

Yule Joy Spreads to Rebels

The winters were bitter, and the snow was deep, but the Confederates in Virginia managed to have some jolly times at Christmas even with a war under way.

The snowball fight: Many authors wrote of the great Confederate snowball fight near Fredericksburg, where the armies were stuck in winter quarters. Possibly the world's largest snowball battle, it was between the infantry divisions Gens. Lafayette McLaws and John Bell Hood, totaling more than 5,000 men. Gen. J.E.B. Stuart's headquarters were on the battlefield and Maj. Heroes von Borcke jocularly raised a white flag over Stuart's two-fireplace headquarters tent. He and Stuart got up on a large wooden box to watch the fight but had to dodge stray snowballs.

Jackson's Christmas dinner: On Christmas Day 1862, after the Battle of Fredericksburg, Gen. Stonewall Jackson's headquarters were at Corbin Hall, made available by owner Richard Corbin, a private in the infantry. Jackson occupied only the plantation office, a small outbuilding set up as a library. There he entertained Gens. Robert E. Lee, Stuart and William N. Pendleton with a Christmas dinner that included oysters, turkey and cakes. Both Lee and Stuart good-naturedly made fun of Jackson for putting on a very un-Jacksonian show.

Stuart's Christmas raid: The day after Christmas, Stuart departed with 1,800 men on another of his famous raids around the Union army. He took the men through Kelly's Ford, Bristersburg, Dumfries, Occoquan, Burke's Station, Fairfax Court House, Vienna and Frying Pan Church, where the raiders finally stopped to rest on Dec. 29. Stuart was always more than welcome at the home of the famous beauty, Laura Ratcliffe, just south of Frying Pan Church. There he introduced her to John Singleton Mosby, who would stay behind after the Christmas raid to become the war's most famous partisan leader.

Stuart and his men went on toward Middleburg, where they turned south and headed home via Warrenton, Brandy Station and Culpeper, arriving at army headquarters Jan. 1, 1863. They brought back about 200 prisoners, 200 horses and 20 wagonloads of equipment and suffered casualties of one killed, 13 wounded and 13 missing.

Dinner with the Yankees: After 36 foodless hours on Stuart's 1862 Christmas raid, Capt. James M. Scott left the column, made his way toward a distant house at night, heard the sound of a jovial party within and asked for supper.

When the host said, "Well, you are in the wrong place, for these are Yankee officers and their wives," Scott forced his way in at gunpoint.

"The supper party were amazed to see their host appear in the door followed by a fully armed Confederate officer," Scott recalled. One woman implored him not to take her husband prisoner, and he replied that he only wanted supper; he would not take prisoners or make trouble, but if trouble arose, they would get the worst of it. After a place was quickly set at the end of the table near the door, two ladies waited on Scott, "plying me with real coffee, oysters, turkey and all the accessories to complete a Christmas meal."

With his pistol beside his plate and the Yankees at the same table, Scott remembered, "I bolted my supper, doing precious little chewing.....Meantime the sound of the Confederate column could be heard as it marched by." When unable to eat any more, he rose, offered Confederate money for the supper, and slid out the back door to his horse. Silence reigned in the house while he rode off and joined the line of march.

Returning to Virginia: Capt. Frank Myers of Waterford, Va., who rode with White's Cavalry, the 35th Virginia Battalion, wrote about how "the Comanches" returned from a successful expedition against Union guerillas, the Swamp Dragons, in what is now West Virginia and were extremely glad to get back to old Virginia and the Shenandoah Valley:

"On the morning of the 21st, the 'Comanches' waked up finding a foot of snow on their blankets and more of it coming down...The weather continued freezing cold, and the Colonel halted for two nights and a day in the South Fork Valley, but on Christmas Day the battalion

passed Brock's Gap – the gateway to the Valley – and if there was a sober man in the battalion...I did not see him; was with the command all day too.”

When the soldiers of the 35th Battalion were allowed to disperse to their homes for the winter of 1864-65 rather than face starvation with the unsupplied army, Companies A and B returned to homes in Loudon County that were well behind Union lines. Nevertheless, Myers of Company A recorded that more balls and parties were given in the county that winter than he could remember. The county's Union battalion, the Loudon Rangers, was holding them, too. The young ladies of the county were in great demand at both.

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