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A Transylvania Medical Graduate Searches for His Sons After a Civil War Battle

Charles T. Ambrose

University of Kentucky, cambros@uky.edu

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A Transylvania Medical Graduate
Searches for His Sons
After a Civil War Battle

Years invariably bring great sorrow to the parents of many soldiers. Unwelcome news of this sort came in December 1862 to Reuben Searcy in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, who had two sons fighting for the Confederacy. Searcy (1805-87) had come to Alabama from North Carolina in 1826. Two years later he attended Transylvania University's Medical Department, taking courses of lectures in 1830-32 and writing his dissertation on fever. After earning his diploma, Searcy embarked on a medical practice in Tuscaloosa County and married Mary Ann Abigail Fitch, who bore him five children. When the Civil War began in April 1861, his son James was age 22, Reuben was 18, and George was 11. James had graduated from the University of Alabama two years earlier and was teaching elementary school to earn money for attending medical school later. Reuben was a sophomore at the university and a member of its cadet corps.

In February 1862 James Searcy enlisted as an artillery man in a Tuscaloosa army company then engaged in coastal defense outside Mobile. His battery was soon dispatched to Corinth in northeast Mississippi to join the main Confederate Army, which had withdrawn there in front of the advancing Union Army. When the latter overran Corinth in mid-March, James's company traveled slowly by train eastward to Tuscaloosa, and by August through Rome and Lafayette, Georgia. It continued northward via Chattanooga and Sparta, Tennessee, to Bardstown and Perryville, Kentucky. The Battle of Perryville in October 1862 saw another defeat for the Confederate forces, which then retired south to Knoxville. The army, depleted daily by injuries and diseases, trekked westward 150 miles across Tennessee and assembled near Murfreesboro for an anticipated fateful battle in January 1863.

In 150 letters to his family, James vividly described army life, complaining during one period of unremitting rain, muddy camps, fleas, and mosquitoes. Early on, he repeatedly admonished his brother Reuben not to enter the army before completing his education. His "merits" could be better displayed by joining later as an officer than by enlisting then as a private.

Unfortunately, Reuben Searcy succumbed to the martial fervor while training with a local volunteer group. In April 1862 he and a friend, James R. Maxwell, joined the 34th Alabama Infantry, accompanied by Maxwell's slave, Jim Bobbitt. They reached their regiment at Tupelo, 50 miles south of Corinth, but soon became part of the withdrawing Army of Mississippi, which included the older brother, James. Over the next eight months the Searcy brothers and Maxwell, along with Bobbitt, traveled the same route outlined above. Although billeted generally a mile or so apart, the brothers met whenever possible.

During the advance through northwestern Georgia in August, Reuben became sick with fever in LaFayette but was nursed back to health over a week's stay there by some local young ladies who brought him "chicken soup and other nice things." In Chattanooga, he rejoined the main army, which then moved into Kentucky, anticipating the battle at Perryville. The brothers were present at this strategic defeat for the Confederacy, both surviving unscathed.

The Southern forces retreated from Perryville and camped for a time at Knoxville, where Reuben suffered two bouts of dysentery. The army finally gathered in western Tennessee near Murfreesboro, organizing for an eventual battle there, and in early December, Reuben, age 19, was elected a 3rd Lieutenant to replace an incompetent officer in his company. In late December, his company came under prolonged attack by a Union "battery of rifled fieldpieces."
Bursting shells filled the sky and showered the men below, severely wounding Reuben on Dec. 30. His friend, James Maxwell, found him “lying in a crowded building, on a bare floor, under the influence of a heavy dose of morphine.” The slave, Jim Bobbitt, was already at Reuben's side. Shrapnel “had torn away the whole inside of his right thigh from knee to buttock, laying bare the femoral artery; no flesh being left on the leg above the knee, except possibly a six-inch-wide strip on the outside of his right thigh.” Metal fragments had cut into his left breast, exposing the ribs. The next morning Reuben was carried to a private home in Murfreesboro, already crowded with other wounded.

Only on January 1, the first day of the battle of Murfreesboro, did James Searcy learn of his brother's wounds. He obtained a pass to go to his side. There was little he could do but comfort the semiconscious youth. On January 3 the routed Confederate Army began its retreat from the battlefield, while James Searcy, James Maxwell, and Jim Bobbitt remained to care for Reuben. He died on January 7, “his head resting on [his brother’s] arm.” He was buried in the cemetery of the Old School Presbyterian Church.

Upon first locating his wounded comrade, Maxwell had telegraphed the Searcy family in Tuscaloosa about young Reuben’s grave injuries. “Within two hours,” his father had left for Murfreesboro, some 200 miles north. He got within 25 miles of the town but was turned back by Union forces that controlled the region. He spoke to the local doctor who earlier had dressed Reuben’s wounds, and upon learning of no hope for his son’s survival, returned “home with a very sad heart.”

James Searcy and Maxwell remained in Murfreesboro, now under Federal occupation, and were allowed to nurse other Southern wounded among the 1,700 of both armies left behind. But after several weeks the two “captives” were shipped to a prisoner of war camp near Indianapolis. In April, as part of a prisoner exchange, both were returned to the Army of Tennessee. Searcy was later promoted to sergeant major and Maxwell to sergeant. After the war James Searcy attended medical school at the University of New York, graduating in 1867 and later practicing medicine with his father in Tuscaloosa.

The elder Reuben Searcy died in 1892, James Searcy in 1920, and James Maxwell in 1921. As for Jim Bobbitt, on the last day of fighting at Murfreesboro, he was given two pistols and $80 by his two companions and sent to join the retreating Army of Tennessee. One wonders whether he survived the war and how he fared afterwards.

Endnotes

Much of this essay is based on the moving article “When Shall Our Cup Be Full?” by Maxwell Elebash in Alabama Heritage, Winter 1994, pp. 28-30.

1. Reuben Searcy's inaugural dissertation, presented in February 1832, was entitled “On Pathology of Fever,” as found in bilious fevers, typhus, and yellow fever. It summarized the views about fever held by the ancient Hippocrates and Galen, seventeenth-century English physicians Sydenham, eighteenth-century Scottish doctor Cullen, nineteenth-century French internist Broussais, and an obscure contemporary named Clutterbuck. Hippocrates contended that fever was the body's mechanism for expelling morbid humors through the process of concoction (abscusses, boils, rashes, fevers, etc.). Sydenham blamed fever on the intake of “vis meditativa externa.” Other authors had different views. Searcy concluded that the underlying general cause was likely the febrile poison present in swamp miasmata, which people often inhaled.

Recovery, when it occurred, was due to the healing power of the body's nature (vis medicativa nature).