

Thomas Benton Ellis, Sr.

Company C, 3rd Florida Infantry Regiment, C.S.A.

Birth and Death Dates

Born June 22nd, 1842, at Old Fort Walker, about 16 miles south of Gainesville, Alachua County, Florida.

Died February 1926, and buried in Evergreen Cemetery, Gainesville, Florida.

A short record of Thomas Benton Ellis, Sr.

I, Thomas Benton Ellis, was born June 22nd, 1842 at Old Fort Walker, about 16 miles south of Gainesville, Alachua County, Florida, near what is now known as Kanappaha [sic] Prairie, about 8 miles south of the station on the S.A.L. Railway known as Kanappaha [sic] Station.

During the Indian Wars in 1835 and 1845, the citizens of the surrounding country were compelled to place their families in what was called Forts, made by logs placed in the ground with port holes so that the occupants could shoot. The women and children occupied the forts, while the men were outside scouting and keeping watch and at the same time carrying on the farming and stock raising. As above noted, during this period I was born (1842). My father, Thomas Cook Ellis, commanded a Company at this time; he was also Tax Collector and Sheriff of Alachua County when the County extended from the Suwannee River to Tampa Bay, Newnansville being the County site.

My father was born in Bullock County, Georgia, September 30th, 1814, the son of Giles Ellis, who was a native of North Carolina, and was born in 1777 and died in 1838, and was the son of William Ellis, who served in the Revolutionary War.

In the year 1820 Giles Ellis removed to Florida when my father was six years old, settled in Nassau County—moved to Alachua County December 24th, 1824.

December 19, 1839, Thomas C. Ellis married Sarah A. Townsend, who was born May 20, 1820, in Liberty County, Georgia. She was the daughter of Light Townsend, and Phoebe Carter Townsend, who moved to Jefferson County, Florida, about the same time the Ellis family did. Both families afterward moved to Alachua County, near Newnansville.

To T.C. and Sarah A. Ellis were born thirteen children, seven boys and six girls. Three of the boys served in the Confederate Army; Thomas Benton Ellis, James Light Ellis, and John Caldwell Ellis—1861-1865.

My father was living at Brooksville, Hernando County in 1861. When the State seceded, Walker Terry Saxon began raising a Company to support the action of the State in Secession. My brother James L. Ellis and I joined this Company, and in July the Company was ready, having elected its officers and we were sent to Fernandina, where for some months we were being drilled and were engaged in building batteries of sand on Amelia Island.

Some time in the first part of 1862, Saxon's Company and other Companies were sent to Cedar Keys, remaining there some time. Later sent to Camp Langford, near Jacksonville, and some time afterward we boarded cars and were taken to Camp Midway, which place is about 10 miles North of Tallahassee. After a while we marched to Chattahoochie, [sic] and from there were shipped by steamer to Columbus, Ga. thence to Montgomery, Ala., remaining there about a month, thence to Mobile, Ala. I think we remained at Mobile about three months when we were sent to Chattanooga, Tenn. Captain Saxon's Company was mustered into the Confederate Service August 10, 1861, and placed in Colonel W. S. Dillworth's 3rd Florida Regiment. Captain Saxon's Company was designated "Company C", and was called "The Wild Cats", and when we left Florida, we had a wild cat skin stuffed and placed at the head of the engine that bore us to Montgomery and on to Chattanooga. This Company was composed of young men from 18 to 25 and 30 years old, and from all classes, farmers, lawyers, doctors, merchants and students. My brother and I were attending school at the Brooksville Academy and left it to join the Army. Our Company was known as the "The Wild Cat Company" throughout the war and all through that part of the Army. There never was a better fighting Company, and were often selected to perform some of the most daring feats. Our Captain was a brave man, seemed to fear nothing in war, and always said, "Come Boys" and never "Go Boys". His men idolized him and would follow wherever he led, and with a yell—the "Rebel Yell".

Our Regiment being placed in General Bragg's Army of the West, we crossed the river at Chattanooga, Tenn., and then began that memorable foraging campaign through Tennessee and Kentucky. While we camped at Chattanooga, my brother who was generally known as Jimmy, and I had a wall tent furnished us by Major McKay, Quartermaster of the 4th Florida Regiment, which Regiment was side by side with us. Up to this time, we had mattress, sheets, comforts blankets and pillows, and when we moved across the river, all these were left in the tent left standing. Jimmy and I had a knapsack packed with good clothes sent us from home, and with this and a pair of blankets, we began that march, but we had not gone three miles before we discarded the blankets and knapsacks and the campaign with the clothing we had on. In fact, we left everything except our shirts, pants, shoes and hat.

When we began to ascend and cross the mountains "Waldron Ridge" I was detailed to assist the wagons. We had to carry a large rock, and when the mules after a desperate

struggle, would move a short distance and stop, we had to scotch the wheels with the rock. I do not remember now how long it took us to reach the top of the mountain. My recollection is that leaving the top of the mountain, the country was high and level. I remember that apples were plentiful along the route and we enjoyed them.

At Mumfordsville, we captured 4000 yankees. [sic] I was still with the wagons until we reached Perryville, Ky., when the battle of Perryville began. Knowing that a battle was on hand and my brother would be in it, I now deserted my position as wagon guard and set out to find my company, and did find it in line of battle, ready for the fight.

I had left my gun in the wagon, so there I was without a gun. Right then, with one or two more men I was detailed to take all the canteens of the Company and go to a spring not very far off, and fill and bring back. When I got back with the water was ordered to charge and me with a gun! It was only a short time before there were plenty of guns beside the dead and dying. So I was armed and joined in the charge up the red clay hill. My brother in this battle carried the flag. I was near him, but we had not gotten far up the hill before I was struck in the left elbow. I had my gun up leveled for shooting when the ball struck me. My arm dropped, but I kept on loading and shooting with my right arm. About this time Frank Saxon, my Captain's brother, was badly wounded in the leg and instep. Then came Captain Saxon to me and said, "Benton, Frank is badly wounded and as you are in no fix to proceed in the fight, won't you please stop with Frank?". I could not but promise him, however, I hated to leave my brother, but he went through the battle safely. About night, ambulances came and took me with Frank and others to a small farmhouse as a field hospital. Next morning the Yankees captured us. Bragg during the night had retreated and went on to Cumberland Gap. Frank and I remained in the Hospital nearly a month. My arm by this time was about well, but Saxon was still suffering. At this time I was told that I could report to Louisville and take boat to Vicksburg and be exchanged—so, as I had \$2.00, I hired a team to take me to Louisville, arriving there about night. I was taken to an office and relieved of everything I had in my pockets, not much, however, only a little money, a pocketknife and some tobacco. A large gate was then opened and I was thrust in it where I found about 1000 of our prisoners.

We remained there, I think, about a week and fed on about two mouthfuls of bread and a half cup of coffee, and once a day we would get about a mouthful of bacon with all the grease fried out. The snow covered the ground in this yard and we picked up lumps of coal for small warmth. We were finally put on board a steamer—1000 men. It took the boat 21 days to reach Vicksburg, the boat stopping two or three days at different places. We were taken off the boat at a place at the Cairo, Illinois, Mouth of the Ohio River, and stayed there three days—the dirtiest, filthiest place I ever saw. It was in some kind of old barracks, but finally we arrived at Vicksburg. The boat hould [sic] alongside the steep banks of the river just before night. Then began the most terrible suspense I ever experienced in my life. It seems that they were to retain every 100th man to be kept as hostages for ten men that they claimed John Morgan had captured and had not accounted for, and in one of the 100 counts, my name came 98, this was getting interesting, but that was the nearest that I came to it. Two or three perhaps of those

drawn jumped overboard into the Mississippi River, dived as far as they could, then would rise and duck again. They were fired on by the Yankee guards, but I don't think they hit any of them, and I hope they reached shore safely. There was one very handsome man, whose name was [text missing] Wise from Virginia, who was captured as a spy and had papers to convict him. When leaving the prison gate at Louisville, having gotten rid of his fine citizen's suit, he secured a dirty, ragged suit in some way and put it on, and in this disguise he was fortunate enough to pass through the gate with the rest of us and got aboard the boat, and the first night we were down in the wheel house, he quietly shook hands with me and P. Henry Young from Gainesville, Fla., and a few others, then slipped down through the wheel house into the river, and so escaped, but I never heard whether or not he reached the shore. I hope he did.

Some of these prisoner's homes were near the river in some of the States through which the river ran, and nearly every night some of them would step overboard. We had smallpox on board the steamer, and every morning the dead—sometimes six or eight or more—were carried ashore and dumped on the banks of the river. One of these men was an acquaintance of mine and Henry Young's. His name was William Hearn, from Newnansville, Fla. He was of a wealthy family. I afterwards sent word by someone to his family of his death, but I do not know that they received the message. When we went ashore at Vicksburg, the citizens had a good-sized room stacked with pones of corn bread and a lot of syrup. You can image how we enjoyed this! We only ate as much as we wanted at this meal, and did not take any with us. We were afterwards sorry we did not take a lot of it. The next day we took train for Jackson, Miss. Then we got nothing to eat and had to stay there three or four days waiting for payrolls to be made out so we could draw some Confederate money. All I had to eat for four days was one-half of a pie of some kind which a soldier gave me, but when we got our money, the first thing we did was to hunt something to eat, and the first thing I found was a small baked opossum, which I devoured with relish. Then I took the train for Montgomery, Ala. and spent one day and night at the Exchange Hotel, and thoroughly feasted until I was satisfied.

Then I proceeded to Murfreesboro, and arriving there found out that my Regiment was at Shelbyville, about 20 miles from Murfreesboro. I spent the night at a hotel, and next morning began my march to my Command, arriving there a little before night, found the boys in good shape, and Jimmie, my brother, happy to see me. I think I got to camp about the 22nd of December and remained there till after Christmas. On Christmas Day a good many boxes of clothing and provisions arrived from Florida, among these was one large box for Jimmie and me, sent us from Father and Mother from Brooksville. Our box contained two suits of homespun and made clothes, a pair of shoes, also made by my father, shirts, drawers and socks, also home-cured hams, a big gourd of butter, some large cakes, half dozen home made cheeses, and a lot of other things, so at Christmas Dinner we spread our entire lot of goodies out under the shade of the trees and invited the whole Company to dine with us, which they readily accepted. After all had satisfied themselves fully, Jimmie and I put a quantity away in our tent, enough to have done us for several days. Now think what soldiers will do, that night the boys stole

every scrap of our feast, after having divided with them so freely. I was hurt and disgusted.

On Friday, December 30th, the drum beat the long roll and we were to draw and cook two day's rations, and soon after we were formed into line and marched toward Murfreesboro and reached a cedar woods. We were formed in line of battle and General Breckenridge rode down our line and made a speech to us, telling us that we were going to make a desperate charge, wanted us to keep good order and charge like men, which we did. We got into a beautiful wood of cedar and other trees, and soon charged through a line of Yankees, capturing them with their supplies. I remember we captured a Hospital Tent which a lot of good things, among these a large glass jar of Peach Brandy. I got a small taste of it, but we did not have time to enjoy it, not delaying two minutes but kept on until we reached Stone River, then fell down and fought for sometime. When I heard a ball strike some of the boys, Jimmie was on my right side and near me, and we kept shooting. It was dear boy Jimmie that received that bullet in the right groin, but he said nothing and kept shooting. I happened to look around and saw the command was retreating and we turned back, retreating and firing. We made several stands, and after one of those I missed Jimmie, but thought he had gotten mixed up in some way and lost sight of me. I never saw the dear boy any more. One of the men told me he saw him; that he was wounded but was walking on slowly, but he did not come to us. We learned afterwards that he was in a Field Hospital seventeen days, then carried on to Murfreesboro. Long afterwards one of our Company came to camp from the Hospital in which Jimmie was staying and told me that he sent a lot of messages and for home. He asked him to give him a drink of water, which he did from his canteen. He thanked him then and turned over on his side. The man left and that was the last we ever heard of him until the Hospital Surgeon reported that he had died January 19, 1863. The dear boy was a favorite with all the boys; was a brave soldier and a good Christian. What a terrible duty I had to perform to write the dear home folks of his death. Sad, sad! Poor Mother, dear Mother! How she loved and prayer for her boys!

That night after the battle I was detailed to go on picket duty, and my second watch was from two o'clock in the morning, Just after daylight I found that we were with 200 yards of the Yankee pickets. Both sides got behind large trees and had for some time a lot of fun shooting at each other. My comrade, behind a tree a few feet from me, after firing six times at his opponent said to me, "Benton, I have a man I have shot at six times in pretty plain view and have not gotten him. Suppose you and I change places, maybe you can hit him." So we exchanged, and when I made the exchange could only see about half of the man. After exchanging two or three shots with him, my fourth shot struck I suppose, about the middle of his body. I saw him fall backwards, then two men took him away. I fired at these but missed them. At this time the Relief Pickets came and I went to camp. As we started for camp, my comrade, whose name was Van Jackson, said, "Benton, do you see that Officer over on the hill? I'm going to try him, watch." He fired and the officer fell off his horse, so we both got our man that morning. We stayed in camp till Monday, when the command to march, and we got to Tullahoma. We stopped, put up tents, and the Command stayed there, I think, about a month.

Sometime after arriving at Tullahoma, I had a severe attack of acute rheumatism, and after a few days I was sent to the Hospital at Atlanta, Ga. I think I was in the Hospital two weeks, then returned to my Company. Next we were shipped to Jackson, Miss., and from there the Command started to Vicksburg to relieve Pemberton, but when we got to the Big Black River, we met couriers who reported that Vicksburg had capitulated, so we marched back to Jackson, camped that night near the city. Next morning Captain Saxon's Company was at the front as skirmishers. Sometime that morning we saw the Yankees advancing from a thick woods across an old field. Our Company began firing as soon as near enough and kept it up until we had them opposite to us, but they paid no attention to the picket's firing, but continued the charge towards our main line and artillery. They advanced by platoons, and when well into the old field, our artillery opened up on them. I think it was Cobb's Battery. There was a Brigade of 6000, and I never saw such slaughter as our guns made, they were nearly all killed, captured or wounded. I never saw so many dead men in all my life. They were armed with new short Enfield rifles, dressed in new uniforms, new knapsacks filled with clothing, etc. a pair of new blankets, fine hats and shoes, and well filled pocketbooks; had new Haversacks, loaded with good things to eat, ham, hard tack, coffee, sugar, and some of them had a bottle of wine, and some had liquor. Our soldiers at once began to appropriate their guns, knapsacks and Haversacks, and also their pocketbooks, and such as they wanted. Saxon's Company continued to follow the few Yankees left alive and trying to retreat, but we kept on, turned them back toward our lines. Captain Saxon and I were in front and kept going until we reached the woods, when we were ordered to halt and found we were near a second line of Yankees. Of course we halted, and Captain Saxon told them that we had come to tell them that there were so many of their wounded and suffering that they might go and pick them up and take into their lines. We turned around the other way. As we started, Saxon said to me, "Benton, we are going to get it in the back." I tell you we felt uneasy for sometime, but they did not shoot. Our soldiers had appropriated the dead Yank's new guns, etc., but for my part I exchanged my old Enfield for a new one, took a rubber blanket and a fine new hat, that was all I wanted. The Haversacks were filled with good rations, and we got to camp we made good sure enough, and with the hard tack and ham, we had a fine dinner.

We rested till night, then were ordered into line and were kept standing in line till 12 o'clock that night. The order was given to go forward and we marched a few miles, halted and ordered to rest. Of course we lay down and were soon asleep, but not for long. An ambulance or big wagon with a pair of large horses, came running away down the turnpike, right down the line of sleeping soldiers. I never was so scared in all my life! I thought the whole Yankee army and cavalry was running over us. Some lost their guns, some their hats or shoes; I lost my fine hat and one shoe, but my recollection is that none were hurt. We continued our march, and I think arrived next day at Meridian, Miss., where we stopped for some days. It rained very hard the night before we reached Meridian. I remember that I took some rails from a fence and made me a bed so as not to sleep in the water. Next day, while passing through a long lane on each side of which was a cornfield, roasting ears, and we were ordered to gather some of it and roast it. I built a fire, put the corn in the fire, shucks and all, and only let it get good hot, as we did

not have time for it to be well done. I ate three ears and it made me sick, and when we got to Meridian I had a high fever and was very ill for some days. We had fresh beef badly cooked, and it with the green corn gave everyone dysentery, several died—would be taken with cramps in the stomach and body and died. I saw men die that I thought were no sicker than I. That was an awful experience. One day a soldier came near me who had a green cucumber. I bought it from him for 25 cents, actually believe that cucumber saved my life, and I have always had great respect for cucumbers. [no more text]