

Charles Watkins

You never know who is going to come through the doors here at the Interpretive Center. The best part of my job is all of the folks I get to talk to and they come from everywhere. I've chatted with folks from all fifty states and several dozen countries. The best is when they are walking in the footsteps of a soldier- ancestor who paid a visit to Corinth during the Civil War.

Back in the spring of 2007 a couple from Oregon came through the doors looking for info on their ancestor from the 52nd Illinois Infantry. He had spent plenty of time in Corinth, and best of all, he wrote a lot of letters which they generously shared with the park.

The soldier's name was Charles Watkins and he was born in Fredonia, New York, a tiny little village on the shores of Lake Erie. When he was 9 the family pulled up roots for Rockford, Illinois and it was there that the 26 year-old Charles enlisted in Company E of the 52nd Illinois. He saw some heavy fighting at Shiloh and was present for duty during the Siege of Corinth. He made it through both without a scratch.

Charles was really in the thick of it during the Battle of Corinth. His regiment started the day in the old Confederate earthworks of the Beauregard Line and was steadily pushed back through the morning of October 3rd. In the afternoon they made a stand in the White House fields. On the following day he was in the middle of the fighting around Battery Powell, not far from the First Baptist Church.

As fascinating as the letters are, it wasn't his accounts of the battle that caught my interest; it was the pages he wrote to his dear wife Libbie about his day to day life in camp. We have dozens upon dozens of eyewitness accounts of the battle not to mention all of the official reports written by the senior officers. What we have less of are the stories of occupied Corinth by the soldiers who remained in town after the battle.

The Battle of Corinth lasted two days but the 52nd Illinois stayed for 15 months. Charles wrote about a great many events that went largely unnoticed by the rest of the world. Do you remember my article about the soldier of the 1st Alabama Cavalry who was executed for deserting to the enemy? It was Private Watkins who provided me with many of the details of that grisly affair.

Charles may have realized the letter about the execution may have been a bit depressing so the next day he lightened things up and told Libbie how he had "been-a-black-berrying-today," with seven of his comrades. They set out to a likely spot not far from Camp Montgomery and it didn't take long to pick a "Patent Pail full and some five quarts besides."

I myself love to pick blackberries (I'm not telling you where) and Charles' day sounds like many I have spent getting scratched in pursuit of those luscious little pieces of fruit. But his experience was much different than mine. He and his pals took their rifles with them as the expedition passed beyond their picket lines and into enemy territory. Where was this enemy territory? Somewhere in the vicinity of Wal-mart. Some of the men stood guard while the others picked berries. "I never saw them so thick or so large as they are here."

The treasures were brought back to camp where Charles took the time to write his "Dearest one," and wished he could send some to her. He wasn't exactly sure what they would do with all of those berries, "we shall either preserve them or make them up into wine [but] we don't know how to do either." He supposed they would have to get some woman to show them how.

After some deep thought the soldiers decided to preserve them and were at the task when the wife of Lt. George Robinson happened by and showed them the proper way to preserve a blackberry. Charles and crew were proud of the results and announced they were "A - No. 1." The berry crew put up fourteen pounds of preserves and decided to share their bounty with the leaders of the regiment. "We gave some to the Major and some to the Colonel, and well, it's no use in talking, it was the best they had ever seen."

The blackberrying expedition was a peaceful interlude for a regiment which would soon be cast back into the violence of war. Before his own war was over Charles would be in the middle of the battles around Atlanta and later march with Sherman to the sea. At the end of the conflict he came home to Illinois and his dear Libbie and together they raised eight children. He was active in the veteran groups of the day and served as commander of his local post of the Grand Army of the Republic. Charles finally went to his maker in his 88th year.

It's a good thing Charles made it through the war and had all those kiddies who in turn had children and grandchildren of their own. One of Charlie's great-grand kids, Kat (and her awesome husband B.D.), came to Corinth and brought us those letters. And best of all they became dear friends to Nita and I. Like I said, you never know who's going to come through those doors.