

UDC Magazine * Richmond, Virginia * October, 2012

Southern Voices from 1863
Composite Diary Reveals Life of Confederate Soldiers and Civilians

Confederate Notes – Review by Mary Grundman Vial

Mama, I Am Yet Still Alive:
A Composite Diary of 1863
in the Confederacy
Jeff Toalson, Editor

Southern voices from the past, letters and diaries of 240 soldiers, sailors, clerks, nurses, farm girls, merchants, surgeons, chaplains and wives tell the story of 1863 during the War Between the States. Many of these ‘voices’ speak from letters in the files of the Brewer Library at the UDC Memorial Building . . . letters that were donated by members and citizens to be archived for the future. Most letters are from soldiers, because letters sent from home were used for camp fires or toilet paper. This book contains excerpts of the actual letters, printed just as they were written, in their own language and spelling.

Pvt. Carlton McCarthy, Richmond Howitzers, wrote a description of a Confederate soldier:

. . . one man, one hat, one jacket, one shirt, one pair of pants, one pair of drawers, one pair of shoes, one pair of socks. His baggage contained one blanket, one rubber blanket, and one haversack containing smoking tobacco, pipe, one piece of soap, and fruit collected along the road. A dogfly was a tent, with three men sleeping together . . .

Pvt. Charles Thomas, 56th Virginia Infantry, described his reality as:

. . . I washed my old shirt and draws yestady. My old pant is verry nasty and my ass is out and these is all I have got . . .

As the months passed, food was scarce, uniforms wore out, shoe soles were thin, yet they closed their letters “but we are fine.” They were sick, wounded and deathly ill, but “they are fine.” Smallpox was prevalent, hospital extremely over-crowded, with men lying everywhere, arm and legs in piles . . . but most letters still ended with “we are fine.”

Captain Griffin Frost, 2nd Missouri Infantry, who received a large box of food from home containing preserves, tomato catsup, and a large ham wrote, *“have not seen delicacies for so long we have become strangers.”* Sgt. John Beaton, 9th Virginia Infantry, wrote to his sister, *“It is a sad duty writing dead opposite so many names.”* On April 14, Private Milton Barrett, 18th Georgia Infantry, wrote about the Richmond ‘bread riot.’

Letters of discomfort from home seemed to cause soldiers *“to quit the fielde,”* wrote Sgt. Benjamin Porter of the 11th Alabama Infantry. *“Almost every one who has been shot for desertion say that their parents was the final caus of thir desertion.”*

Many letters are graphic descriptions of the *H. L. Hunley*, referring to it as “the Fish Boat,” and describing its many sinkings and the drowned sailors. Lt. John Payne wrote, *“Bill for a coffin of 5 sailors after sinking. For 5 coffins \$15 apiece. Amount is large but the bodies have been under water and required large coffins.”*

This composite diary of 1863 is interesting, informative and does “open vistas to a side of the war” that we are not familiar with. When you pick up this book, you will not want to put it down.

A short fifteen minute May 23, 2012, radio interview on WXML Radio can be heard at:
http://www.chesapeakebaywriters.org/radio_interviews.html#Interviews