

*Portrait of Samuel J. Reader when he was eighteen years old in 1855.*

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# “I was a prisoner of war.” The Autobiography of SAMUEL J. READER

*edited by Virgil W. Dean*

**B**orn in Greenfield, Pennsylvania, on January 25, 1836, Samuel J. Reader subsequently lived in Illinois before his removal to Kansas Territory in May 1855. He settled on a farm north of Topeka where he lived until his death on September 15, 1914. “Reader’s unique contribution to Kansas history,” wrote George A. Root, a long-time member of the Kansas State Historical Society staff, “was a diary which he began when he was thirteen years old and in which he wrote every day to the end of his life.” Reader’s formal education was “meager,” but he cultivated “an active and observant mind by reading and study. . . . In some places his diary is a strange mixture of shorthand, French and abbreviated English. It is illustrated throughout with marginal and full-page sketches, many in water color. During his later years he wrote his ‘Reminiscences,’ based upon the diary.”<sup>1</sup>

Reader, a free-state partisan, honed his skills as a diarist and artist during his first, strife-torn decade as a Kansan. He observed and participated in much of the conflict that marked the territorial and Civil War years on the Kansas border. At the first day’s battle at Hickory Point on September 13, 1856, Reader was with James H. Lane’s company, and during Confederate General Sterling Price’s attempted invasion of Kansas in October 1864, Reader served with the Second Kansas State Militia, the Shawnee County unit. Taken prisoner on the afternoon of October 22, “southeast of the Mockbee barn” in Jackson County, Missouri, during the Battle of the Big Blue, Reader chronicled the experience in one of his autobiographical volumes: “A Prisoner of War.”<sup>2</sup>

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Virgil W. Dean, who received his PhD from the University of Kansas, edited *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains for the Kansas Historical Society* from 1991 until his retirement in 2011, and currently acts as consulting editor. His publications include *Territorial Kansas Reader* (2005) and *John Brown to Bob Dole: Movers and Shakers in Kansas History* (2006).

1. George A. Root, ed., “The First Day’s Battle at Hickory Point: From the Diary and Reminiscences of Samuel James Reader,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 1 (November 1931): 28; see also “The Letters of Samuel James Reader, 1861–1863; Pioneer of Soldier Township, Shawnee County,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 9 (February 1940): 26–57; part two, 9 (May 1940): 141–74.

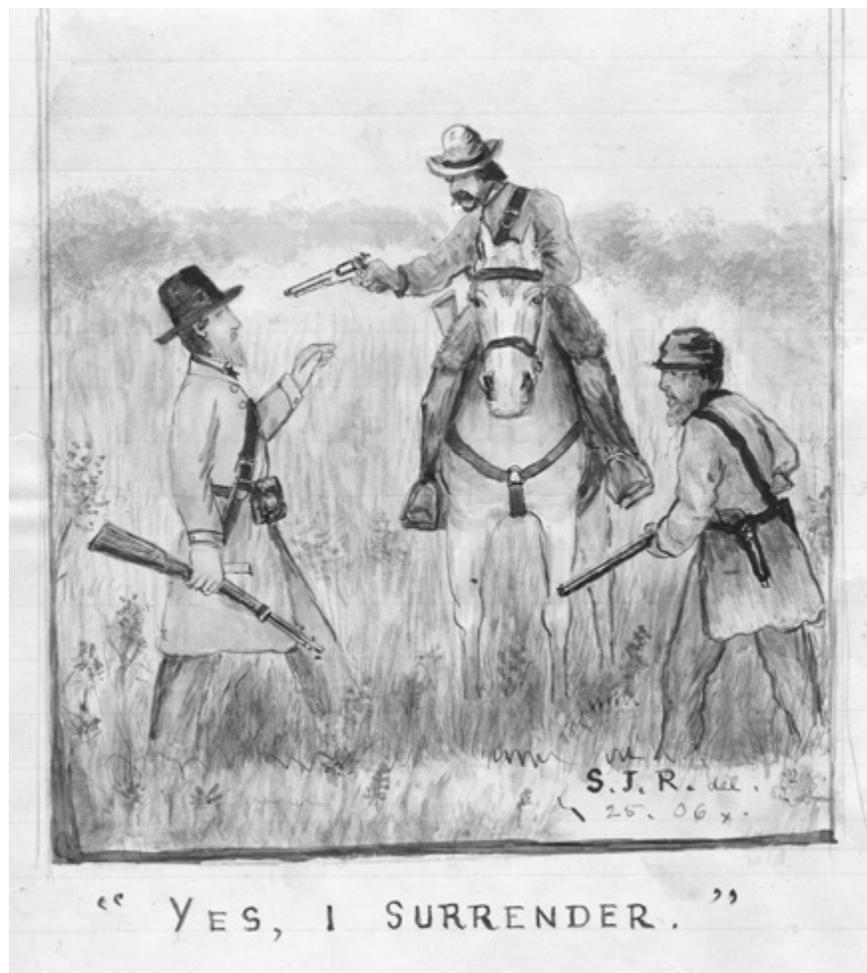
2. “A Prisoner of War” is actually the second half of the volume; the first is titled “Extracts from an old Diary, 1864; and Personal recollection of the Battle of Big Blue fought October 22d 1864. By an eyewitness,” all in the “Autobiography From Diary [of] S. J. Reader, 1864, Topeka, Kansas,” Volume 3, ca. 1907, State Archives Division, Kansas Historical Society, <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/206900>. The complete “Autobiography” is in the collections of the Kansas Historical Society and available online through Kansas Memory: <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/206900>. Page numbers reference the online version.

"All hope of escape by flight was now at an end," explained Reader years later.

In a few more jumps they would ride me down, even if I escaped their bullets. Instinctively I threw myself on my face among the old cornstalks and dried up weeds. . . . In less than half a minute, two more horsemen galloped past, but instead of going on after the main party, pulled, and rode back to where I lay. I was still breathing heavily from my little sprint, and knew well enough I should never be able to counterfeit death in such a condition. I would surrender and take my chances. I had said, and believed, that instant death on the battlefield would be far preferable to the torture and starvation of a Southern prison; but I somewhat modified my resolution when the test was applied. A soldier's glorious death could now be mine. The slightest resistance—motion of a hand toward my weapons, would bring it about, swift and sure. But I was in no mood for martyrdom. Sudden Death has an ugly look, when he sternly and unexpectedly stares one in the face. One naturally clings to life under almost any circumstances, and I decided to not throw it away in this particular case. . . . As the two confederates halted beside me, I arose deliberately from the ground. . . . "I surrender," I cried out, as my carbine fell from my hand, and hung suspended by the sling. . . . I was a prisoner of war.<sup>3</sup>

Reader wrote of his journey south with the retreating Confederate army and his treatment at the hands of his captors. His was a unique perspective on Price's campaign, as the rebel troops moved and fought their way through eastern Kansas. As Price's army "hurried on over the open prairie . . . [Reader] heard the thunder of artillery. . . . When a few miles north of Ft. Scott, the rebels turned us to the left in a south-easterly direction, at a double-quick. I could see nothing myself, but knew that Price was headed off from his prey. . . . The road was now littered with cast-away plunder. Like a ship in a storm, the cargo was being thrown overboard." Soon, Reader made his escape, fleeing north on the Missouri

3. "Autobiography," 130-38.



side of the border. On October 26, 1864, he "came to a number of fields lying west of a creek. But all the fences were gone, and weeds covered the ground. The remains of chimneys showed where the buildings had formerly stood. This was the handiwork of Gen. Lane, when he laid the country waste, the year before."<sup>4</sup>

What follows is excerpted from the "Autobiography, Samuel J. Reader, From Diary of 1864, Topeka, Kansas," which Reader compiled, with illustrations, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. To add additional color and explanation, Reader interspersed quotes from official reports, various writers, and even Macbeth, in addition, of course, to his many drawings/watercolors.<sup>5</sup> Most of these original embellishments have been omitted from the reprint version, but all can be

4. "Autobiography," 350.

5. "Autobiography," 323. Lines from Macbeth, Act 2, Scene 3, appear under one of Reader's many drawings: "And let's not be dainty of leavetaking, / But shift away. There's warrant in that theft / Which steals itself, when there's no mercy left."

examined online in the original or text versions. The portion printed below reflects Reader's experience during the Kansas retreat of General Sterling Price's Confederate command through eastern Kansas, which most notably included the Battle of Mine Creek in Linn County on October 25, 1864.

From the Autobiography

The twilight faded out and was gone. The night was clear, but quite dark. After considerable marching we were filed through a gate way and halted in front of a one-story frame house. It was painted white, and a porch extended along the east side. (It was called the "Boston Adams Place.")<sup>6</sup>

Half a dozen fires, or more, were burning brightly in the yard between the house and a stone wall or fence that enclosed the yard from the road.

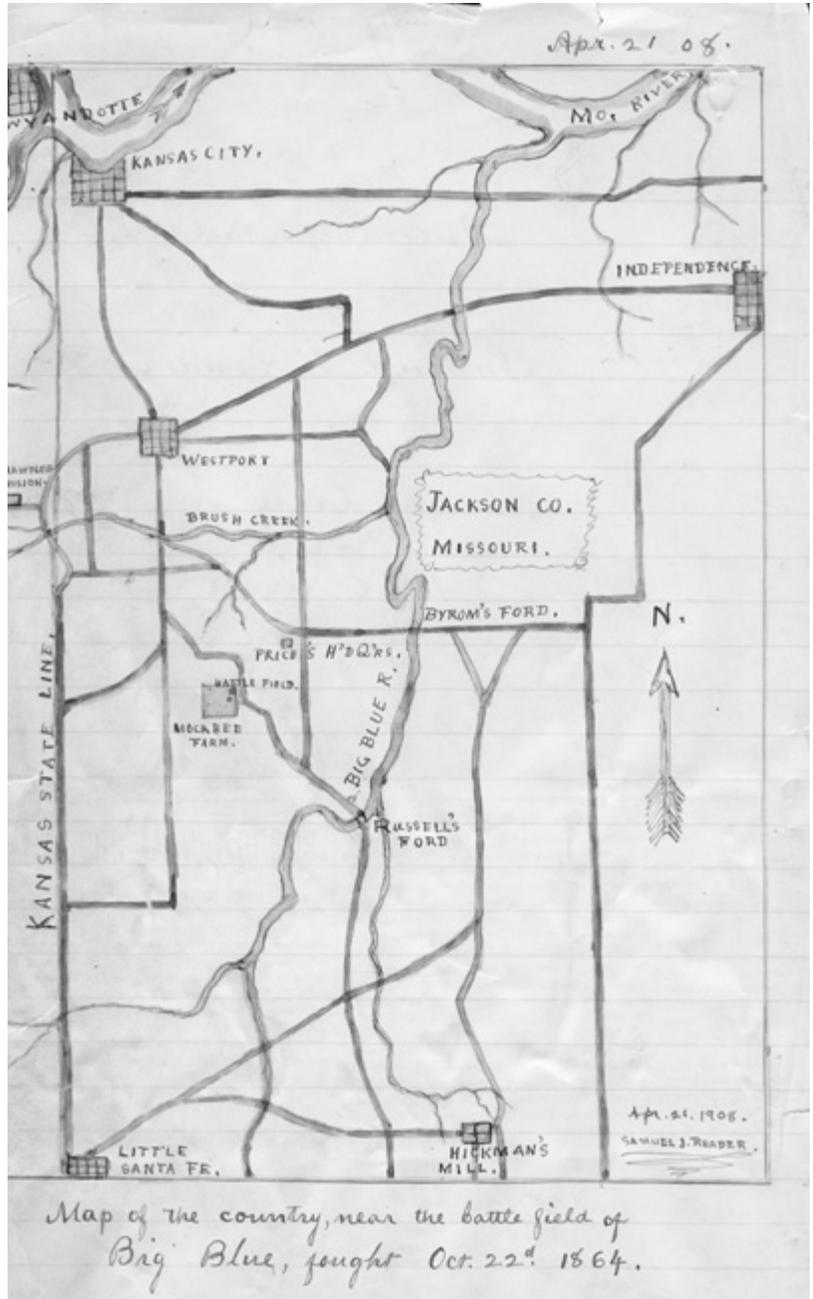
By these fires a number of men were sitting, with others standing or walking about amidst much noise and bustle. We were ordered to go to the fires and sit down. . . .

About sunrise I heard a sound off to the west, like the violent slamming heavy door. In two or three seconds came a similar sound, almost equally loud—A cannon shot, and the explosion of a shell—It was the opening of the Battle of Westport. Sunday October 23rd 1864.<sup>7</sup>

The rebels were evidently feeling for the Federal position. The reports now followed each other with more and more rapidity, which showed plainly enough that the Union Batteries had taken a hand, and the Battle was on.

The road in front of the house was now crowded with mounted men, all hurrying forward to the sound of the cannonade. Some passed at a trot. And all seemed eager to get to the front. It was a brave sight but no doubt there were plenty of men in that motley throng whose hearts chilled at the sound of those murderous engines of war.

For some little time I watched this constant stream of humanity with feelings of the deepest dejection. To my unaccustomed eyes the hostile host seemed almost



innumerable. That our own forces could successfully cope with them, I considered extremely doubtful. There was to be a second day defeat and disaster to our arms. So I dismally inferred.

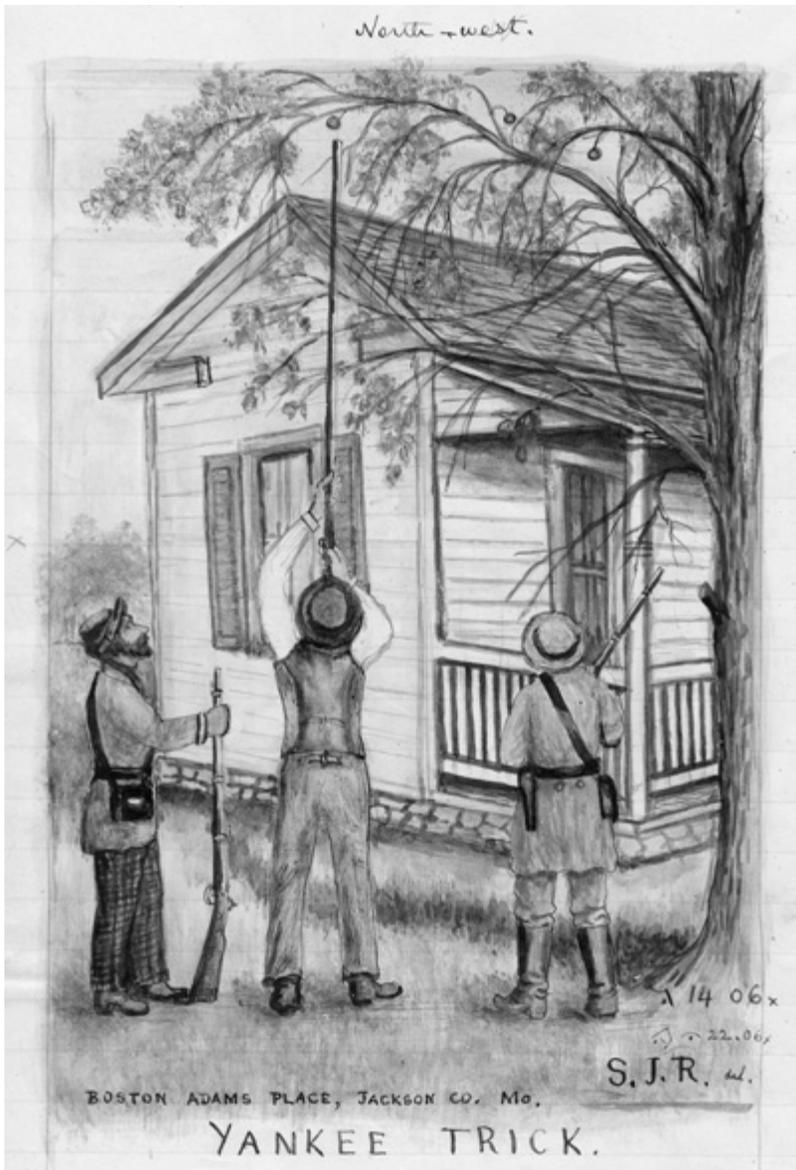
The bustle and hurry at the house and about the out buildings, increased. Gen. Price came out on the porch several times but if I saw him I did not know.

A young man in a neat grey uniform wore a large white plume. He was very conspicuous.

Another man in Confederate grey came out to us. He was a surgeon, and came to see if any of our wounded

6. "Autobiography," 195, <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/206900/page/195>.

7. "Autobiography," 223, <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/206900/page/223>.



had been overlooked. He made the round of our fires, and left us. A kindly mannered, quiet gentleman. . . .

Another set of guards came. One, who was posted near our fire, was a lank, sallow faced man of uncertain age. He wore a long skirted butternut coat, with large smooth brass buttons. The color of the coat was a dingy yellowish brown. As quite a number of the rebels wore similar coats to this I concluded it was a sort of uniform among them.<sup>8</sup>

The man seemed somewhat interested in me, and asked me a number of questions. One of the first was:

“Ever been in a fight before?”

8. “Autobiography,” 229, <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/206900/page/229>.

I came near telling him, I had been at Hickory Point, in 1856, but fortunately did not. There was odium enough in being a Union Yankee; but a Kansas Free-state Yankee was looked upon as something dreadful by the average Southerner.

I asked him a few questions myself:

“How many men has Gen. Price?”

“About thirty five thousand.”

“Do you think he will remain here during the winter?”

“Don’t know. Think he will.”

My heart sank at the bare possibility. After a moment he inquired in his drawling tone of voice:

“Do you always have such cold weather in the Fall?”

“Often,” I replied.

“It’s a H\_\_ of a climate,” remarked another of our guards. “I don’t want any more of it.”

I was more than willing they should dislike it.

I hinted about breakfast to my butternut custodian, but he could give me no satisfaction. I learned that most of the rebels in Price’s army lived on parched corn, and fresh beef. That few had tents or sufficient clothing. I could see for myself that many were poorly armed. But they all seemed to worship “Grand-Pap” as they affectionately called the old General. . . .

We marched south a little way; and then turned west, toward the sound of the cannonade which was now quite heavy. . . .

Wagon trains and soldiers filled the crowded highway, or traversed the adjoining fields; all pushing toward the front.<sup>9</sup>

To my mind there could be but one explanation. The rebels were driving our forces from the field—Kansas would be over-run, and the National cause itself imperiled. I gave up all for lost, and was sunk in the lowest depths of despondency. I said to Bickell:

“Kansas will be invaded, and our homes destroyed. They’re beating us.”

Pretty soon we came in the neighborhood of our battlefield of the day before. Here I noticed the wagons ahead of us were turning south, and going at a lively rate.

9. “Autobiography,” 238, <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/206900/page/238>.



In a few minutes we also were led southward through the eastern portion of the old cornfield where our battle had been fought. My relief was immense. I said to those about me:

"They must be getting whipped." . . .

All this time we could hear the roar of battle over toward Westport. Our halt made me fear that the rebels were gaining some advantage. But the wagons kept on and that looked encouraging, for us.

I saw some of our men taking the badges from their hats. Mine was a piece of red flannel, one inch square, pinned to the band of my hat. I removed it and put it in my pocket for possible future use. (I noticed that some of the rebels had badges of pale blue ribbon fastened to their hats, also.)<sup>10</sup>

10. The Kansas State Militia, which initially numbered about ten thousand men, was called into service by Governor Thomas Carney on October 8, 1864. The militia was poorly armed (the men supplied their own arms and ammunition, as well as clothing, blankets, etc.), and its only uniform was a red badge pinned to each man's hat. Edgar Langsdorf, "Price's Raid and the Battle of Mine Creek," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 37 (Summer 2014): 84. Albert Castel, *Civil War Kansas: Reaping the Whirlwind* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 186-89; Albert Castel, "War and Politics: The Price Raid of 1864," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 24 (Summer 1958): 129.

About the middle of the forenoon we were started on again, marching almost due south.

And now began that terrible, weary march, never to be forgotten by the surviving participants.

Fatal to some—injurious to the health of many—all were subjected to such tortures of hunger and thirst, fatigue and exposure, as few mortals are called upon to suffer.

The country we traversed was mostly rolling prairie land, with here and there a cultivated field.

Our pace was rapid. At first I suffered little distress, being well seasoned to walking, but toward noon my feet and ankles were chafed. . . .

We were now being forced onward at a fearful rate. Many of the prisoners were utterly unable to walk as fast as we were being driven; and as a consequence intervals were forming here and there in our column, all the time.

"Close up! Close up!" could be heard almost continually; and then we would have to double-quick to overtake those in our front, and close up the gaps. The prisoners walking at the front, naturally suffered the least—those at the rear, the most. I spoke to one of the guards, and told him we could not keep on much longer at such a pace.



"Yes you can," said the fellow. "I was a prisoner myself, once, and a Yankee tied a rope to me, and trotted his horse ten miles and I had to keep up. This is nothing. You can stand it well enough if you only think so."

There were few settlers on our line of march, and a great scarcity of woodland and water.

The season had been dry and most of the small streams were dried up, causing us great suffering from thirst. This was aggravated by the day being rather warm and the roads dusty. . . .

At one time I noticed some of our men almost completely exhausted. I think E.B. Williams was one—

I ran forward and called out: "Lieutenant, can't you give us a rest?" "Some of the men back here are about tuckered out."

Capt. Huntoon—who was walking at the front, also spoke up: "Yes, yes, give us a rest."

Sentelle looked around, and without comment, ordered a halt. . . .

Mid-day had passed without a hint of dinner, or a desire for it on my part. My mouth was parched, and a feeling of nausea invaded my stomach. A sip of clear cold water, would have seemed worth its weight in gold. Now and then a cluster of trees would awaken hopes of relief, always to be disappointed.<sup>11</sup>

My wounded foot was sore, and both were badly blistered. One of our men had given out and was mounted on a large raw-boned mule. I received permission to get on behind. In my exhausted condition I had great difficulty in doing so, which excited the jeers and laughter of some of our unfeeling custodians.

The relief I experienced was immense; and I could well say: "Let those laugh who win."—although I must admit, I found their mirth more disagreeable than their curses—

11. "Autobiography," 258, <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/206900/page/258>.

Soon after this we came to an old well. I do not think there were any buildings near it. Very likely they had been burned, as the whole country looked desolate. I slipped from the mule and crowded up to the well. Someone had drawn up a bucket full, and I heard a man say that the water was not good, as there was a half-rotten skunk in it.

I was told long afterwards, that there were also the bodies of two men at the bottom of this well—When my turn came, I drained the pint cup to its last drop, in spite of the terrible stench and flavor. . . .

Then on again we went. Quite a number of rebel soldiers overtook, and passed us, probably to guard against a possible flank attack on their train. Some of these soldiers gave us greeting as they passed. Most of their remarks were directed at the Negro prisoner. His life would not have been worth a straw out-side the guard-line, judging from their expressions of deadly hatred. But the rest of us were not overlooked.

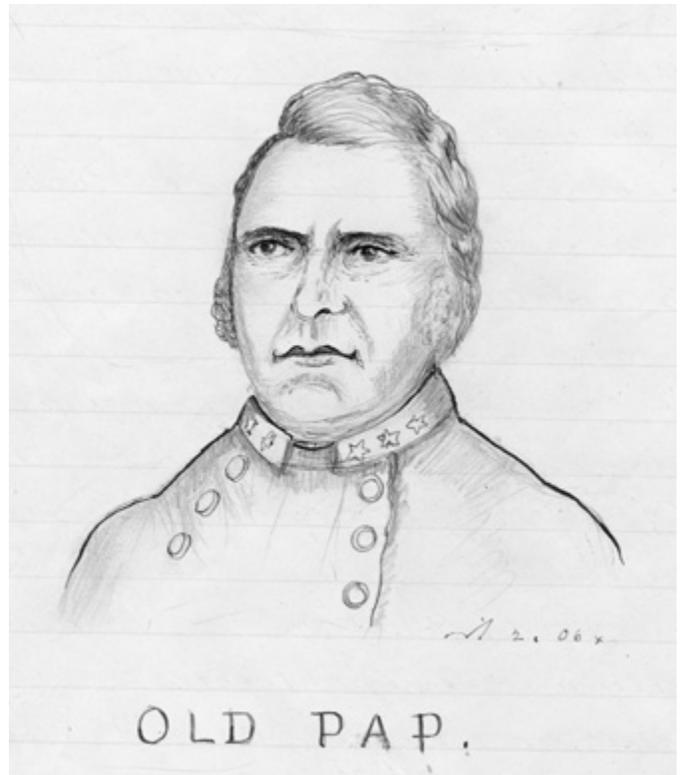
A rebel officer galloped up. The very sight of us seemed to enrage him beyond all bounds. Interlarded with the most savage profanity, he fairly yelled: "Kill them! Shoot every last one of them—They don't take us prisoners—What are we keeping these men for?" "I know what I'm talking about—I've been at the front all day—I've seen the Yanks ride up to our wounded as they lay on the ground, and shoot them in cold blood!" During this bloodthirsty ebullition I watched Lieut. Sentelle. He partly turned in his saddle, and after glancing at the officer, paid no further attention to him. . . .

About dark we reached a stream, and went into camp among a lot of young trees. The ground was rough and broken. A number of the guards and prisoners, brought us plenty of clear spring water.

For the first time, the rebels issued rations to us. We ten Indianola men were in a mess together, and received a few handfuls of course flour for our share and nothing more—<sup>12</sup>

I was at a loss what to do with our provision, when Sergeant John Kemp spread a large pocket handkerchief on the ground, and upon it mixed our flour into a stiff dough, and gave each man as near an equal share as possible. Mine was about the size of an ordinary biscuit. I took a forked twig, wrapped my dough about it, and held it in the fire until it was partly cooked, and partly burnt. I

12. Just north and a little west of Topeka in Shawnee County near Soldier Creek, Indianola was the site of Reader's initial claim upon moving to Kansas Territory in July 1855. "Autobiography," 266, <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/206900/page/266>; see also Kansas Memory (<http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/90350>) for Reader's account of the Battle of Indianola, August 30, 1856.



*Sketch of Confederate General Sterling Price.*

ate it with a relish, and wished I could have it duplicated many times.

We had very good fires, and the night was quite pleasant.

The guards were stationed about us, on all sides, and were very strict and watchful. None of them talked with us as they did the night before. In fact we prisoners were too utterly worn out to talk among ourselves. . . .

The guards started us on our way at a very early hour [Monday Oct. 24 1864].

There was not even a pretense of giving us breakfast. . . .

Water was scarce, and few houses were to be seen. . . .

We were marching a little west of south, and after awhile crossed the line, and entered Kansas. The exact time and place I cannot state with any degree of accuracy. We now saw more houses and improvements, and the rebels began to burn everything in the shape of forage. No houses were fired, so far as I could see. All kinds of stock were collected and driven along.

Sometime during the day a number of soldiers passed, going on ahead of us. I saw a battery of artillery go by at a brisk trot.

I heard a guard call attention to a pet bear, that he said was riding on one of the gun carriages. I looked, but failed



to see it. But I saw something else, of more interest to me. As a cannon swept past a few rods to our right, my eye caught the inscription on the limber chest:

"Capt. W.W.H. Lawrence Topeka Kansas."

It was our old brass howitzer, and I then and there probably saw the last of it.

As usual, many of the rebels reviled us, in passing. Some of the officers rode close along side to look at us. Some of these were gentlemen; some were not.

One foul-mouthed fellow swore himself nearly hoarse, at the bare sight of us. A small man, wearing a cloth cap, especially excited his animosity.

"Why, you can't look an honest man in the face!" yelled the rebel. Then followed a torrent of threats and profanity.

But he was not partial. As he worked his way up along our column, men were singled out, here and there for special abuse. . . .

We marched over a long stretch of prairie, with higher ground some two miles off to our right. I noticed our guards were watching something in that direction. One of them asked:

"What is it?"

"Yankees," was the reply. I looked, and saw something that resembled the shadow of a cloud resting on the slope of the hill. By close watching I could see that it was moving south.

In all the time I was a prisoner, I never longed for liberty as I did at that particular moment. It was indescribably tantalizing to know that only a little strip of open prairie was between me and my freedom. It was Dives regarding Lazarus, across the gulf.<sup>13</sup>

At one place we passed a shanty that stood by the roadside. The people were gone, and the door stood wide open. How inviting it looked, and how I longed to enter and drop my weary frame upon the floor. But the hateful: "Close up:—Double quick!" soon hurried us by. . . .

During the afternoon, time dragged fearfully. The sun seemed almost at a stand still, and minutes seemed hours. Would the night ever come?

At sun-set we came to a heavy body of timber land near a place called "Trading Post."<sup>14</sup> Under the trees, lying side by side I saw a number of men—whether corpses or wounded men, it was impossible to tell.

A man was riding a grey horse just outside the line of guards. One of them asked: "Are you one of the prisoners?" The man nodded. It was G.G. Gage. Prevarication might have secured his liberty at this time, or it might not. No doubt the risk was too great, in spite of the gathering obscurity.

We soon reached a large stream of water, and camped on the north bank. As we halted I was startled by a series of heart rending groans.

One of our men being maltreated or murdered, was my instant thought. In a few moments all was quiet.

The second Lieutenant—whose name I have forgotten—called out to the guards:

"Treat these prisoners kindly but let no man escape."

"Your head's level," one of our men responded.

Sentelle drew his revolver, and told some of us to follow him to the water. Half the prisoners sprang to their feet.

"Sit down! Sit down!" yelled the Lieutenant.

We all dropped to the earth as if we had been shot.

He, then selected about a dozen of us and led us down to the creek; a strong guard enclosing us on all sides. I

13. Reader here alluded to the biblical parable of the rich man (Dives) and Lazarus found in Luke 16:19–31.

14. Trading Post is located on the north bank of the Marias des Cygnes River in eastern Linn County, Kansas. "Autobiography," <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/206900/page/282>.

drank and drank, and then filled my hat. As we climbed the bank on our return, Sentelle and I were a little in advance of the party.

The night was very dark. A bold leap, and I might escape. But the thrill of half formed resolve, was but momentary. The rebel Lieutenant turned, and my opportunity was lost.

It was here that our first man—Jake Klein—escaped.

Some of the prisoners were overlooked, and got no water at all. I passed my hat around to my nearest comrades; then drank all my stomach would hold, and emptied out the muddy settlings—as I needed my hat.

“Rations for the prisoners” was announced.

They consisted of fresh beef and corn meal. Captain Huntoon took charge and issued. I felt too miserable to even offer to help. My old knife was borrowed to cut up the beef, and when the Capt. returned it, he remarked that I kept “a very dull knife.” But there again, the beef was exceedingly tough, and hard to cut.

My share of the meat was about half a pound. I soon had it scorched and devoured. The corn meal could not be cooked—there being no water to mix it. I had an ear of corn which I half parched, half burnt on the cob and ate as best I could. The outside was black as a coal, the inside, raw.

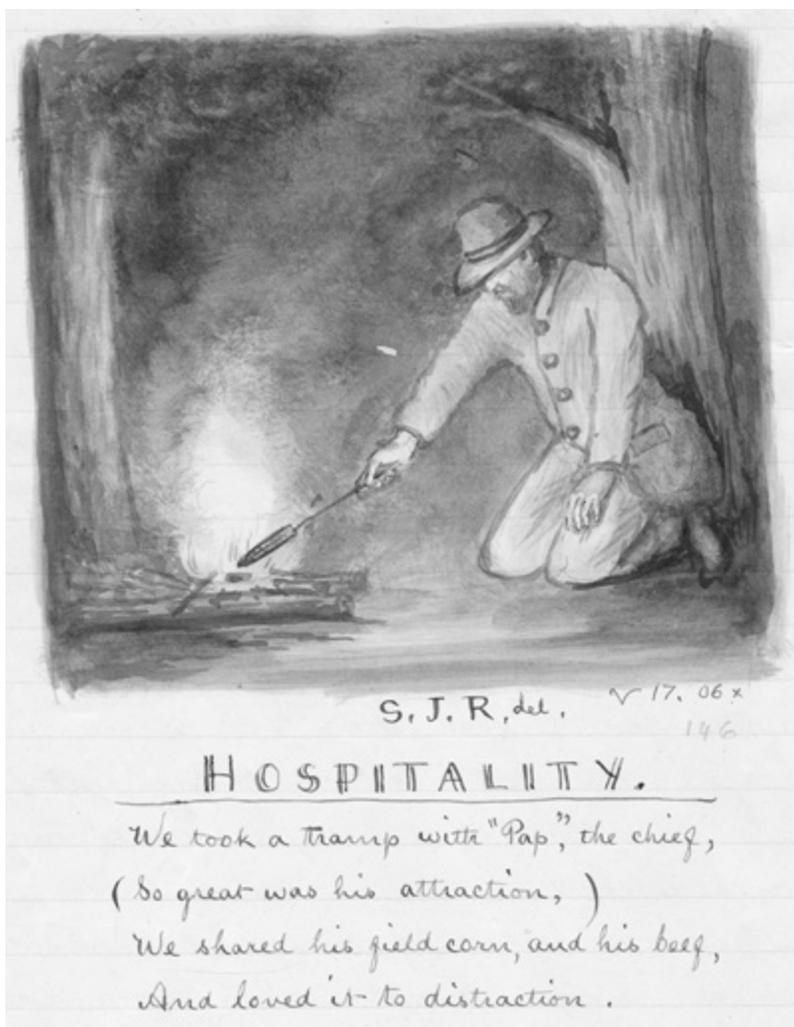
We were in a heavy wood. Many old logs and stumps were about us, but for some reason our fires were poor.

There was a chilly east wind, and the western sky was over cast. Altogether, a most gloomy prospect above and below.

The only possible solace was sleep. I wrapped the old quilt over my butternut coat, pulled my muddy, water soaked hat well on my head, and dropped down under the shelter of a big log. . . .

Long before daylight [Tuesday October 25 1864] we were aroused and started on our way.\* It was exceedingly dark, and a misty rain added to the obscurity as well as our general discomfort.<sup>15</sup>

15. “\*Note—Gen. Curtis with the Kansas men took the lead in the pursuit, but soon gave place to Pleasonton’s horsemen, who after a march of 60 miles, struck them about midnight at the Marais-des-Cygnés, [Trading Post] opening upon their bivouac at 4 A.M., with artillery, setting them at once in motion, and chasing them to the Little



We waded the stream—which seemed to me rather wide and shallow—and reached the up-land beyond.

I saw a number of fires on ahead and at first supposed them to be the smoldering fires of a burned village; but they were only campfires.

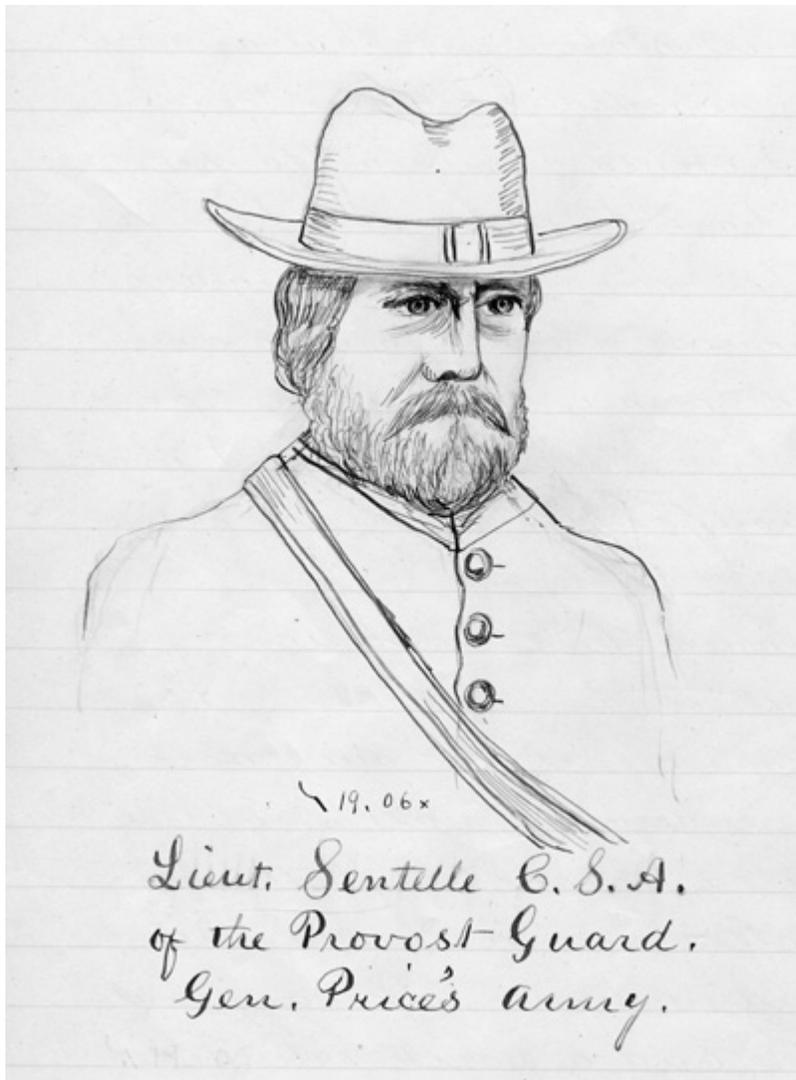
After tramping several miles we were halted, and waited for daylight. The rain had now increased to quite a shower. But my rebel coat and the old quilt kept me tolerably dry. . . .

Day light slowly appeared. . . .

Lieut. Sentelle formed us in line and looked us over.

His inspection was seemingly unsatisfactory, for presently he cried out with a savage malediction:

Osage.” Reader referenced and quoted Horace Greeley’s *The American Conflict: A History of the Great Rebellion in the United States of America, 1860-’65*. (Hartford, Conn.: O.D. Case & Company, 1867), 561, on page 289 of the original, online version of the autobiography (<http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/206900/page/289>).



"Men, you've let half a dozen or more gat away last night!" He then made another count, and looked us all over carefully—as I have frequently seen stockmen do in rounding up a herd of cattle.

"One hundred and ten." Was announced as our number, all told.

Again the rebel lieutenant rode up and down our line carefully scanning each face as he passed. It was not so bad as he had feared. Only one man was missing. He merely remarked in a surly tone:

"That damned little Dutchman is gone!"

Someone said to me: "It's Jake Klein."

John Kemp was quite sick. He showed his tongue, and it was very badly coated. He was of course quite despondent, and remarked:

"Sam, We'll never see home again."

His words depressed me extremely, but I tried to cheer

him up with the old story of one being paroled. But hope was about dead with both of us.

Then on again we went. The rain ceased, and after awhile the clouds cleared away.

I felt much better than I had the day before. The air was fresh, and the rain had softened the road so I could walk with less pain from my lame feet. I began to hope that I was getting my "second wind", and would stand the trip all right. I even tried to whistle at one time, but it was a lamentable failure.

For awhile I walked near the head of the column, J.S. Stanfield was at my side.

"Mr. Reader!" he suddenly called out. "This is a little harder than running for office, isn't it?"

The man was actually laughing aloud, and looked as merry as if there were not a rebel within a thousand miles. Amid our dismal surroundings, it was encouraging to see and hear him giving vent to his irrepressible gaiety.

Another man who seemed to stand tramping remarkably well, was a tall young Missourian. He told me he had been a prisoner about two weeks, and that after a few days of distress he had seemingly become seasoned to hard marching and now suffered little pain or fatigue. He also told me that he had neglected several good chances to escape—preferring to be paroled.

Some of our men declared he was put among us by the rebels in order to more closely watch us. Possible, but not probable.

Nothing seemed to escape the notice of Lieut. Sentelle. He saw my coat, and demanded how I came by it. I told him. He nodded and at last, rather gruffly said: "All right."

One of the guards called out: "Say, have any of you fellows ever been across the plains?"

"Yes, I have," answered a prisoner. They talked for some time. I heard the rebel say: "When this war is over I'm going to make the trip myself." It was pleasant to hear him say that.

But the end of the war seemed a long way off, notwithstanding.

Another guard was a good vocalist. At one time he sang Kingdom Coming—a rank abolition song of the incendiary type—

"That song can hardly be popular, down South." I enquired.



He laughed good humoredly: "Well no, it isn't."

They were not all so peaceable. Two of the guards had a fierce quarrel, and threatened to shoot. One—fellow with fiery red hair—leaped from his horse, close by me, and called to the other to come on with his gun. But his challenge was declined, much to my relief if they were going to shoot among us prisoners. . . .

We suffered for want of water but not so terribly as on Sunday and Monday. The rain had left some water on the ground, and at one place I drank from horse tracks. We passed more streams and found water more frequently than before.

I also secured a few eatables. Turnip parings and cabbage leaves were scattered along the road and I gathered up a handful or so. A piece of a turnip I also picked up, which was quite a prize.

A rebel Samaritan brought us an armful of sugar cane. I very thankfully received one, although some of our men

refused, fearing the cane would make them sick. I ate mine without bad effects. About noon we crossed a creek and took a short cut through the woods. Here I picked up two large hickory-nuts.

We scrambled up a very steep bank at the edge of the woods, and found a number of cannons placed in position at the top, and a line of battle forming. We were hurried on over the open prairie to the south.<sup>16</sup>

We met numerous parties of rebels returning at a trot. Half a mile from the creek, a long thin line stretched far across the open ground, to stop and turn back the stragglers. They halted us too, but immediately opened

16. Here Reader described the crossing of Mine Creek and the Confederate preparation for battle. He again referenced and briefly quoted Greeley, *American Conflict*, 561, who incorrectly identified this action as on the Little Osage, a few miles south (<http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/206900/page/302>).



and let us go on. We marched rapidly. After a while we heard the thunder of artillery, and knew that the battle was begun.

We heard firing off and on, for several hours afterwards. It was a running fight, as we could easily guess; and the rebels were seemingly hard pressed by our forces. Many soldiers passed us, as if to guard against a flank attack on the right. Some of the Federals were quite close to us at one time. John P. Mayors expressed the wish that they would charge right over us all.

"I would be willing to die right here, to see it done." He said to me in an undertone.

My own feelings just then were less self-sacrificing, perhaps.

The excitement of battle seemed to infuse fresh ferocity in some of the rebels, and we received an additional share of abusive language. Some of them yelled like wild Indians at sight of the Negro prisoner, and various were the modes proposed of killing him.

"Don't shoot him! Kill him with a white oak club!" shouted one ruffian.

The Negro happened to be walking by my side, and I took an opportunity to advise him to escape at the first opportunity.

"Yes sir." Was his stolid response.

He exhibited no alarm, and probably felt none.

The afternoon was bright and warm, and I began to get very tired. Several of us asked the guards for a ride, but were told they had no extra horses.

A Negro was riding along, leading a horse. One of our men pointed him out to a guard: "There, that fellow has an extra horse."

The rebel looked, and then turned savagely on the prisoner.

"So you call that a fellow? Hell! That's a nigger!"

My corrected comrade was abashed and silent.

When a few miles north of Ft. Scott, the rebels turned us to the left in a south-easterly direction, at a double quick. I could see nothing myself, but knew that Price was headed off from his prey.

Many of our men were nearly exhausted; especially E.B. Williams. He told me that he was suffering with a severe head-ache, as well as from fatigue. He had also been thrown from his horse during our Battle, and several of his ribs were injured. On the other hand, John Kemp seemed better. He proposed that we lean our backs together, instead of lying flat on the ground during our rests. It was a decided improvement.

We stopped at a large pond of water on the prairie. I was in such a state of exhaustion that everything seemed misty and dream-like while we remained there. I have an uncertain remembrance of seeing a wounded rebel

sitting near us by the water; and of thinking that his plight was perhaps worse than my own.

We drank our fill of the water, then up and on again.

The road was now littered with cast away plunder.

Like a ship in a storm, the cargo was being thrown overboard.

I first picked up a book. To my surprise it was Uncle Tom's Cabin. Next was a ledger. It was too heavy to carry, and I cut out what paper I wanted for a diary, and left the two books on the ground.

More than a dozen new axes were scattered along the roadside, in one place. . . .

Near the road I saw two barrels that had been emptied of their contents on the ground. By the smell, it was whisky. . . .

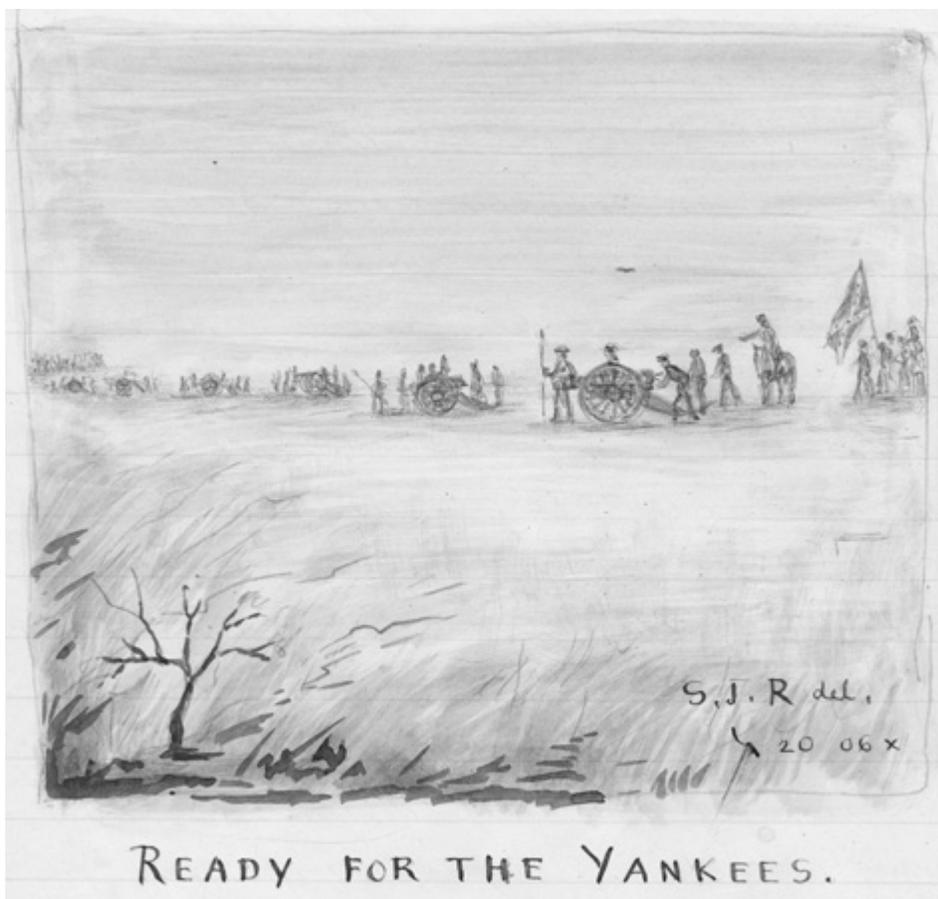
Then on and on we went, often at double quick, until at times I felt ready to drop from sheer exhaustion. To do so meant death, and I told one of the guards he had better shoot me then and there, as I could hold out but little longer. He looked at me without reply. Had he shown the least disposition to take me at my word, no doubt it would have infused me with fresh life and energy. The ordinary individual will endure an incredible amount of misery before he will part with life, and I would not have been an exception.

Again I clung to the tail of a rebel's horse, and stumbled on as best I could.

About sunset, Bickell seeing how badly off I was, told me to take the pony. It had a rope halter, but no saddle or bridle. . . . I had walked all day long, and the relief experienced from riding was to my tired frame, "like beds of downy ease." My boots were tied together and I hung them over the pony's neck. Bickell held the end of the rope and led the animal along side our column, and just inside the line of guards.

We were approaching a heavy body of timber. Just before we reached it, we entered a lane, with a fenced field on the left hand side. In the field were many horsemen. Some were shouting:

"Shelby's men, fall in here!" A little farther on, others were calling out:



"Marmaduke's men, fall in." It was a perfect bedlam of orders and confused outcries.<sup>17</sup>

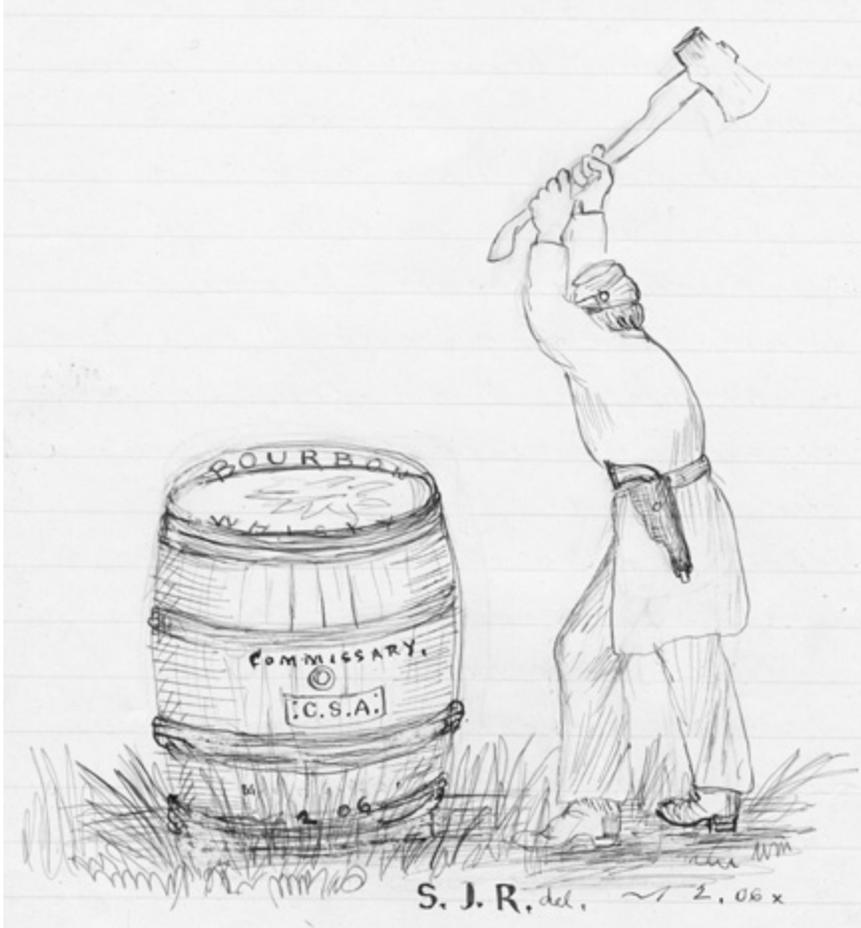
The road was thronged with mounted men, evidently very badly demoralized. Some no doubt fell in with their commands, but the greater part seemed anxious to go on.

At this time I did not know that these were fugitives from a lost battle-field.

It was quite dark when we entered the woods. (The stream was the Marmiton, and we were now back in Missouri.)

Near the creek the jam and uproar increased four-fold. Our guards halted us every few rods to allow those in front

17. "Shelby" was General Jo Shelby, a commander of one of Price's three divisions during the 1864 raid and one of Missouri's wealthiest slave owners. In 1861 he cast his lot with the Confederacy, enlisted, and rose to the rank of brigadier general in three years. His skill in fighting rear guard actions probably saved the army from total destruction. On the morning of October 25, however, Shelby's division was guarding the wagon train several miles south of Mine Creek. The Rebel forces under General John Sappington Marmaduke, a native of Arrow Rock, Missouri, who was captured during the battle, and General James Fleming Fagan were routed before Shelby could move his troops to the battlefield. "Autobiography," <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/206900/page/314>.



to make way. Ahead of us I heard a terrible yelling and cracking of whips, and supposed the train was crossing at a ford. At our first halt in the woods the prisoners as usual, dropped flat upon the ground.

Bickell gave me the rope for fear the pony might tread on some of the prisoners.

When we started up again the animal found an opening in the rebel guard line, and crowed in. I was well enough pleased, seeing I could do little in guiding him with the rope. We kept on—starting up and halting again, for the space of several minutes. I heard the guards now and then warning outsiders to keep off and not break their line.

I was riding on the left hand side of the column.

We had come to another halt. The shadows of the overhanging trees made the night additionally dark at that particular place.

A man rode up to me and inquired: "Where can I find Col. Ellis's men?"

I told the man I didn't know. He was turning to go away when he happened to see our men lying on the ground—a dark mass indistinguishable in the obscurity—

"What have you got there?" he asked in some surprise.

Up to this moment I had believed that escape would be next to an impossibility. I had even advised Mat. Clark that afternoon to not attempt it. That he would be recaptured and shot, almost to a certainty.

Our custodians had impressed it upon our minds, that the man who attempted an escape would be shown no mercy at their hands when recaptured. But here was a chance that might never occur again. My questioner evidently took me for a rebel. I could encourage that belief and perhaps gain my liberty. For one moment the gates of Paradise stood ajar—I would take the risk at all hazards, for escape. The contending emotions of hope and fear rushed over me with such tumultuous force, that I could scarcely control my voice as I answered: "Yankee prisoners."

To keep him from going, I added that we had one hundred and ten in all; the greater part captured near Westport. He seemed interested for the moment. I then asked: "How did the battle go today?" The rebel lowered his voice:

"It went against us." Remembering the battery that I had seen in position during some part of the day, I questioned further:

"Did we lose any guns?"

"Yes," he replied "a good many." My confidence had increased amazingly. The soldier was reining up to go on, when I kicked up the pony and left the guard line, with the excuse that I wanted a drink of water from his canteen—which I saw the man was carrying, as it had no cover—

"You can have a little sip," he responded, as he gave it me. I was terribly thirsty, but the nervous tension was so great I could scarcely drink a drop. In the meantime, the prisoners were still at rest—the guard who rode behind me, only a few feet distant from us.

Was he deceived, or willfully blind? I may never know. The suspense was more than I could endure.

Returning the canteen with a mumbled statement that I would get water from the creek—which I saw was just alongside the road—I seized my boots, and slipped from the pony's back. As I did so, the soldier exclaimed:

"I see you've lost your saddle." My heart was in my mouth. For an instant I feared all was discovered. But he drew no weapon; he did not appear to suspect.

"Yes, I have," I replied, "then I used a wagon cover, and lost that too."

A lame story—lamey told—but it sufficed. He too, was blind as a bat.

"Yes sir," he remarked; turned, and rode away. My involuntary deliverer, in truth.

Hastily I tied the pony to a branch—to help prove that I intended to get a drink, and return, if re-captured—and plunged down the steep bank to the water's edge.

My first frantic intention was to wade across the stream, but when I stepped in I found the water too deep. I took a hasty drink, returned, and pulled on my boots.

Exhaustion was gone. I felt I could travel to the ends of the earth.

I ran north, under the creek bank, for about fifty yards, where I saw several foot-men coming down a cow-path, from the road above. I had to meet them, unless I turned back. I foolishly feared they would detect me, even in the dark. Had they been as many grizzly bears, they would hardly have inspired me with a greater terror. In sheer desperation I rushed up to them and called out: "O say! Have you seen a loose horse run by?"

They stopped, and with real concern in their voices, said they had not.

"I've lost mine." I cried as I ran past them up the bank.

Here I found myself in the road again, surrounded by men mounted and dismounted.

"A bay horse," I cried breathlessly to the first man I met, "Have you seen him pass this way?"

"No I haven't," he replied. Safe so far. In the darkness and confusion I saw there would be little trouble in personating a rebel soldier, as long no searching questions were asked.

I had learned that the Provost Guard belonged in part, to a regiment commanded by Col. Crawford; but its



## DESPERATION.

"And let's not be dainty of leavetaking,  
But shift away. There's warrant in that theft  
Which steals itself, when there's no mercy left."  
(Macbeth, Act 2, scene 3.)

number, brigade and division I was entirely ignorant of.

To claim membership with this organization, however, would be my best course if brought to bay. A broken reed, no doubt, but still one poor little chance for life and liberty.

I pushed on up the road against the tide of fugitives that crowded the roadway. I met footmen, and to several of them related my fabricated story of loss. Some responded, some did not. One of these men seemed to recognize in me, one of his comrades.

"Jim is back there a little way, and wants to see you." I replied that I would look for him, and hurried away. ("Jim" was certainly one of the last persons in the world that I wanted to see just then.) The next man I spoke to

showed considerable sympathy, and I almost feared he would volunteer to help me in my hunt. Embroidered by his friendliness, I asked him if the pickets were out.

"No," he replied, "not likely." His tone expressed surprise at my question, and fearing I had aroused his suspicions, I hurried away.

After following the road north for about one hundred yards, the creek made a bend to the eastward. At this point a country road left the highway and turned to the right; and here a party of soldiers had started a number of bright fires.

I halted. It would be impossible to take the right hand road without passing close to several of the fires, and their light would betray me. Sentinels were no doubt posted near by, and I would certainly be challenged, and made to give an account of myself.

The simple question: "What command do you belong to?" would probably be my death sentence. But hesitation only increasing my peril, and with many misgivings I walked rapidly toward the fires determined to put the matter to the test.

A dozen men were warming themselves or walking about. In spite of myself I could not get rid of the feeling that they would see by my very countenance, that I was a Yankee.

But when I was fully within the circle of firelight, my fears proved groundless.

Not a man paid the slightest attention to me. I had to pass very close to one of them. He turned and looked me full in the face, as I almost jostled against him. (Perhaps it was "Jim?")

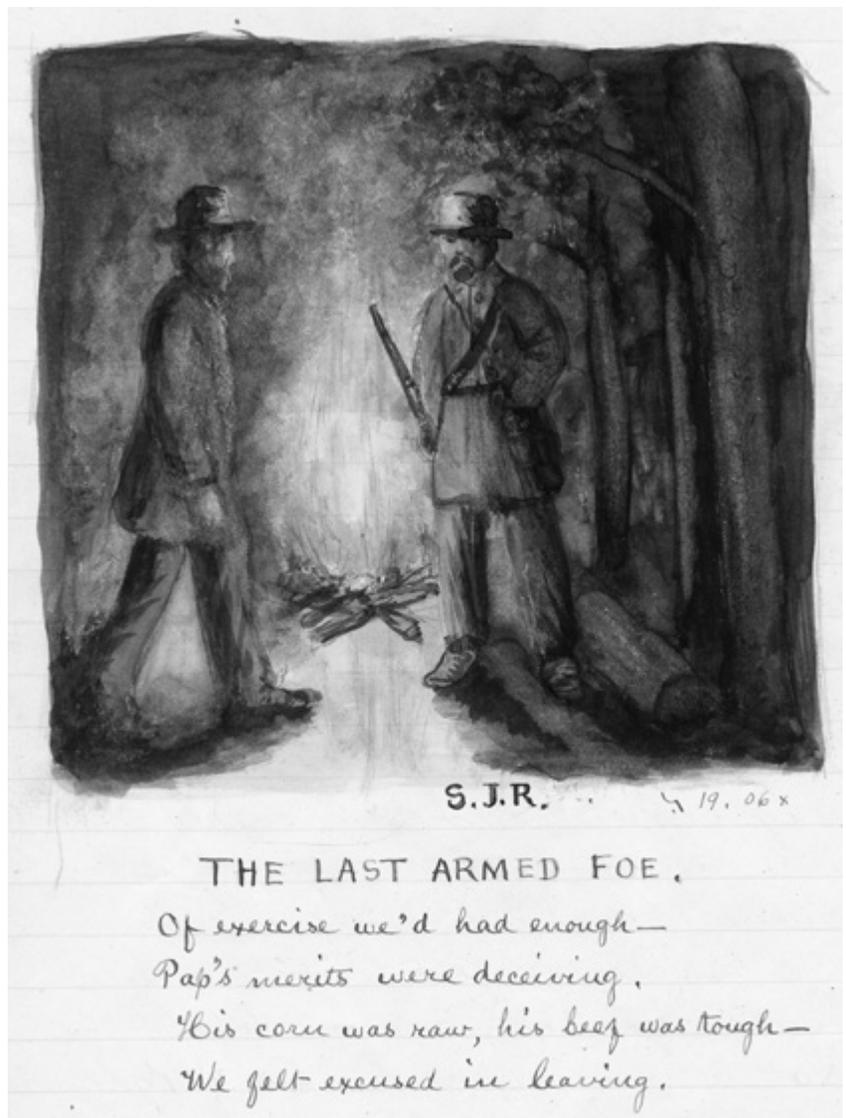
"Did you see a loose horse going this way?"

"No."

"Mine got away."

With rapid strides I passed on, nor slackened my pace until I was again within the friendly shelter of the darkness. My spirits rose. No sentinel had challenged me so far; but fearing to meet a patrol or foraging party on the road, I left it as soon as possible, and turned off to the left.

Presently I came to a flat common overgrown with tall weeds and bushes. There was a movement and rustling of some kind, directly in front of me. A rebel picket, without a doubt.



I immediately fell on my face and listened with bated breath for what seemed to me half an hour. I could now hear movements in several different directions, but could see nothing. I was very much alarmed, but resolved to resist re-capture to the last extremity. My life was forfeit, but even if it were spared I could not endure the thought of returning to the miseries of captivity. The blade of my knife was pointed, and more than three inches long. In a nocturnal encounter it would possess some advantages over firearms. I held it open in my hand. No one man should take me, without a desperate struggle, at all events.

The night was quite still, and I could hear every movement of the hidden enemy. Some of them were almost upon me, when I heard a grunt, that unmistakably betrayed the nature of my foe.

Ashamed, but immensely relieved, I sprang to my feet, while a number of hogs scampered away with their familiar "wouf-a-wouf!"

But the time had not been lost. It had given me a breathing spell, and time to think. I was now quite certain of being outside the rebel outposts, even if there were any.

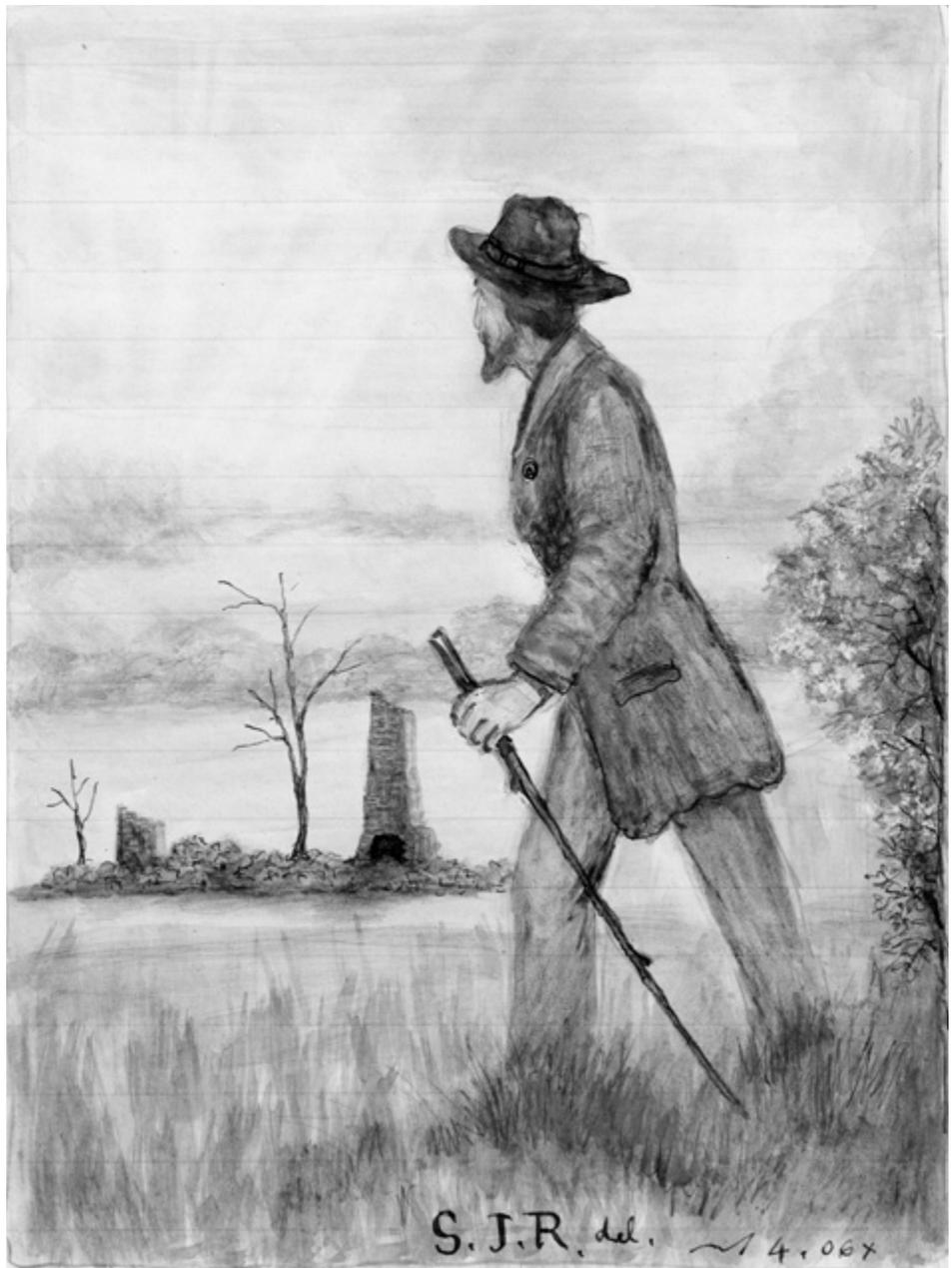
I stopped a moment to listen. The noise from the direction of the rebel army was peculiar. At that distance the shouting of soldiers and teamsters resembled a continuous roar. Now and then it would rise, and swell into a more formidable volume of sound; then it would sink again as the light breeze wafted it away.

A vivid imagination could easily compare it to a wait of distress, and I failed not to remember that my unfortunate comrades were still in the midst of all that din and misery.

It was a saddening thought, as I turned to go.

I walked rapidly in a northerly direction, across field and prairie. My thirst became intolerable. All the moisture of my system seemed to be drying up. I chewed the rebel bullet without relief. My mouth remained dry as ashes. In all my three days of torture, I had never suffered from thirst like this. It is something that I have never been able to understand, for the night was sufficiently cool. But relief was nearer than I expected.

I stumbled across a ravine and found a puddle of stagnant water. How much of it I drank, I should probably hesitate to tell, even if I could remember. I bathed my blistered and inflamed feet, and took a good rest. Remembering the two hickory-nuts in my pocket, I cut them open with my knife and ate them as best I could. From another pocket I fished up the stem of a cabbage leaf, and devoured it to the last fiber. I do not think I was ever happier in my life. My spirits were buoyant as a feather, in spite of the knowledge that I was far from absolute safety. There was danger from rebel bushwhackers; and



the Federal soldiers would undoubtedly take me for a rebel at first sight. I concluded it would be safer to have a flag of truce ready for an emergency. My outer shirt was white, and would answer the purpose admirably. I cut a stout stick that would serve as a cane and a flag staff, as occasion required.

For the purpose of identification, in case I should be killed, I wrote on a scrap of paper: "S.J. Reader, Indianola Kansas. Second reg't. K.S.M." This I pinned to my waistband.

Soon after leaving the ravine, I came to a house. There was a light inside, but I did not dare venture too near.



were now gathering, with some lightening. There were sounds like cannon shots, from the direction of the Marmiton Crossing. Off to the west the prairie grass had been fired, and the light was reflected on the clouds.

I stood for a few moments and viewed my surroundings. I could hardly realize that all was not a dream.

I was supremely happy. But the tremendous mental and physical strain of the last two hours could not be longer sustained.

I pulled up some dead grass for a pillow, and was soon luxuriously couched. Before I closed my eyes, the shrill bark of a wolf broke the silence of the night. My first thought was, that he was on his way to the battlefield, to feast on the slain—but the field was probably too far away for that. All the same, it was not a pleasant sound to hear under the circumstances, and I was glad when his vocal efforts ceased.

I must have slept five or six hours, when I was awakened by a feeling of chilliness, and found that a very light rain was falling.

I started up, and guiding myself by a slight breeze, set out on my way again. After an hours walk, I was

warm, but very tired and sleepy. I threw myself down in the grass, and slept, in spite of the showers of rain that still continued at intervals. I soon waked up again feeling cold and wet.

Then on again I went, to repeat the alternate tramping and sleeping, until the grey light of morning struggled through the overcast sky.

The drizzly rain had ceased and the clouds broke away [Wednesday, morning, October 26]. I was now getting fearfully weak. The sun presently came out, bright and warm. I sat down for a long time.

There were no signs of habitations to be seen in any direction. Nothing but the undulating swells of the prairie, and a line of woodland to the east.

I was on the crest of a ridge and had an extensive view. I took out my memorandum book, and jotted down in

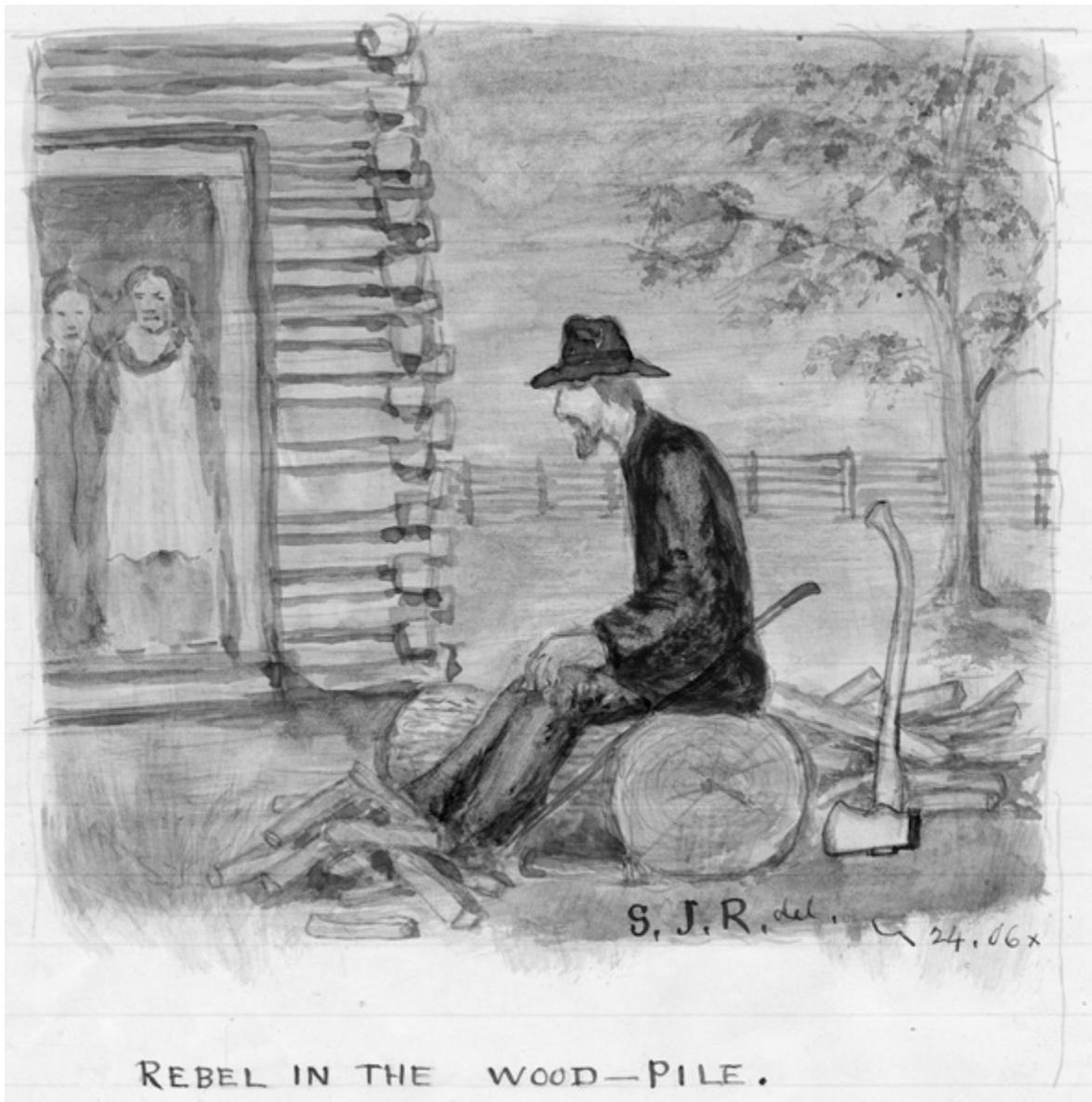
I passed to the east of it through a stable yard and remember to my credit, pulling up the bars after me.

I then came to a small stream of running water. I drank my fill, and started on again, with a quart or so in my hat.

I reached open ground and attempted to lay my course by the stars. Ursa Major was low in the northwest; the Pleiades just above the eastern horizon. I had some trouble in locating the "pointers of the dipper," so as to find the North Star. Brightly it shone in the clear northern sky, the fugitives friend in all ages, past and present.

The familiar hymn: "Lead Kindly Light," might with little change apply to my condition at that moment. . . .

I went on at a brisk pace until I came to an elevated spot on the prairie. It must have been four or five miles from where my escape was effected; and a little east of north. A small creek was to my right. A few clouds



a rough way, the exciting incidents of the last four days. As I sat writing, a flock of merry crows serenaded me from a neighboring knoll.

I will here give verbatim the closing lines as I wrote them, sitting in that vast solitude:

"I slept a little, and walked a lot in the night—I am very weak—I hear crows cawing—Some clouds, now and then—I must go—"

I put up my book, and started on again.

The prairie grass had dried off, and the walking became exceedingly difficult and slippery.

I generally kept in sight of woodland, that I might have a better chance of escape if pursued by horsemen.

In a wooded ravine I found grapes and elm bark,

together with clear running water: My breakfast lacked in variety, but not in quantity.

After leaving this place I came to a number of fields lying west of a creek.

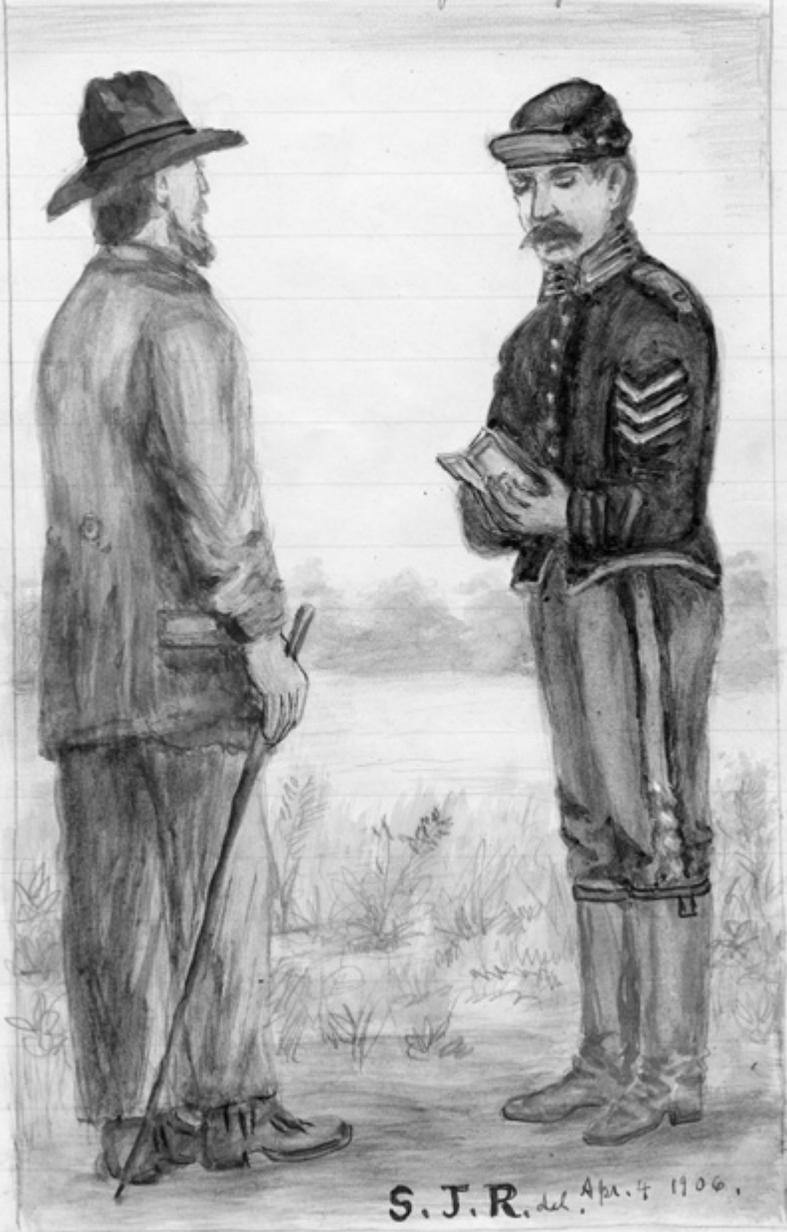
But all the fences were gone, and weeds covered the ground. The remains of chimneys showed where the buildings had formerly stood. This was the handi-work of Gen. Lane, when he laid the country waste, the year before.

I was now so completely worn out, that I was unable to walk more than a few minutes at a time. I would then have to lie on the ground awhile to rest.

I began to bear off more to the west and toward mid-day came to an enclosed field in which were a number of

North,

In grimy, footsore, woful plight,  
But free, and filled with glory.  
Distant home has loomed in sight,  
And here I'll end my story,



FREE.

144.

cabbages. I lost no time in securing a head, and after eating all I dared, filled my pockets. I then struck a road which I followed to the northwest, and soon after came in sight of a farm house. As I approached it, an old man rode out from an adjoining field, and came toward me. A short distance behind were other armed and mounted men. I never thought about my flag of truce, and it was not displayed, very fortunately.

When the old man had approached near enough, I called out to him: "Are you a Union man?" He nodded and said: "Yes."

"Then I'm all right!" I cried, immensely relieved.

"Well, I don't know about that," he rejoined, "You must be a rebel!"

His words were harsh, but there was something about the man that pleasantly reminded me of old Osawatomie Brown.

I hastened to explain to him, that I was a Union soldier, and had escaped from the rebels during the night.

He looked at my butternut coat and my dilapidated appearance generally, and shook his head.

"Several of you fellows have already been picked up, straggling about the neighborhood." Then he added:

"There's just one thing in your favor. You were going the wrong way for a rebel."

The other men now joined him and they took me to the house. From their glum and sullen aspect it was easy to guess their opinion of me.

I sat on a log at the wood-pile, while the men talked together, a little apart. For myself I was perfectly at my ease; and was rather amused than otherwise.

The women in the house looked out, and viewed me with considerable curiosity. Perhaps I was

the first real live rebel they had ever seen. Dead rebels, some of them had just seen on the battlefield—which was not far away—as I heard them speaking about it.

I took out my book and began writing up my diary for that morning. One of the men held out his hand: “Give me that book.”

My diary was written in shorthand. He looked puzzled and suspicious. But I had him turn to the business part of the book—which was in longhand—and explained to them all who and what I was, and all about my capture and escape. My statement of facts appeared to be convincing. The old man said:

“Well I suppose you are all right, but we must be sure about it. After dinner I will take you to Fort Scott and turn you over to the soldiers there.”

I was now taken indoors. On the margin of a newspaper was “Juo. McNeal.” This I suppose was the old man’s name; and so I call him.

The dinner hour arrived—to me, an epicurean feast—biscuit, fresh pork and sweet potatoes, were, I remember a part of the bill of fare. I was treated as an honored guest by my kind entertainer, and all offers of payment on my part were politely declined.

“If you’re a Union man—as I think you are—I am very glad to serve you. And if you’re not—well, that will be all right, too.”

Mr. McNeal furnished me with a horse, and in company with him and another militia man, we started for Fort Scott—some ten miles to the southwest.

I was told that we would pass over one of the battlefields of the day before. But pretty soon we met a party of men who advised Mr. McNeal to take me to Barnsville—which was only six miles to the northwest—We accordingly changed our course, and by so doing, missed seeing the battlefield—no doubt a gruesome sight enough, and better avoided.

One of the members of the new party joined us.

He was a self-confidant chatter-box of sixteen, and claimed that he had participated in the fight—or at any rate the pursuit—of the day before. He showed us a Sharp’s carbine, that he had picked up on the field.

“The rebels don’t look like our men,” he remarked. “And I saw so many of the dead rebels who had red hair. I helped guard prisoners for awhile,” he continued. “I asked one of them: ‘We’ve whipped you good, haven’t we?’ and he says: ‘yes’. Then says I: ‘You’ve been fighting on the wrong side! Don’t you feel sorry?’ And says he: ‘I believe I do.’ When he said that, it made me mad, and I says to him, ‘Now I’m going to shoot you!’ I began to put a cap on my gun, and the rebel began to beg. When I got

my gun ready I thought I wouldn’t shoot him—he begged so—But I wish now, I’d shot him.” I [Reader] felt a great desire to read this young ruffian a lecture on the proper treatment of prisoners, but as I was to all appearances a Confederate prisoner myself, and the disappointed youth possessed a breach loader, I wisely concluded to waste no words on him.

When we reached Barnsville Mr. McNeal turned me over to Sergeant Pickerell of the 15th Kansas Cavalry. I was not personally acquainted with the Sergeant, although he was a resident of Topeka.

He was very thorough in his examination of me, and among other things, asked me to name a number of prominent citizens of Topeka.

I remember giving the names of Jake Smith, and Dan Horne; and a personal description of these gentlemen was required and given, as well.

But my memorandum book served me better than anything else. Sergeant Pickerall carefully examined it, and after a few more searching questions, which I could readily answer, he declared himself satisfied, and pronounced the welcome words: “You are free.”

In grimy, footsore, woful plight,  
But free, and filled with glory.  
Distant home has loom’d in sight,  
And here I’ll end my story.

My account properly ends here. I will add however that I started the next morning, on foot, and reached Topeka at noon, Sunday Oct. 30th.

I reported to Col. Veale in person; crossed the Kansas river and reached home at about three o’clock p.m.<sup>18</sup> [KH]

18. Colonel George W. Veale of Topeka commanded the Second Kansas State Militia, Reader’s Shawnee County regiment, which contained nearly six hundred men. According to Adjutant General Cyrus K. Holiday, the Second suffered the only serious casualties of the action around Kansas City; on October 23 the regiment fought “Jackman’s Brigade of Shelby’s Division—six times our numbers—for three quarters of an hour.” The colonel reported critically on the command decisions that placed him in a numerically vulnerable position: “I acted under orders, and by so doing lost twenty-four brave Kansans killed, about the same number wounded, and sixty-eight taken prisoners.” *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Kansas, 1864* (Leavenworth: P. H. Hubbell & Co., 1865), 64; “Autobiography,” <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/206900/page/363>.