of Southern families. And here, as always, the heroic women, smiling, indomitable, are the center of the picture. Their flight to preserve the children was no small test of courage. Almost invariably they had to traverse desolate country, with few attendants, through forests, and across rivers, where the arm of the law was now powerless to protect them. Outlaws, defiant of the authorities both civil and military, - ruthless men of whom we shall hear again, - roved those great unoccupied spaces so characteristic of the Southern countryside. Many a family legend preserves still the sense of breathless caution, of pilgrimage in the nighttime intently silent for fear of these master less men. When the remote rendezvous had been reached, there a colony of refugees drew together in a steadfast despair, unprotected by their own fighting men. What strange sad pages in the history of American valor were filled by these women outwardly calm, their children romping after butterflies in a glory of sunshine, while horrid tales drifted in of deeds done by the master less men in the forest just beyond the horizon, and far off on the soul's horizon fathers, husbands, brothers, held grimly the lines oblast defense!

The above article is a reprint of Chapter VI of the book "The Day of the Confederacy, A Chronicle of the Embattled South", by Nathaniel W. Stephenson. Humphrey Milford - Oxford University Press, 1919, London.